Tui Na & the Treatment of Sciatica

By Bill Ryan

Her phone call to inquire about working with me came about in the usual way. Jackie was the daughter of a friend of a student of mine. She was suffering from sciatica in her right leg and had been for some time. Her condition was getting worse, and she wasn’t finding any relief. I say the usual way because people typically come to me – like so many bodyworkers – when they’ve run out of other possibilities. This is especially so for me because the modality that I practice is the Chinese art of qigong tui na, of which there are few practitioners in the West.

Many people today are learning about and/or practicing tui na, but few are familiar with its qigong-based branch.

Of course Jackie didn’t really care about exactly what I did. She was in pain from her lower back all the way down her right leg, and she wasn’t sleeping. Her father had heard from my student that I might be able to provide her with relief. When I got back to her I told her that I’d be happy to try to help her. But I already knew from my student that we had a problem beyond the specifics of her condition.

Jackie lived in a small town four hours by car from my office. So regular visits spread out over a few weeks were out of the question. We’d have to try to do some intensive work over a few days.

Jackie’s condition

Jackie explained by phone that for several months she had been suffering from sciatica in her right leg, primarily expressed as burning and general discomfort in her right hip and the side and back of her upper leg, and sometimes extending down through her calf as well. The pain had gradually grown more intense and difficult to manage. By this time she was unable to sit upright in a car without intense pain nor was she able to sleep for more than short periods of time. She couldn’t walk for anything but short distances without pain.

About a year before she had experienced very similar pain in her left leg. The diagnosis she had received then from her doctors was “piriformis syndrome”. This condition occurs when the piriformis muscle in the pelvis compresses or otherwise aggravates the sciatic nerve, causing pain, tingling, and/or numbness in all or parts of the leg.

Jackie had received this diagnosis from the doctors she consulted, but was offered no effective treatment. The problem with her left leg eventually went away.

When the problem with her right leg began, she chose not to consult with doctors again. She self-diagnosed her condition as being piriformis syndrome because her symptoms were so similar to those she had had with her left leg.

She was seeing a chiropractor in her town, but the relief she was getting was so temporary that she had to see him daily.
Our treatment plan

Jackie asked me whether I’d had success providing relief from piriformis syndrome. I told her that I had, although only through sessions spread over several weeks.

We agreed that she would come to see me for three sessions spread over three days, with an intensive 1 to 2 hour session on Monday evening, a 1 hour session on Tuesday mid-day, and a 1 to 1.5 hour early morning Wednesday session.

On the Monday evening Jackie and her husband arrived. She had laid down in the back of the car while he had driven. They had dropped off their kids with her parents and come to see me.

When they arrived Jackie showed me where she was feeling pain and filled in a few more details of her history. It turned out that her original problem with her left leg had resulted from a fall, but she didn’t remember any particular trigger for the pain in her right leg.

I asked her whether she had injured her ankle, and at that point she remembered that she had severely sprained her ankle not long before she began to experience the sciatic pain. She had been running on a steep road and had fallen. Her husband had to come by car and bring her home.

Rather than allow the ankle to heal fully, she had taken a friend’s advice to push through the pain and continue to walk on the ankle. Eventually the pain had gone away. Not long after the sciatic pain had appeared, but Jackie had not linked the two.

Analysis of Jackie’s qi flows

In the qigong tui na tradition in which I am trained, you learn how to put your hands on or near a person and to directly feel, analyze, open, and balance the flows of qi in their body. In traditional training, every time you learn a new technique for developing energy you first learn how to do it as a qigong practice directly with your mind – and occasionally your hands - within your own body. Only when you can clearly and easily manifest the method in a smooth and balanced way with your own qi and body do you learn to use it with another person.

There are some 4,000 energy channels in the body that affect one’s physical health. Acupuncturists work with a small subset of these channels. These channels lie at various depths within the body, from superficial to very deep and all levels between.

In our tradition an important area of focus are the “energy gates” which lie at the intersections of multiple channels. If you can influence the flow of qi in these gates, then you can influence many channels simultaneously.

A master in the tradition understands and can work with all 4,000 channels, while other high-level practitioners have complete knowledge of several hundred. Intermediate practitioners like me work primarily with the energy gates and use the gates to work backward into the channels affected by those gates to clear and build energy.

As I put my hands on various parts of Jackie’s leg and felt from there through the channels and energy gates of her entire body, I quickly detected a very clear pattern. There was a pronounced “excess” of blocked qi in the area of her right hip and upper thigh that extended down her leg and an equally pronounced “deficiency” of qi in the area of her ankle. Fortunately the flows in her spine, torso, arms and other leg were fairly clear and balanced.

In her ankle, the qualities of the qi in the energy gates and channels and the condition of the physical tissues indicated that the area had experienced significant and fairly recent damage.

In my qigong tui na tradition one of the most important principles is that everything in the body is connected to everything else, through both physical and energetic connections. So in order to relieve a condition in one area – such as the pain in Jackie’s hip and thigh – you must simultaneously address any other areas that are linked to that area.

Therefore I knew that I had to address her ankle in order to help her hip and thigh. So I had to think about the relationships between the two that had led to her condition.

My analysis was that when she sprained her ankle and didn’t let it fully heal, she in turn lost the natural body spring normally provided by healthy fluids and ligaments and other soft tissues in her foot and ankle – and to some extent in her knee. Having lost this spring, any pressures or shocks exerted on her foot when walking or running or otherwise moving carried right past the foot and ankle up the leg to the hip. There in order to protect the spine the muscles – including the piriformis – and other soft tissues had contracted and in a sense had “frozen” in order to prevent those pressures or shocks from becoming lodged in her spine or internal organs.

Fortunately for Jackie – and for me in trying to help her – she is a naturally athletic woman who exercises regularly and overall enjoys excellent health. Because of this her thigh and hip muscles had been healthy and strong enough to “lock down” and create a barrier to pressures and shock to protect her spine and internal organs. If what had happened to Jackie had happened to a less healthy person, the pressures and shocks would have reached her spine and potentially caused far greater difficulties than Jackie was experiencing.

Given all of this, I knew that simultaneously I had to help the ankle heal more fully and release the holding in her hip.

From the perspective of my qigong tui na tradition, one of the functions of the qi of the body is that it carries information that informs the physical body of how to organize itself. So my goals were:

1. to build up the “deficiency” of qi in Jackie’s ankle so that the tissues there could “come alive” again, and;
2. to release the corresponding “excess” of qi in Jackie’s hip to inform the tissues there to release.
It was very important to approach these goals simultaneously. Too much emphasis on one or the other could lead to destabilization of the various parts of her leg, which could exacerbate her condition, or cause further problems with her spine, etc.

Techniques Used

Throughout each of our three sessions, I relied primarily on four qigong tui na techniques: small circles, joint pulsing, tissue twisting, and listening. There are over 200 techniques in qigong tui na. To learn the subtleties and possibilities of each of these techniques requires years of study and practice. What follows is just a brief introduction to each of the techniques that I used.

1. Small Circles (see Sidebar)

In the small circles technique you use the tip of your finger or thumb – or a knuckle or even the tip of your elbow – to press into any area where soft tissues are bound or otherwise holding. You then make very small circular motions that release bound chi and tissues, regularly reversing the direction of the circles.

This technique awakens, releases, and energises bound tissues. When done in many places in the same general area the technique helps to open small energy channels that have become closed and to weave together and integrate the energies within the area.

I especially used this technique to stimulate, awaken, release, and integrate the qi and soft tissues in and around Jackie’s right ankle and upper foot that had been damaged by the sprain and by that time had become either flaccid or overly stiff.

I also used this technique to release tissues in Jackie’s thigh and knee that had become overly taut such as her IT band and tendons and ligaments in and around her knee.

2. Joint Pulsing

From a qigong tui na perspective all parts of the body are constantly pulsing, both energetically and physically. These pulses are all interrelated, interact with, and influence each other.

A key place that the body pulses is within the fluids within joints and cavities, where major and minor energy gates also are found. One of the most effective ways to re-establish and build inadequate qi flows in the body is to pulse the joints.

One way to pulse a joint is to hold the bone above the joint and then to move the bone below the joint toward and away from the upper bone to gently pulse the tissues and fluids surrounding and within the joint. The goal is not so much to stretch the tissues – although sometimes you try to - but to build the natural spring within the joint.

I initially used joint pulsing with Jackie to begin to build back up the natural spring within her ankle joint and between the bones of her upper foot. As our sessions progressed and I released her thigh and hip tissues, I also pulsed her knee and hip. I then used techniques to simultaneously pulse all of the joints from her toes to her lower spine and up the rest of her body to build the physical connections between the joints as well as the qi flows through her whole body.
3. Tissue Twisting

When qi moves through the body it actually moves in spirals, even within tiny channels. So an important qigong tui na technique for releasing bound tissues is to twist tissues back and forth to stimulate these spiraling qi flows, which in turn inform the tissues to let go.

One way to twist tissues is to hold one end of a group of tissues and then to turn the other end, e.g. either end of the tissues of the lower leg. The goal is not to twist the tissues as far as you can, but to twist until you feel a natural point where the tissues "want" to go back the other way. Then you smoothly reverse your turning and go the other way until you find the next natural return point. You repeatedly reverse the direction of your twisting.

4. Listening

The listening technique was the one I first used to analyse the qi flows in Jackie’s body. You use just a bit of your own qi to feel through and “listen” to everything that is happening with the qi flows in the other person’s body.

Throughout our sessions I continuously listened to Jackie’s body’s qi flows to monitor how she was reacting to what I was doing. I also continuously asked her questions about what she was feeling and how she was doing and listened carefully to her answers.

The main image at the beginning of the article shows me (with a person other than Jackie) listening to the qi flows between her hip and her ankle. I did this frequently with Jackie as I monitored how each of the parts of her leg was progressing.

(These photos show the person with her clothes on, which is how we typically work in qigong tui na.)

Jackie’s Response

Fortunately, Jackie responded well to our sessions. The night after our first session she slept soundly throughout for the first time in months. That improvement continued the night after our second session, and she and her husband reported that she was doing routine movements that she hadn’t been able to do before such as squatting down.

When she came into her third and final session Jackie reported that the pain was significantly reduced but still present much of the time.

I told her that we couldn’t hope for full relief quite yet and that after she left we would just hope for the best in terms of continued improvement, which probably would come gradually.

I explained that the body has a great capacity to heal, and that hopefully we had gotten her qi flowing better and in a more balanced way and that the body would take over from there. I showed her a few simple qigong movements she could do to help keep things going, and from there we would just hope for the best.

I didn’t hear from Jackie for a while, but a month and a half later I received the following email:

Bill, I just wanted to drop you a note to say thank you. I am feeling great. It was gradual from when I left Boston. Each day I would feel a little less pain. Now I am pain free. (My husband) and I hiked Mount Lafayette on Saturday. It was great.