

*Qi: The Journal of Traditional Eastern Health and Fitness*. 2004. **14 (3):** 28-32.

## **The Tao of Internal Cultivation**

By Guan-Cheng Sun, PhD

In the past several years of teaching qigong classes, I have found it is always interesting to discuss “what is the Tao?” and “How is our qigong practice related to the Tao?” Often, practitioners quote from the English vision of the Tao Te Ching: “the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” (1) ( : Dao Ke Dao, Fei Chang Dao; Ming Ke Ming, Fei Chang Ming. *From Chapter 1 of Tao Te Ching*). One day when this quote came up yet again, I replied “If that was really Lao Tzu’s meaning of the Tao, there would never have been a Tao Te Ching at all. The translator says ‘those who know don’t talk; those who talk don’t know,’ (1) ( : Zhi Zhe Bu Yan, Yan Zhe Bu Zhi. *From Chapter 56 of Tao Te Ching*) and this suggests that Lao Tzu didn’t know, because he wrote about 5,000 words. So, is it Lao Tzu who really didn’t know?”

The word “Tao” appears 74 times in the Tao Te Ching. However, for this one term, there are different meanings in different sentences or chapters. Sometimes the Tao means the “way”, or “talk” or “speaking”, or “virtue”; sometimes the Tao means the “origin” of everything, or the “matrix of qi” or “truth” or “principle” or “mechanisms” or “objective laws” of energy, health, nature, society, thinking, and so forth. How can we understand the meaning of the Tao correctly in different situations? According to my understanding, the internal cultivation process, or qigong practice, is one way to comprehend and experience the fullness of all that is meant by “Tao.”

Since ancient times, one of the ways to know oneself and others was called “internal cultivation.” This internal cultivation was a way to develop the intrinsic functions of the body, using the intelligence and wisdom of the body to communicate with and thus to understand the objective natural world--by means of qi. More recently, internal cultivation has become known as Qigong practice.

## **The “Descent” of Qi**

In the beginning of Qigong training, we first train the intellectual mind to relax and to turn the focus from the outer to the inner. We direct our intent to find an

appropriate degree of concentration, one that allows us to feel the energy field between both hands stretching like an energetic rubber band and forming a magnetic energy field ( Lian Yi De Neng).

We also experience that sense of magnetic field between our elbows, or between our knees, or between the elbows and knees, and so forth. Even though we feel these energetic sensations, the energy field is experienced at the surface of the skin in the early stage of energetic development.

With continued and disciplined practice, we are able to experience the refined qi flowing beneath the skin and through the acupuncture meridians as we gain experiential understanding of the internal energy pathways. When our refined qi becomes integrated with the force of the muscles, we experience the difference between mere physical force and the internal power of "Jing ( )." When our refined qi becomes integrated with our tendons, we experience the difference between the softness of the tendons and power of the "Rou ( )" within the tendons. When the refined qi becomes integrated with our bones, we experience the difference between the quality of the strength of the bones and the power of "Gang ( )." When the refined qi sinks down to the "Dantian," the internal elixir field, we experience the "Dantian rotation" naturally. With continued practice, the internal refined qi goes into deeper and deeper layers of the body; when the refined qi enters into the internal organs, we experience how different organs respond to specific emotions. For example, when I communicate with students experiencing grief, my lungs feel heavy and cold; when I communicate with students experiencing excess anger, my liver hurts; when I communicate with students experiencing excess excitement, my heart and chest feel warm. These experiences reflect what Chinese medicine says: that anger is related to the liver, that grief is related to the lungs, and so forth. But these experiences of body-to-body communications without words also help me to understand the meaning of the Tao of Lao Tzu in his first sentence of the Tao Te Ching: "the Tao that can be told is very difficult to express in language, and even though we give the Tao a name, the name is still hard to understand." Lao Tzu's meaning of Tao is the Tao of internal cultivation. And, in order to understand this Tao of internal cultivation, internal experience and realization are necessary. (2)

### **Breathing Down to the Heels**

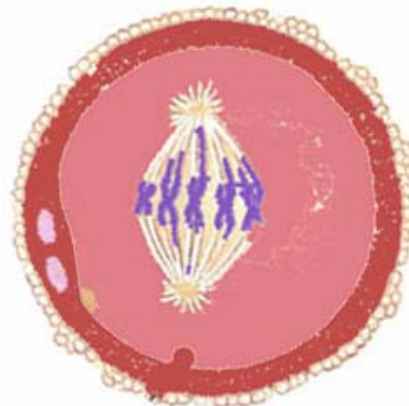
As stated earlier, the beginning stages of our internal experience involve sensing the energy field between our hands. Thereafter, we begin to breathe more deeply,

slowly, and smoothly, increasing the oxygen levels within. This enhances the strength of the energy field, and reduces the carbon dioxide levels in the body, keeping the internal environment healthy and clean. In ancient times, breathing exercise was called "Tu Na." The famous philosopher Chuang Tzu (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.), stated that "the immortal's breathing reaches down to their heels and the normal person's breathing to the throat." (3) What is the meaning of this statement? Is it possible to breathe so deeply that it reaches down to our heels?

Let us examine the physiology of human respiration. There are three steps in one complete respiration. In the first step, the oxygen flows into the lungs, and carbon dioxide flows out to the atmosphere; in the second step, blood gains oxygen and gives up carbon dioxide; in the third step, blood gives up oxygen and gains carbon dioxide. In the first step, qi is exchanged between the atmosphere and the lungs; in the second step, qi is exchanged between the lungs and blood; in the third step, qi is exchanged between the blood and cells. Our cells constantly use oxygen for the metabolic reactions that release energy from nutrient molecules and produce a packaged form of chemical energy, ATP (adenosine triphosphate). This chemical energy, ATP, is used to power the processes in all cells in the body. We need constant respiration in order to support our daily life and activities. We also need to eliminate excess carbon dioxide as efficiently and quickly as we can, because an excessive amount of carbon dioxide produces acidity that is toxic to the cells and to the body. However, our natural respiration styles constantly change during our development.

Our life starts with the fusion of the father's sperm and mother's egg. This fertilized egg is a single cell. In that state, the cell utilizes its entire cellular membrane as a breathing apparatus via its connection with the mother's uterus. We can call this cellular breathing, or embryonic breathing (Figure 1) (4).

**Fertilized Cell**



**Figure 1. Cellular Breathing**

When the umbilical cord is formed during embryonic development it is the transport mechanism carrying oxygen-rich blood and nutrients to the baby and exporting blood with carbon dioxide and other waste products from the baby to the mother's placenta. The baby expands and contracts the abdominal area of its body, inhaling during expansion and exhaling during contraction. This natural movement acts as the pump that stimulates the inflow of qi, oxygen and nutrients and the outflow of qi, carbon dioxide and waste products via the cord. In this stage, the baby is utilizing what we call natural "abdominal breathing" (Figure 2).

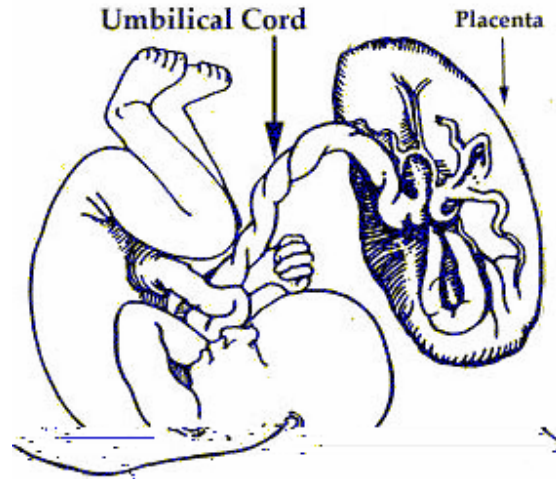


Figure 2. Abdominal Breathing F

After the baby is born, the breathing style changes so that the baby gets oxygen into the lungs and carbon dioxide out of the lungs through the nose or the mouth (Figure 3). (5)

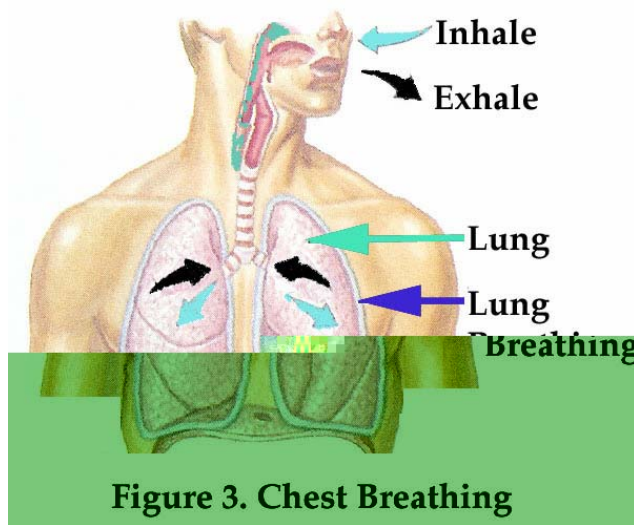


Figure 3. Chest Breathing

In addition, as humans get older, breathing becomes shallower and takes place higher in the body so that the focal point of the breathing gradually shifts from the abdomen to the thorax, and from the thorax to the throat. This is why Chuang Tzu said that “the normal person is breathing to the throat.” In this stage, the carbon dioxide and other waste products get trapped under the tissues in the thorax and the abdomen. This is because the breathing is not initiated from abdominal movement as in the child or the fetus. There is less pronounced organ and tissue movement internally thus the carbon dioxide and other waste materials are no longer expelled as efficiently. Over a period of time, wastes produced during metabolism accumulate as the breathing aspect of elimination becomes less effective. This accumulation of carbon dioxide and waste materials affects our health and well-being a great deal. It can cause high blood pressure, exhaustion, headaches, dizziness, and so on. An excessive amount of carbon dioxide produces acidity that changes the internal conditions; pH becomes more acidic, blood and liquid flow become slower, etc. These internal changes provide a condition and opportunity for the expression of unhealthy genes, such as cancer, and for viral or bacteria infections, such as arthritis.

A unique aspect of Qigong practice is that we can consciously change our breathing styles--from deep chest breathing to abdominal breathing, and ultimately to embryonic breathing, thereby restoring the intrinsic functions of the respiratory system. We can consciously breathe deeply down to the cellular level once again, as in the child or the fetus. Once practitioners have experienced a successful reversal of breathing style through qigong practice they are in a better position to begin to understand Lao Tzu's question, “Concentrating the exercise with qi, can you train your body to become as supple as a child's again?” ( ? Zhuan Qi Zhi Rou, Neng Ying Er Hu? *From Chapter 10 of Tao Te Ching*).

### **Intrinsic Nature, or Gen-Qi**

According to the ancients, an important aspect of the internal cultivation process is how to nourish and develop an individual's “Gen-Qi” ( ). But what is the Gen-Qi? After many years of qigong practice I realized that the Gen-Qi represents the qi of our genes in the DNA at the energetic and informational levels.

Everyone carries a full set of genetic codes inherited from our parents. If we view our body as a personal garden, the different genes in our DNA can be viewed as different seeds of flowers, trees, weeds, vegetables, etc. Different seeds need

different types of soil and specific conditions in order to grow. Similarly, in the body, different genes need particular conditions in the body's internal environment in order to express themselves. We cannot change the genetic codes within our bodies, but we can change our internal condition, our internal environment, in order to encourage and improve the expression of the healthy and noble genes as well as to avoid and repress the expression of the unhealthy and undesirable genes.

To give an example of how the Gen-Qi is expressed at the physical level of the body, some individuals may have powerful genes of alcohol dehydrogenase enzyme, so they are able to drink a bottle of wine just like drinking water. They enjoy the drinking without any negative effects. However, if some individuals have this enzyme gene deficiency, they may feel itchy with a red face and a rash over all of their body even if they drink only a small amount of wine. Alcohol cannot be stored in the body, and the body must get rid of it effectively. Within the body, alcohol can only be oxidized in the liver, where alcohol dehydrogenase enzymes initiate the alcohol oxidizing process. (6) In the case of an individual who has this enzyme gene deficiency, they should avoid taking alcohol into the body. And even though another individual may have powerful genes of alcohol dehydrogenase enzymes, they should not take alcohol into the body to a degree greater than the enzymes can handle--otherwise, the excess alcohol not only affects the functions of the liver, but can cause fatty liver, trigger other liver disease, and also travel to other parts of the body, increasing the risks of gouty arthritis, and cancer in the liver, breast, pancreas, rectum, and so forth. In general, many people are not aware of how their specific symptoms reflect their corresponding specific gene expression, thus they are not able to listen the body's signals and intelligence until they've already gotten sick.

Disciplined qigong practitioners, however, gradually develop an information system. The deepening and enhanced qi flow increases their awareness levels so they understand that unusual symptoms or signals are feedback from the body's intelligence. For instance, to continue with the drinking example, an individual might feel a strong sense of pain in the liver, or vomiting, when she or he drinks just a small amount of wine if it does not fit the body's condition. Thus the body's information system automatically protects the body and prevents the development of illnesses. What has happened for this Qigong practitioner is that they have become aware of the interaction between the Gen-Qi (gene) and the corresponding stimulus. In the drinking example, they have gained experiential understanding of how excess alcohol, or "jiu-qi (酒气)," can affect and damage the qi of the liver (肝气).

These interactions take place at the physical level quite obviously, but they also take place at the level of our gifts and abilities, our behaviors, and other aspects of our Gen-Qi as well. When it comes to our talents and behaviors, these also require particular conditions in order to be expressed. With qigong practice, we gradually develop a greater understanding of our intrinsic talents, or the Gen-Qi within, and make better choices--an appropriate field, friends, community—so as to nourish and develop our inherited nature and to fulfill our highest potential. For example, in the recent Hollywood movie, “Sea Biscuit,” a horse with inborn champion quality required an understanding owner, a congenial horse/companion, a sympathetic rider, and a masterful trainer with the ability to see what others could not see--all working together to achieve the goal. Once practitioners are aware of what kind of energy stimulates, nourishes, and enhances their inherited talent and potentials, and what kind of energy represses and damages the development of their intrinsic nature, they make great progress in their cultivation process. When practitioners experience the change from a passive/reactive orientation to one that is proactive in the nourishing and expressing of their intrinsic nature, they have achieved a great deal. As Lao Tzu said, “knowing others is intelligence; knowing oneself is enlightenment.” (7) ( [http://www.dharmafarmer.com/tao-te-ching/tao-te-ching-33.html](#) , Zhi Ren Zhe Zhi, Zi Zhi Zhe Ming. *From Chapter 33 of Tao Te Ching*).

## **Conclusion**

Aside, perhaps, from some religious tracts on faith, the Western tradition, with its roots in reason and empiricism, with its binarisms of mind/ body and spirit/matter, has long giggled and smirked at the “concept” of experience, a concept that is, indeed, held at arms’ length. In Eastern traditions, however, experience is the very root of much of what has been handed down. For Westerners and Easterners alike, it is vital to understand that texts such as the Tao Te Ching and the Chuang Tzu emerged from the primacy of this experience of the Tao. The “poems” and “stories” in these texts reflect a level and degree of unification, a oneness with the Tao that is both spiritual and bodily. Of course language can never adequately convey this fullness, and that is why the Tao Te Ching begins as it does.

I have observed practitioners during Qigong classes as they taste moments of mental silence during the practice; then, almost invariably, someone in the group will want or need to discuss some point—and over and over again I see practitioners’ reluctance to be pulled out of the experience by talking about it instead of just being in it. It would seem as though the mind, having tasted rest and silence, recognizes how tiring it is to be engaged all the time in talking; and

the body, having integrated and synchronized with the mind, doesn't really want to open its mouth. This represents real progress in practice, what the tradition refers to as "zero mind," the place where we connect to something greater—some have called it Tao.

### **Acknowledgments:**

My thanks to Jill Gonet for her help with the writing of this article.

### **Endnotes:**

(1) Tao Te Ching, trans. by Stephen Mitchell, 1988, Harper Collins Publishers, p. 1 and p. 56.

(2) For example, the most important aspect of internal martial arts practice is coordinating the internal qi flow with outside movements. An outstanding modern Tai Chi teacher, Gao Fu, has been teaching people to practice Tai Chi by cultivating the internal qi. She told me that she practiced Tai Chi Chuan forms for about eight years without training her internal qi. Madam Gao said that before she developed internal qi, when people saw her practicing they said her forms were very beautiful, but empty on the inside. She said she didn't know what they were talking about (T'ai Chi: The International Magazine of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, 21:6, December 1997.). But she understood the meaning of "empty on the inside" right away after she experienced the internal qi movement by following the teaching and guidance from Tai Chi masters, Xiou-Chen Tian and Zhi-Qiang Feng. Her experience again demonstrates that the Tao that can be told is very difficult to express in language, and even though we give the Tao a name, the name is still hard to understand without the internal experience and realization.

(3) The Root of Chinese Qigong, by Jwing-Ming Yang, 1997, YMAA Publication Center. p. 14.

(4) This illustration has been adapted from one in Human Physiology by Stuart Ira Fox, 1996, Wm. C. Brown Publishers. p. 642.

(5) This illustration has been adapted from one in Human Physiology by Stuart Ira Fox, 1996, Wm. C. Brown Publishers. p. 471.

(6) Check more detailed information at  
<http://www.healthchecksystems.com/alcohol.htm>

(7) Dao-De-Jing, trans. by Cheng Lin, 1995, The World Book Company, Ltd. p. 55.  
For other translations of Chapter 33 of the Tao Te Ching, visit the website at  
[http://www.geocities.com/bgaughr/words\\_of\\_wisdom.htm](http://www.geocities.com/bgaughr/words_of_wisdom.htm)