

Qigong as a Portal to Presence: Cultivating the Inner Energy Body ©

by Gunther M. Weil, Ph.D.

“The key is to be in a state of permanent connectedness with your inner body– to feel it at all times. This will rapidly deepen and transform your life.” Eckhart Tolle

Is there an underlying spiritual dimension behind the myriad forms of Qigong that by its very nature, invites us to simply and directly access deeper levels of being, pure awareness and the experience of Presence in daily life? If this is the original intent of Qigong, in what way can this ancient art be practiced as a Portal to Presence?

These questions and the perspective that informs them stem directly from many years of my personal and professional experience as a psychologist, student and teacher of Qigong and Tai Chi Chuan. My own journey through the complex and often confusing landscape of these disciplines and practices has led me to some of the insights and ideas I would like to share in this article.

Having studied and worked for many years with a variety of teachings, and masters of internal energy, martial and spiritual arts, I have personally experienced and observed many of the spiritual blind alleys and subtle dangers that are associated with complex systems of Qi training and hierarchical structures of spiritual development. The obvious risks include identification with a set of formal teachings, lineages, systems, or even the identity of belonging to an elite professional organization. The less obvious, more subtle dangers involve identification with a set of goals, or images of spiritual attainment, no matter how refined or ideal they may be. The result of either is that the seeker assumes a new self-image; an elevated or spiritual ego emerges, an identity framed within the language, symbols or authority of the teachings or lineage. These risks become especially compelling when ancient teachings are highly commercialized as they are transplanted into Western society. As a result, it is very easy for students of Qigong or meditation to become lost in a

forest of techniques, symbols, arcane language, rituals or authority and thereby ignore the simple and direct realization that lies at the very heart or genesis of most formal systems. This essential realization, which we could describe as Presence or Being, is in complete alignment with the core of Taoist principles ,and is aptly expressed in the aphorism:

“When there is no meditator, there is nothing to meditate upon”

If we are willing to suspend for the moment our conventional understanding of Qigong, our inquiry could lead us into a much simpler and direct approach to working with Qi - a way of embracing the life force that encompasses and employs the most subtle qualities of energy expressed in the body/mind. This approach to understanding and practicing Qigong is more truly aligned with the Taoist principles of Wu Wei (non-effort) and Wu Chi (Formlessness). This approach, more fundamental than any forms or systems of cultivating Qi for the purpose of healing or developing internal power, would at the same time effortlessly incorporate those expressions, and simultaneously point to the field of consciousness or Presence that lies behind all of these phenomena.

I would describe this deeper understanding or more essential quality as the spiritual foundation of Qigong – the ancient intent underlying any forms or systems of internal development whether they are healing, martial or spiritual.

Notwithstanding the numerous health benefits of the conventional forms of Qigong, Tai Chi Chuan, and other ancient mind/body traditions, there is something more essentially authentic in or behind these forms that evokes a deeper level of human consciousness existing prior to the forms themselves.

Before we examine this possibility, it may be useful to briefly describe some background and theory of Qigong.

Qigong, Neigong and the Progressive Path of Inner Cultivation Some classical principles may help us understand

Qigong theory and practice in a broader psycho-spiritual context. In some respects, this is an exercise similar to highlighting the richly textured context of Taoist spirituality and healing which lies behind the widespread system of contemporary Traditional Chinese Medicine.

It is generally agreed that the multitudinous systems and forms of Qigong are historically closely associated with the healing arts of Taoism, although it is also acknowledged by some excellent teachers that there are a number of important practices that derive from the Buddhist tradition as well. The most common definitions of Qigong include techniques for conserving, storing, circulating refining and transmitting Jing (pure essence) and Qi (pure energy) for restoring and maintaining health and increasing strength and stamina. Based on the classical Taoist emphasis on a sound energetic and physical foundation for health and longevity, a dedicated practitioner will, through consistent effort, progressively realize the health benefits of Qigong on energetic, physical and even psychological levels.

In terms of spiritual cultivation, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Taoist spiritual practice is the importance of the body as the laboratory in which Jing, Qi and Shen (individual consciousness) are progressively refined and transmuted into increasingly finer levels of energy culminating in the "Golden Elixir" or "Elixir of Immortality." In fact, this emphasis is a uniquely distinguishing feature of Taoist spirituality. In the Taoist tradition, a healthy body and longevity – the goal of most Qigong and Taoist healings arts - is regarded as the foundation for spiritual realization. The message is a simple one: the longer one lives in health and well-being, the greater the potential for realization. There is no obvious parallel in the Buddhist or Hindu traditions, which, with a few exceptions, view the body as an impediment to spiritual realization.

There are also Taoist teachings, sometimes described as Neigong, (inner or hidden cultivation) that take this progression even further in the direction of spiritual attainment. Neigong practices generally emphasize inner cultivation through a greater focus of attention on the Upper Dantian and the heart/mind.

What are sought in these practices is a transformation of Qi into Shen, as well as the further refinement of Shen itself into higher levels of soul and spirit. In some teachings, notably some popularized forms of Taoist Inner Alchemy, this process has become elaborated into a series of complex "formulas" that hold the promise of leading progressively to the highest levels of spiritual attainment. These formulas seek to blend the progressively refined internal energies of Jing, Qi and Shen with "external" energies of a variety of solar, lunar and cosmic forces to arrive at their stated goal of Taoist immortality. Essentially, this is a path that interprets spiritual development as a process of systematically refining the post-birth material energies at different levels of density so that they return to their original nature - the non-material realm of pre-birth spirit. The intent of the practitioner is to return to the void, the Wu Chi, through an intentional, accelerated mental and energetic focus on refinement and transformation of energy.

Risks of the Progressive Approach to Inner Cultivation On the path of progressive cultivation, the seeker strives for higher and higher levels of realization according to a road map often derived from interpretations of ancient Taoist alchemical texts such as the as "The Secret of the Golden Flower." And "Taoist Yoga: Alchemy & Immortality."

From my perspective, there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding attendant to this process. Although there are numerous classical techniques, as well as contemporary interpretations of these methods, designed to control and manipulate the energies of Jing, Qi and Shen, I consider most of them to be artificial and misleading. Following this path, the seeker is endlessly in a process of becoming or progressing through effort towards an imagined goal. This easily becomes a desired delicacy for the ego and has the real potential to fixate the mind on the mental form of a spiritual goal, thereby subtly creating just another dualistic illusion.

I have observed many otherwise sincere and dedicated practitioners of Qigong embrace internal alchemy as an entree into some kind of elevated spiritual real estate; a mentally

created location characterized by the qualities of voidness, emptiness or the imaged goal of immortality that becomes the desired pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

One result of this is that after many months or years of dedicated practice, many students and teachers become identified with a self-image of attainment. The mental structure of the ego assumes an identity, albeit in this instance a spiritual identity, that superficially replaces the ordinary, more pedestrian, material ego or self. This is a particular danger in any teaching, but especially in those practices that emphasize the manipulation of Qi or Prana in the form of ascending or descending channels or meridians such as Conception and Governing vessels and the Thrusting Channel (Ch'ung Mo), or focus on energizing specific centers or Chakras in the body as in some of the classic and modern interpretations of the Indian Yogic systems. Perhaps even more disturbing is the common phenomena of energy imbalances that often arise in practitioners of these forms. The level and quality of energy suddenly awakened in these practices is not easily integrated into the student's body/mind in daily life and may result in mental, emotional or physical disturbances. This has sometimes been described as the Kundalini syndrome within the tradition of Yoga or "Running Fire" by Oriental medicine.

To be fair, it should also be pointed out that there are some teachers of the Taoist arts who warn that the mental manipulation of internal energies, channels, etc. is a dead-end. Their emphasis, beyond embodying desired attributes of virtue and morality, is to simply rest awareness in the body, initially in the lower Dantian, and allow the process of cultivation to proceed naturally and effortlessly. In their understanding, not only is this approach more consistent with principles of Wu Wei, it is also safer both physically and spiritually.

Wu Chi (emptiness) & Wu Wei (effortlessness) The central paradox of Taoism - summarized succinctly in the first verse of Tao Te Ching, begins with the warning:

"The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant way."

It is no accident that one of the central sources of Taoist wisdom should state this proviso at the outset. Fundamentally, what the Tao Te Ching tells us is that the Tao cannot be explained or fully described by the intellect. The unrefined intellectual or discursive mind, i.e. the categorizing mind based on past memory and future expectation, cannot by its very nature “grasp” the essentially ungraspable Tao. From the perspective of the Tao Te Ching, the mind and language itself, i.e., mental and linguistic forms, even refined forms of spiritual ideas and ideals, can only point to that which is beyond the mind. They can never fully describe this realm of being since it is the very source or basis from which the mind and all other forms of life derive. In this sense, mind, language, the very basis of thought, can only describe itself and other forms, including the subtle forms of energy.

Another way of understanding this particular spiritual conundrum is within classical Taoist ontology. This philosophical framework describes Wu Chi, the nameless, formless Void and source of the Tao, as the source of the dual forms of Yin and Yang in all of their countless permutations. This play of opposites in turn gives rise to the Five Elements or Five Energetic Phases, and these, in turn, lead to the forms of life in all of its infinite manifestations. And yet, at the end of the day, so to speak, all phenomena naturally and easily return to the source, the un-manifested Wu Chi. Return to Wu Chi is essentially the model for all Taoist cultivation methods.

If we transpose this “warning”- the inherent limitations of the mind’s capacity to describe the Tao- to the conventional practice of Qigong or Neigong, we may rightfully ask the question: how can techniques or forms that work with energies of Yin and Yang, lead to the formless or the Tao? Or, to put it another way, how can the practice of progressively refined technique, no matter how subtle and sophisticated, lead to that which is by its very nature beyond any technique? Can any progressive practice of self-development, whether it is Qigong, Neigong, including the complex formulas of Inner Alchemy, lead through time to that which is essentially selfless, formless, timeless and eternal? On the surface this seems to be a perplexing paradox – one that

goes to the heart of the question of the limitations of systematic, progressive practice of Qigong and Qi cultivation.

Almost everyone who sincerely practices Qigong, Neigong, or any progressive practice of meditation with a spiritual intent pursues these disciplines with the expectation that these arts will add something to their lives. The goals may range from gaining more calmness and equanimity to immortality. Whatever the level of aspiration, the intent is to add something that is missing. Yet, the central tenet of Taoism warns us that this is an illusion. How can we become that which in our essential nature we already are?

Any technique or method that is goal oriented implies a degree of effort and tension since it involves a search for something external to the self - some result which is desired to complement or complete the self-image. Yet, if what we seek is already ours by virtue of it being our essential nature, then methods or techniques that seek spiritual attainment are misguided and may, in fact, obscure the understanding that we are what we seek.

Interestingly enough, this paradox is not exclusive to the Taoists arts of self-cultivation. In fact, this same conundrum is at the center of a number of spiritual traditions. For example, Jean Klein, one of the great Western masters of the non-dual teachings of Advaita Vedanta, as well as a great teacher of Hatha Yoga, makes the point in commenting on the value of Yoga as a spiritual practice:

“If you practice yoga to achieve something...then yoga becomes an obstacle, for it may generate the belief that what you fundamentally are is a goal you can attain through some system of progress. And this belief in progress takes you further away from yourself.”

Qigong as a Portal to Presence As Qigong practitioners, how can we work with this paradox in a practical fashion? After all, philosophy aside, we live in a world of form and duality, and have learned from experience the necessity and concrete benefits of diligently focusing our attention on the realization of a goal. We have all learned that both time and intelligent practice is

necessary whether we wish to learn a language, play the piano or develop a high level of martial or healing skill.

Some practitioners and teachers of Qigong have understood this point and suggest that the "highest" or most refined form of Qigong is embodied by standing postures. In this teaching, known as "Zhan Zhuang" ("standing like a tree") one's practice is to simply stand, relaxed with as empty a mind as possible, and allow the internal energies to rise or descend and do their work of unraveling tension, knots or stagnation in the body's muscular - skeletal and energetic systems. Nothing more is required. "Zhan Zhuang represents "effortless effort," utilizing a minimum of form or technique, embodying principles of Wu Wei and Wu Chi in a very direct way. This type of practice, of which there are numerous variations, is most closely associated with Wang Xiang Zhai, one of the foremost practitioners of the Chinese internal martial art of Hsing Yi, who describes the philosophy of Zhan Zhuang as:

"Action originates in inaction, and stillness is the mother of movement."

Wang Xiang Zhai's statement conveys a deep truth, one that lies at the threshold of understanding how we can directly approach the "practice" of Qigong as a portal to Presence.

A "Portal to Presence" is exactly what it says: a simple doorway or entrance to the field of Consciousness or Presence. It would be stretching the meaning of the word "technique" or "method" to apply it to this idea. One just walks through the portal as one becomes aware of its existence. There is no effort involved such as a decision to remain in the doorway, or to walk through on one's hands and knees. In fact, it would be a bit odd to hang out in the doorway itself or to approach it in such a convoluted manner. The portal opens, and Presence arises spontaneously. Gradually, as awareness arises, the practitioner experiences the portal opening more frequently in the spirit of Wu Wei.

Approaching the practice of Qigong in this way, the body and Qi are just objects for attention and observation. No particular

posture, Qigong form, visualization or breathing technique is required or preferred, nor are we attempting to change the body or the energy in any way according to a pre-determined goal. It is possible to use any Qigong posture for this purpose. A degree of familiarity and comfort with any specific standing, sitting or moving form may be helpful if it is approached as a vehicle for deepening awareness. It is, however, essential to suspend or release any particular expectations, images, reference to past experiences of energy, or expectations of results.

Initially one's attention may be gently directed to the surface of the body, or various parts such as the palms of the hands, the limbs, or, for those with more Qigong experience, the lower Dantian. As the awareness is sustained, different types of sensation and feeling may arise. No effort is involved in this. There is no sense of doing or activity directed towards an anticipated result. Rather, the experience is one of deep receptivity, stillness or "listening."

Gradually, attention moves toward the subtle energy field of the body, the Qi or life force. This may be felt in any area of the body or over the entire body. The classical indicators of Qi – tingling, warmth, numbness, etc. may arise and these are simply employed as objects for attention.

With sustained "listening," a more global sensation of energy arises involving the whole body. The "practice" here is one of effortlessly allowing the attention to rest within the Inner Body, the field of Qi that is manifesting within and perhaps extending beyond the body. Breathing may be experienced over the entire body, as if the cells themselves were inhaling and exhaling. Yet, there is no imaging, description, labeling or conceptualizing involved in any of this. Gradually, the body itself becomes more transparent and the distinction between the doer, the observer, and the object of observation begins to dissolve. Directed attention itself begins to dissolve and what remains is Wu Chi - simple pure, awareness.

As we practice this ancient art with this intent and understanding, utilizing the body/senses/mind and Qi as objects

or forms arising in awareness, we embody the essential principles of Wu Wei. Working with the forms of Qigong in this simple, direct manner, as a Portal to Presence, we enter the natural state of being that is at the heart of the Taoist way.

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