QI: THE ENERGY OF THE MARTIAL AND TRADITIONAL HEALING ARTS

Jason Freewalt
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for black belt rank in Ryukyu kempo
Sensei Shane Lear
Lear’s Martial Arts Academy
Delphos, Ohio
February 21, 2014
姜 Qi (also ch’i, chi, ki) is the traditional Chinese concept of energies such as electricity, heaven, earth, wind, and spirit. In addition, qi is believed to be the “life force energy that flows through the body,” possessing numerous bioenergetic properties. These include emotion, thought, heat, light, magnetism, sound, and electricity. Qi comes from “the food we eat, the air we breathe, the energy fields in and around us, and it is also inherited.” Cultivating and balancing qi, a process known as 氣功 qigong (also ch’i kung, chi gung) “energy work” or “energy skill,” is the central focus of Traditional Chinese Medicine, but also has martial applications as well. Studying and understanding the nature and history of qi is an important part of training in the martial and traditional healing arts.

Sometimes known as “vital energy,” qi is a concept that is often compared to the Hindu yoga concept of प्राण prana (also prâna) “life force,” and has links with prana that are both medical and martial. Prana, like qi, is believed to be the sum total of all energy in the universe. According to the Atharva-Veda, “Reverence to Prâna, to whom all this (universe) is subject, who has become the lord of the all, on whom the all is supported!” Qi may also be related to the Hindu yoga concept of कुण्डलिनी kundalini “corporeal energy,” which deals with coiled energy at the base of the spine. On the other side of the world, Native Americans practiced (some still do) “smudging,” which uses the smoke of smoldering cedar, sage, or sweetgrass to cleanse a person or place of negative energies. Ancient religious peoples of Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, sub-

1 Shane Lear and David Deich, Wild Goose System: Volume 1 – 1st & 2nd 64 Action Forms (Delphos, OH: Dayan Arts, 2010), 23.
2 Ibid, 21.
3 Ibid. 23.
Saharan Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia often used incense for purification or to create a pleasant environment for worship. They also practiced various shamanistic energy purification rituals as part of animism. *Qi* may be related to concepts of “living breath” or “spirit,” such as the Greek πνεῦμα *pneuma*, the Latin *spiritus*, medieval European “vitalism,” the Arabic روح *ruḥ*, and perhaps the Hebrew רוח *ruach*. The philosopher Laozi (老子 also Lao-Tzu) wrote, “When one gives undivided attention to the (vital) breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a (tender) babe.” Laozi’s “breath” aligns with the Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew understanding of *qi* as an energy source. Clearly, the belief in a life force energy or vital energy is widespread throughout the world.

The Chinese concept of *qi* is centuries, perhaps millennia, old and is steeped in tradition. The traditional symbol for *qi* is 氣, which is a combination of steam 氣 rising from rice 米 as it cooks. Its very symbol expresses energy and life. While most modern scientists in the West rationalize the various apparent manifestations of *qi* as “simple physical dynamics of matter and energy,” many people believe now, as they did in ancient China, that there is more to *qi* than simple physics. In *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Bruce Lee noted, “The ‘Immoveable’ is the concentration of energy at a given focus, as at the axis of a wheel, instead of dispersal in scattered activities.” The key is the concentration of *qi* and how it is used.

According to some philosophers, *qi* comes from the interaction between the Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang*. In fact, *yin* and *yang* are sometimes identified as the *qi* of the universe.

---

7 Laozi *Tao Te Ching* 10 (Legge translation, 1891).
9 Order of Shaolin Ch’an, *The Shaolin Grandmasters’ Text: History, Philosophy, and Gung Fu of Shaolin Ch’an*, revised ed. (Beaverton, OR: Order of Shaolin Ch’an, 2006), 244.
the primary energy of all things natural. According to the fourth century BC philosopher 莊子 Zhuangzi (also Zuang Zhou), “Want of harmony between the Yin and Yang…affects all things injuriously.”11 In the nearly 2,000-year old text 黃帝內經 Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon of Internal Medicine (known as the Huangdi Neijing), yin and yang are connected with qi in all things. In its first book 素問 “Suwen” or “Basic Questions,” the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon states, “Yellow Emperor said: yin and yang, which are also of Heaven and Earth, the discipline of all things [are] the beginning of life and death.”12 In this way, qi, being connected to and balanced by both yin and yang, may be thought similarly to electricity, neither good nor bad. It is up to the user to define the purpose.13

In the body, qi is centered in the 丹田 dantian (also tan t’ien), which stores the qi. According to some perspectives, the dantian is one single location, just below the naval and inside the lower belly region. It is a “cauldron” that stores the qi and allows it to flow throughout the body.14 Other perspectives recognize multiple dantians. One dantian resides in the head (上 丹田 Shang Dantian), another in the chest (中丹田 Zhong Dantian), and another behind the naval (下丹田 Xia Dantian). Like a lake that is created by damming a river, qi is believed to collect in the dantians and then flows like rivers through vessels and like streams through meridians throughout the body. Periodic gates or points (acupuncture/pressure points) allow qi to flow through the body.15 Energy flow can be adjusted at these points to insure proper flow by using acupressure and acupuncture when healing is desired, or the energy can be disrupted or diverted through strikes or rubs in combat or other martial applications.

---

11 Zhuangzi “The Old Fisherman” (Legge translation).
13 Order of Shaolin Ch’an, 246.
14 Ibid.
15 Lear and Deich, 24-25.
The meridians through which the qi flows are organized based on the Five Elements Theory (五行 known as Wǔ Xíng, also Five Virtues or Five Phases). In traditional Chinese philosophy, there are five primary elements that explain or govern natural phenomena: wood (木 mù), fire (火 huǒ), earth (土 tǔ), metal (金 jīn), and water (水 shuǐ). These elements interact in nature through cycles of production or destruction. In the productive cycle (相生 xiāngshēng “mutual generation”), the following sequence is utilized: wood fuels a fire, fire produces earth, earth yields metal, metal contains water, and water nourishes wood. In the destructive cycle (相剋 xiāngkè “mutual overcoming”), the following sequence is utilized: wood covers earth, earth absorbs water, water puts out fire, fire melts metal, and metal cuts wood.

These elements are associated with various organs of the body and with the meridians through which qi flows. Time of day, the seasons, and other factors affect how the qi flows, which meridians are most active, and various aspects the Five Elements. Explained in early texts such as the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon, diseases can be diagnosed and healed through an understanding of the flow of qi through the meridians. For example, treating with acupressure or acupuncture the 9th lung meridian point (LU9: Tai Yuan – located on the palmar surface, at the tip of the transverse crease of the wrist, in the depression on the radial side of the radial artery) is believed to help treat asthma, chest pain, and pain in the back and shoulder. Following the Five Element Theory, treating points along meridians should be done following the productive or mutual generation cycle to promote the proper flow of qi when healing is the objective. In a combat application, a martial artist can strike or rub points along meridians following the

---

17 Ibid., 58.  
destructive or mutual overcoming cycle to damage the intended victim by disrupting or diverting
the flow of qi.

In the martial arts, the striking or rubbing of pressure points is known in Japanese as 急所術 Kyūshō-Jutsu (sometimes “Kyusho Jitsu”) and in Korean as 헬도법 Hyol Do Bup. George Dillman, a well-known martial artist and proponent of “Pressure Point Fighting,” calls his system Kyusho-jitsu. The use of pressure points in the martial arts, according to Dillman, is “the meaning of Ryukyu kempo.” Katas (型 or 形 “forms”) are used to practice various strikes and other movements to teach muscle memory; but in the Dillman system, katas also serve to help the martial artist practice accessing the location of pressure points. The goal and most important aspect of kata practice then, according to Dillman, is “the mental component of picturing the attacker and the vital points.” Allied with pressure point striking is the art of “Pressure Point Grappling,” known as Tuité or Tuité-jitsu, which also uses pressure point manipulation to control and weaken the joints and make them vulnerable to attack. As Dillman explains, Kyusho-jitsu and Tuité-jitsu “are intertwined because the point attacks of kyusho-jitsu create the opportunities for the tuité joint maneuvers, and the joint techniques of tuité make openings for decisive blows to exposed pressure points.” The pressure point fighting and grappling systems taught by Dillman may have similarities with the Chinese “poison fingers” technique of 蛇拳 Snake Kung Fu, wherein strikes to meridian points can immobilize, paralyze, or kill an opponent. These techniques are derived from ancient military combat, and they have been practiced and preserved for hundreds of years.

20 Ibid.
22 Order of Shaolin Ch’an, 244.
Qi, in traditional Chinese healing and martial arts, has had a history of philosophical, religious, medical, and martial study for thousands of years. It is believed to be the primary or vital energy of all life, and understanding it continues to be the goal of many Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners and martial artists. This cursory overview of the nature of qi in the Chinese healing and martial arts has taught me a great deal about Asian philosophy and medicine. Furthermore, having a better understanding of qi helps me to better understand the martial arts and will make me a better martial artist in the years to come.
Bibliography


