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Emptiness and Coherence: Part 2; Focus on Practice

Integrating Emptiness with the Three Treasures of Love, Wisdom and Vitality

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Qi Gong practice is the art of cultivating a state of energetic harmony between all levels of our being and with the energies of earth and the cosmos. By learning how to skillfully train our attention on different areas of our body/mind, practicing correct posture and movement patterns, and learning healthy breathing patterns, we cultivate a state of vitality in our physical body, increase our capacity to give and receive love, and access a clear and quiet state of mind. In the words of the esteemed neurobiologist Dan Siegel “attention sculpts the nervous system” (Siegel, 2012). Simply put, what we practice we become.

When our chi flows in a natural and unobstructed river through all levels of our being, we access deep levels of our potential. Qi Gong practice nourishes this potential and helps us to realize the true nature of reality. In the view of the Taoist sages, reality is an open system of luminous intelligence in which everything is knit together in a great interdependent web that spans from the smallest atomic quark to the movements of the stars.

According to Taoist practice, in a human being this intelligence manifests as the three treasures of vitality, love and wisdom, which are knit together by the central channel. The nature of the central channel is emptiness. In an accomplished practitioner, the three treasures, which manifest through the lower, middle and upper Dan Tiens of the body (belly, chest and head) are open and balanced and consciousness flows from emptiness to form and back to emptiness in an unbroken circle.

Because of our conditioning and the various traumas that we have experienced in life, we usually find ourselves cut off and alienated from this flow in some way. Qi Gong practice allows us to begin to address this problem. Through our practice we dissolve the blockages we experience and remember our place in the web of life.

The current of chi we access through practice is skillful and precise medicine. Different practices address different blockages and restore the flow of chi in specific ways. A well-trained Qi Gong master has many practices at his or her disposal to address the blockages they discover in themselves and their students. This “medicine chest” of practice in Taoism is vast. After 45 years, I still feel like a beginner!

On the other hand, the core of Qi Gong practice is very simple. Do the practice! The more you practice, in a relaxed and balanced way (i.e. without extremes – don’t be a “weekend warrior” about it!) the more the natural flow of chi will heal and balance your body, heart and mind. The greatest teacher is the practice itself.

What follows are 4 simple methods that can be used to cultivate the three treasures, balance the lower, middle and upper Dan Tiens, and begin to cultivate an awareness of emptiness. These are fairly simple and safe methods. If you practice them with sincerity, they can have a profoundly balancing effect on your body and mind.

This is not meant to be a substitute for study with a teacher. As always, I encourage you to seek out a competent Qi Gong teacher or Taoist master to study with if you want to truly progress in mastering this wonderful art.

Balancing the Belly

Dan Tien breathing (Sometimes also called longevity breathing, ocean breathing, or six-sided breathing.)

Sit comfortably in a chair with your spine straight and your feet planted on the ground, or if you know how to do Taoist standing meditation, stand with the correct alignments.

Allow your attention to rest in your breath. Invite your breathing to relax and deepen until you are breathing diaphragmatically. You will know you are breathing diaphragmatically when your belly is rising and falling with each breath. Gently, begin to feel your belly from the inside. Notice any places of tension, overcharge or undercharge, contraction, or anything that feels imbalanced or not quite right. With your awareness in your breath, invite any sensations of imbalance or tension to relax and unwind.

As your belly relaxes, begin to explore the different directions that your breath moves. Notice how your breath can expand your belly to the front, back, right, left, and up and down. Explore each of these directions separately and note the areas that are more difficult for you. A good way to check if your breath is open in a particular area is to place your hand on that area and see if you feel movement.

As your breath reaches in all six directions with more evenness and ease, imagine that there is a luminous sea of energy in your belly that is pulsing out in all directions with each breath. If your capacity to sense your body from the inside is strong you could breathe into each internal organ. Placing your attention specifically on each internal organ can have a strong effect on the flow of fluids and chi to that area. (If you are not familiar with the placement of each organ it is useful to consult an anatomy book.)

Gradually increase the range of this pulsation until it moves through your whole body all the way out to your skin. Then slowly include the field of energy around your body. Feel your chi reaching from the center of your belly to the periphery of your chi-field and back to the center in an even, relaxed pulsation. As you do this, slow your breath down even more. The slower you breathe and the more your attention can rest in an unbroken stream within it and with the subtle movement of chi, the more coherent, quiet and focused your mind will become. Stay with the sensations of these pulsations. Allow a deep sense of enjoyment, inner peace and relaxation to emerge with each breath. Bless each breath and consciously recognize it as a gift of vitality. Breath is life.

Training your attention to rest in your breath and this pulsation from center to periphery takes time. Feel this time as a gift to yourself and your well-being. Be patient. Practice this until you can rest in your breath with an undistracted mind for 10, 20 or 30 minutes.

As your mind becomes more and more settled and tensions dissolve at deeper levels of your belly, invite an awareness of emptiness to emerge in the center of your belly. This might feel like a profound, relaxed, stillness and *presence* that pervades your entire body-mind. Rest in this presence. Allow the energies that flow into your belly naturally from emptiness to heal and to balance you at every level.

Standing Meditation and Opening the Five Gates

This is one of my favorite practices to connect the Dan Tien of the belly with the energy of the earth. It is tremendously grounding and stabilizing for the nervous system.

To do this practice, first we have to learn how to meditate while standing. Standing meditation is called the secret of Qi Gong (Cohen, 1997). There are many advantages to standing meditation. For many people it keeps their attention in their bodies and their sensations more effectively than sitting practice. It also challenges practitioners to release postural misalignments and body armoring that block the streaming of energy from the crown of their head all the way to their feet*.

Begin by standing with your feet parallel directly under your hips. Bring your attention to the bottoms of your feet and imagine the soles of your feet melting evenly into the ground like soft wax. Allow your weight to be evenly distributed with no more weight in the front, back, left or right side of your foot. Feel that the boundary between your sole and the ground beneath you is dissolving as if you have energetic roots that extend below your feet.

Then bring your attention to your ankles. Feel that there is a luminous cushion of chi in between the bones of your ankles that relieves any pressure. Give yourself the suggestion that this cushion is a little fatter in the back of your ankles than the front. This will encourage a sense of buoyancy and resilience in your ankles.

Then bring your attention to your knees. Find a “sweet spot” in your knees where they are neither bent nor straight. Enter your knees with your awareness through the backs of your knees and fill your knees with a luminous, pulsing fluid that relieves any stress in your knees. Note that in Taoist standing practice, the knees are a “weight transfer” joint, not a weight bearing one.

Then notice your sacrum. Drop your sacrum downwards as if you have a dinosaur's tail that gently pulls your sacrum down towards the ground. Feel an energetic connection between your sacrum and your heels and sense rivers of chi flowing down your legs from your sacrum into your feet and then into the ground.

Next become aware of your lumbar spine. Sense cushions of light between each vertebrae relieving any pressure in your low back. Allow these cushions to be a little fatter in the front of your spine than the back so the vertebrae nest easily down into your sacrum.

Then bring your attention to your midback. Widen the space between your scapula so that you have a sense of the chi wrapping around your body from the back. This should relieve any tension in your upper back. While you do this, open your arm pits as if they have quail's eggs in them and melt any tension you feel in your chest down into your lower Dan Tien.

Finally, become aware of your head and neck. Gently pull your chin in and have a sense that you are lengthening the back of your neck and opening the area of your occiput. Imagine the topmost point of your head opening and reaching for a star above your head. Feel that your whole body is hanging from this star, totally relaxed, like a suit of clothing hung up in the closet. Allow the chi from the star above your head to stream down through your whole body, dissolving any areas of tension, contraction, overcharge or undercharge, and relaxing anything that feels twisted or armored or in any way "not quite right". Allow the process of dissolving tension to continue for as long as you like. For many practitioners, standing meditation on its' own is a core practice.

Once you are standing with proper alignments, bring your attention to your breath and belly as in the belly breathing practice above. Now you are ready to focus on relaxing open the five gates.

Gradually become aware of the palms of your hands the soles of your feet, and your perineum. Slowly bring your hands in front of your body with your palms pointing downward.

Begin to sense five luminous streams of chi extending from your belly center through these five gates into the earth until your body feels like a tree with five luminous roots. Extend these roots deep into the energy field of the earth. Open yourself to the possibility that you can directly and experientially sense the energy field of the earth. Invite the innate intelligence, order and self-correcting balance that is inherent in the earth to communicate directly with your belly center. Feel your chi field and the field of the planet becoming synchronized and

unified. If your sensitivity is highly developed, you might feel the natural pulsations of the earth's magnetic field moving through your body.

As this practice and connection with the earth becomes more stable and coherent, invite emptiness to touch you through the portal of the earth's magnetic field. What do you notice about the quality of emptiness as it gets filtered through the earth's magnetic field?

*I feel particularly indebted to Bill Ryan and Bruce Frantzis (Frantzis, 1993) for teaching me through the finer points of standing meditation.

Balancing the chest

The Inner Smile; Opening the Heart of Compassion

Here is a simple, profound practice to cultivate compassion and balance the middle Dan Tien. I first learned this practice with Mantak Chia (Chia, 1993). It is very similar to lovingkindness or "metta" practice in the Buddhist tradition and I have integrated some aspects of metta practice into the following description.

This practice can be done seated or standing.

Begin by resourcing some experience that opens you to a felt sense of compassion and loving-kindness. This could be a connection with a person you love, a spiritual teacher that embodies these qualities, a piece of music, or a scene from nature. The important thing is to awaken a genuine sense of loving-kindness that is heartfelt and that you can sense directly in your heart area. Allow this feeling to be expressed in an inner smile like the Buddha's smile.

Sense a warm glow in your chest that is imbued with the qualities of love and compassion. Often, I sense an actual sweet taste, like nectar, at this point in the meditation. See what arises for you. For some people it is useful to imagine a light like a small sun in the center of the chest. Allow the warmth of this sweet, loving-kindness to spread through your chest and flow into all parts of your body/mind. It is useful to be very specific. Light up each internal organ, each muscle and bone, and every part of your nervous system with this warm, accepting, compassionate glow. Feel a deep sense of gratitude for the miracle of your human body. Then, invite every area of your emotional life, particularly those areas where you have conflict or judgement, into the compassionate warmth that is emanating from your heart center. Spend more time with any part

of you, either physically or emotionally, that you have shame or judgement towards.

After you have worked with yourself, begin to include people in your life. Start with people that you love unambivalently and progress to those that you have more conflict about. It might take many sessions before you feel ready to authentically work with the difficult people in your life. Notice the quality of the energies that arise in your body/mind as you do this. If at any point you lose contact with this very even, loving, compassionate energy in the center of your chest, slow down and go back a step. Ultimately you can include your city, state, the country and the whole planet.

As the energies in your chest become more stable and coherent, invite the stillness of emptiness into the center of your chest. Notice what happens when you attune to emptiness through the portal of your heart center. How is this similar and/or different to the way that you feel emptiness in your belly center?

After practicing this meditation for a couple of weeks, notice if your relationship with yourself and the people around you changes in any significant way. Experiment with recalling this very even, compassionate and kind energy when you are in a challenging situation. I find it particularly useful when I am about to be emotionally reactive. Notice if your capacity to contain and redirect your attention and behavior so you do not act out in a reactive way has grown as a result of doing this meditation.

Balancing the Head

Opening the Head Center and Connecting to the Subtle Realms of Boundless Chi above the Head

A word of caution with the following meditation. Make sure that you ground yourself in your lower Dan Tien and the earth before and after you this meditation or you might feel spacey. I find it useful to “bracket” any work with the higher, more subtle energies, with standing and/or sitting practices that focus on the downward flow of chi into the earth.

This practice connects the head center to the boundless realms of energy above your head. According to many mystical teachings, this energy is the first vibrational step down out of emptiness. I have learned versions of this practice from many sources, including from Mantak Chia, Pir Vilayat, Thomas Hubl, and in

the Ridwhan school of A.H. Almaas. The following is my own integration. This practice can be done sitting or standing.

Begin by bringing your attention to the center of your head. Mindfully begin to dissolve any areas of tension or contraction that you feel around your skull and scalp. Pay particular attention to your eyes and dissolving the deep tensions in your optical nerve and behind your eyes. Through your eyes begin to access and unwind deeper layers of your brain and nervous system. As the tension in your head dissolves, invite a quality of deep, luminous, black, spaciousness to emerge in your head. Feel the intense quiet and stillness of this luminous, black space.

Then pay particular attention to dissolving any tension that you feel at the topmost point of your crown. This point is called the Ba Hui point in Taoist teachings and is the gateway to the energies above our heads. As this point dissolves, allow your experience of inner spaciousness to extend far above your head. At some point as you travel into this black spaciousness above your head, allow a swirling galaxy of stars like a vast, spiral, funnel of light and energy to emerge. Out of this funnel, notice one particularly bright star about 6 feet above your crown. Feel this star shining with a powerful, luminous, brightness. Feel that it is filled with the deepest essence of your soul, your essential identity, beyond your personality or conditioned mind in time and space.

Feel a stream of luminous energy flowing down from this star into the top of your head and down through your nervous system. As this energy washes down from above your head, you may feel a powerful sense of coherence, clarity, and organization streaming through every aspect of your body and mind. In particular feel this energy moving through your central channel, which runs through the middle of your body from your crown all the way down to your perineum and into the earth. Feel this flow of energy organizing and balancing your nervous system. Allow this current to continue as long as is necessary to do the work of repairing, balancing and healing your nervous system.

When this is finished, return to a deep, neutral sense of the emptiness. Notice how emptiness touches your body/mind through the portal of your head center. Notice how your experience of emptiness at this level is similar and different to your experience of emptiness in your chest and belly. See if you can begin to develop finer and finer discriminations between the direct experience of emptiness and the qualities that emerge through each of the centers of the belly, the chest and the head.

End your practice by focusing your chi in your lower Dan Tien to ground and integrate these subtle, high levels of chi.

Endnotes

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