

QI: THE ENERGY OF THE MARTIAL AND TRADITIONAL HEALING ARTS

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氣 *Qi* (also *ch'i*, *chi*, *ki*) is the traditional Chinese concept of energies such as electricity, heaven, earth, wind, and spirit.¹ In addition, *qi* is believed to be the “life force energy that flows through the body,” possessing numerous bioenergetic properties.² 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.”³ 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!”⁴ *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.⁵ 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.⁶ Ancient religious peoples of Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, sub-

¹ Shane Lear and David Deich, *Wild Goose System: Volume I – 1st & 2nd 64 Action Forms* (Delphos, OH: Dayan Arts, 2010), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda* 11.4.1 (Maurice Bloomfield translation, 1897) online at Sacred Texts, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av.htm> (accessed February 15, 2014).

⁵ *Yoga-Kundalini Upanishad* (K. Narayanasvami Aiyar translation) online at Astrojyoti (Siva Prasad Tata), <http://www.astrojyoti.com/YogaKundaliniUpanishad.htm> (accessed February 14, 2014).

⁶ “Smudging,” online at Native American Research and Historical Preservation Society (Native American Anomaly Research Society), <http://www.nativeamericanresearch.org/smudging.html> (accessed February 13, 2014).

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 *rūḥ*, and perhaps the Hebrew רוּחַ *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.”⁷ 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 气 rising from rice 米 as it cooks.⁸ 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,”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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).

⁸ “Qi,” online at Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia (Wikimedia Foundation Inc., updated 8 February 2014 at 21:36), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qi> (accessed February 14, 2014).

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.

¹⁰ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Burbank, CA: Ohara Publications, 1975), 8.

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).

¹² *Huangdi Neijing*, “Suwen” (translated with Google Translator), <http://cctext.org/huangdi-neijing/yin-yang-ying-xiang-da-lun> (accessed February 14, 2014).

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*).¹⁶ These elements interact in nature through cycles of production or destruction. In the productive cycle (相生 *xiangsheng* “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 *xiangke* “mutual overcoming”), the following sequence is utilized: wood covers earth, earth absorbs water, water puts out fire, fire melts metal, and metal cuts wood.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁶ Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸ “Interactive Acupuncture Model,” online in *The Qi Journal* (Insight Publishing), <http://www.qi-journal.com/AcuModel.asp?-token.T=LU9&-token.M=LU> (accessed February 14, 2014).

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 *Kyūsho-Jutsu* (sometimes “*Kyusho Jitsu*”) and in Korean as 혈도법 *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.”¹⁹ *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.”²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² These techniques are derived from ancient military combat, and they have been practiced and preserved for hundreds of years.

¹⁹ George A. Dillman and Chris Thomas, *Kyusho-Jitsu: The Dillman Method of Pressure Point Fighting* (Reading, PA: George Dillman Karate International, 1992), 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ George A. Dillman and Chris Thomas, *Advanced Pressure Point Grappling: Tuité* (Reading, PA: George Dillman Karate International, 1995), 16.

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.

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