

What is Qi?

The seeking, cultivation, and application of qi in health and creativity.

By J Bremer (灵花)

‘Behold. All of the answers will be found within...

...What? It’s blank?’

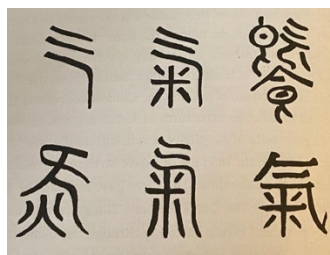
– Shifu, Kung Fu Panda¹

While the quote may come from a children’s film, the words themselves carry a great lesson not too dissimilar to Daoist teachings and practice – that through mindfulness and self-awareness, the answers can be found within. When contemplating the existence and meaning of qi, it is impossible to do so without also considering Daoism 道 (*The Way*) which is both a philosophical and spiritual path that centres on living in harmony with the Dao (the source).

I first came across the word qi when I was a teenager and did a taster session of tai chi that can only be described as moving and profound. In my young age and lack of knowledge (or ability to access such knowledge at the time); I only knew the few words the teacher had spoken in that short time, and that while going through the movements, I felt something that was both outside of my body, and inside of it.

It is a sensation and curiosity that has remained with me my entire life and becoming a guiding force for each step I take. What was it that I felt that day? Was it qi? How could I find that state of mind and feeling again?

Qi (气) is considered to be the life force, or the “breath of life”, or “essence of life” – a vital energy that comes from the harmonized energies of Yin and Yang that came from the formless expanse² at the dawn of creation. The character for qi translates as “Qi of Heaven” and originate from early pictographs that have been explained as “dew turning into steam”.



Early variants of the Chinese characters for qi³

¹ IMDB. *Kung Fu Panda*; quotes. 2008. <

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0441773/quotes/?ref=tt_trv_qu > [accessed 09/10/21]

² Birrell, Anne. (1993). *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*. The John Hopkins University Press, 1999 (Maryland)

³ Sterckx, R. *Chinese Thought; From Confucious to Cook Ding*. (2019). Penguin Random House UK. paperback, 2020, P76

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In the 42nd Chapter of the Laozi, it is written than ‘the ten thousand things; carrying yin, embracing yang – blending Qi to create harmony.’⁴ while Chinese philosophers spoke of harmony that came from Yin and Yang blending together nicely. This suggests that qi is created from the combined and harmonized energies of Yin and Yang.

Qi is considered the centre of spiritual, emotional, and physical health in Daoism, or the essential element to human existence. It comes from three elements, which are also known as the three treasures in Traditional Chinese Medicine: vitality (*jing*), energy (*qi*), and spirit (*shen*). These elements must be kept in balance – especially qi which has influence over *jing* and *shen*⁵. This reiterates what is written in the Laozi of qi being an unseen force of importance that requires harmonizing for other elements to be balanced.

This is a fundamental part of what Traditional Chinese Medicine also looks at. When it comes to the human body, qi can enter or leave through the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. Blood is the “mother of Qi” and qi is the “commander of blood”; and so blood and qi are inseparable from each other in this instance. Blood carries the qi around the body, and it also carries the nutrients for the body itself; while qi is the intelligent force which makes the blood flow.⁶

‘Man is ch’i, and ch’i is within each human. Heaven and Earth and ten thousand things all require ch’i to stay alive.’ – Ko Hung, Taoist alchemist.⁷

If qi is an unseen, intangible energy that exists within and without the body, and yet it also needs cultivation for optimum health and wellbeing, particularly within the human body, how would one be able to experience, feel, and cultivate qi?

A basic belief to a Daoist practitioner is that qi responds to intention which means it can be directed to any part of the body. Strengthening and renewal of qi can occur when one consciously allows the energy to sink down to the lower tan tien (point of power within the abdomen) where qi can be worked upon⁸.

‘Qigong is the art and science of refining and cultivating internal energy.’ – Ken Cohen.

Many exercises of the practice Qi Gong (the resulting product of the effort you put in) are related to rhythmic breathing exercises so that qi (as air) can be inhaled and exhaled and optimize and harmonize the circulation of qi around the body.⁹

Tai Chi, a system of movements aimed at helping people regulating their qi is another great practice for the cultivation and balancing of qi. While the energy is intangible. It is something that can be expressed in the physical realm through the practice of Tai Chi.

⁴ Moeller, Hans-Georg. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*. Columbia University Press, 2006, P34

⁵ Hartz, P R. (*World Religions*) *Daoism*. Chelsea House Publishers. New York, P.76-P.78

⁶ Yiyin Jiao. Chinese Wellbeing: from Philosophy and Religion to Culture; Week 3-1. Key Theories of TCM.

⁷ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.15

⁸ Ball, P. *The Essence of Tao*. (2006). Arcturus Publishing Limited, London, P.198

⁹ Moeller, Hans-Georg. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, P.37

The creation of Tai Chi is generally credited to Chang San-Feng who is reputed to have lived either during the Sung or Yuan Dynasty. In popular belief, Chang San-Feng was so impressed by having witnessed a snake battling a crane, and how it dodged and countered the larger bird; that he dreamed off tai chi that night¹⁰.

Tai (“that which is extreme, great, or supreme”) and Chi (“ultimate” or “polarity”) can be seen as the driving force of the universe as expressed in the Laozi, and which generate two poles: Yin and Yang.



The Taiji symbol¹¹

The well-known taiji symbol is representative of how yin and yang are two opposing energies that are in perpetual flux, but also how they are also interconnected with each other - one couldn't exist without the other. It is a static representation of the combining energies; while the practice of tai chi is living and is a flowing and dynamic manifestation of the essential energies.

With qi coming from the harmonious blending of yin and yang, is it also of great importance that these two opposing energies also be balanced. Tai chi combines fighting stance with more fluid movements which are more like dance and becomes a beautiful, physical manifestation of Daoist principles, and incorporates and blends the different principles of yin and yang energies.

‘The softest thing in the universe, over comes the hardest thing in the universe.’ –
from the Tao Te Ching¹²

The practice of tai chi is both a physical and a spiritual discipline, and it mirrors movements of the universe. In many ways, this is also very much like dance which is also a part of Daoist ritual. Circling movements are believed to bring the worshiper in harmony with the natural

¹⁰ Ball, P. *The Essence of Tao*, P.134

¹¹ mohamed_hassan (Artist) ‘Yin and Yang’ < <https://pixabay.com/vectors/yin-yang-harmony-balance-silhouette-4401011/> > [Accessed 25/09/2021]

¹² Ball, P. *The Essence of Tao*, P.136

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cycles of the universe. Priests will dance a “constellation of the heavens” with beautiful sweeping motions and high steps as though stepping from star to star.¹³

These exercises and practices amongst others all help a person to develop inner contemplation, that tranquil place within where all answers can be sought. Meditation is one of the most efficient practices for balancing and cultivating qi – a practice which even the Western world and scientists have proven has many health benefits too.

Both Qi Gong and tai chi are ultimately a practice of meditation, and require which bring the mind, intention, and energy back into alignment and a state of balance so they can support each other – thus bringing qi back into harmony within the body, and so the spiritual, emotional, and physical health that Daoism and Traditional Chinese Medicine consider essential to human existence also become balanced.

‘when the taoist practitioner achieves state of awareness, there is a sense of connectedness with the natural flow of life. A feeling of belonging and a profound sense of reality.’¹⁴

The existence and discovery of qi can also be found within calligraphy and art. For calligraphy to have qi, the calligrapher would try to make their writing appear as if it had grown naturally, and to be well-formed. To have qi, the strokes would have to give the sense of life and movement; and to have the yin and yang elements of the character fitting together as a whole. “Watching calligraphy should be like watching a dancer perform”¹⁵ which circles back to the principles of tai chi and qi gong that require discipline of the mind and the body, and control over the flow of breath. Through these practices, qi is cultivated and flows through the body, and can be directed into arts.

Classical painters would also strive for a level of true inspiration and union with qi and the creative force (in this instance, the Dao). Many of the artists trained first in calligraphy, and as with monks who would follow a spiritual path and training within monasteries, the artist train for a state of existence where their heart, mind, and spirit were prepared so that the creative force could work through them.

What they would create was not a literal representation of something, but a response to what they were transferring blended with how the mind transformed it. Wang Wei (699-759) was a landscape painter whose work best captured the essence of qi had this to say on looking at a well-executed painting:

‘The wind rises from the green forest, and the foaming water rushes in the stream. Alas! Such painting cannot be achieved by physical movements of the fingers and hand, but only by the spirit entering into them. This is the nature of painting.’¹⁶

¹³ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.121

¹⁴ Ball, P. *The Essence of Tao*, P.40

¹⁵ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.117

¹⁶ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.113

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Wang Wei's 'Snow over Rivers and Mountains'¹⁷

This can also be seen in what Su Dongpo has to say on learning to paint from his friend Yuko:

'When Yuko painted on bamboo
he saw bamboo, not himself.
Nor was he simply unconscious of himself:
Trancelike, he left his body.'¹⁸

The sensations Wang Wei and Su Dongpo talk about isn't unheard of in the Western world, though it is more commonly known as "creative flow" or "in the zone". As primarily an artist and writer myself, this is a sensation I have experience with. Being in a state of mind to sit down and write or paint takes more than just sitting down and beginning, it also requires having the right state of mind.

The body needs to be well nourished and strong so that it can endure the state of creativity, and the mind must be calm and settled so it can become focused, intuitive, and responsive. At the art begins, the mind goes to an indescribable place where the creation flows through the self and onto the page. It is a wonderful and magical experience that so much creativity can well up from an unknown source and surge on to the page and give the art a life of its own.

'The zone is enjoyable, but when that joy becomes an obsession, one becomes disconnected from life.' – Moonwind, Soul, 2020¹⁹

While it may seem unfathomable or incomprehensible to someone who isn't an artist, not being able to get into that state of flow is the biggest stress and block to an artist of any kind – just as obsessively trying to find that place.

¹⁷ Wang Shimin, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

¹⁸ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.113

¹⁹ IMDB. *Soul; quotes*. 2020. < https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2948372/quotes/?ref=tt_trv_qu > [accessed 09/10/21]

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As with any practitioner of Daoism, an artist – though they may follow a different path to the same end – will slowly discover that the way in which to maintain optimum creativity and productivity is to also address factors of their lifestyle. Seeking understanding and truth in belief systems, the diet, mindfulness – particularly that of self-awareness and temperance, and exercise are all contributing factors that many artists and writers will find themselves adhering to in some way.

Haruki Murakami had this to say on lifestyle when interviewed by John Wray in 2004:

‘...but to hold such repetition for so long...requires a good amount of mental and physical strength. In that sense, writing a long novel is like survival training. Physical strength is as necessary as artistic sensitivity.’²⁰

A quick search on the internet for the advice from successful writers and artists all give a similar advice. While the Western world may not be so aware or knowledgeable of qi, Daoism, and principle of traditional Chinese medicine; it can be seen at a glance that artists have, in their own way, been striving to find that same tranquil place of harmony and balance where creativity and knowledge can be found.

In conclusion, qi can be considered an energetic force of creation that is always on the move, within and without the human body. It is a force that requires constant renewal and cultivation through meditative exercise, self-discipline, and the mastery of self through learning and understanding of subtle energies within the self and within the world.

Qi is the essence of life which can be recognised with practice and connected with through various techniques. It is breath that can be nurtured and shared with nature and with others, while also being channelled through the self and the physical body into physical manifestation.

It is a profound and secretive energy that can be understood inherently, yet also requires dedication and constant leaning. It is the wind that rises out of the painted forest and the foaming waters that rushes through ink and story. It can be seen and experienced through the creation and expression of the arts as much as it can be perceived by the onlooker.

Through adopting a lifestyle that incorporates principles of “The Way” and traditional Chinese medicine, a person can begin to obtain a far higher quality of life and wellbeing that comes from connecting with qi.

One final thought on what The Way (Dao) or qi is, is that in the end: Dao can be learned, but cannot be taught. Like the scroll from Kung Fu Panda that is said to contain all the answers within, yet is blank when unfurled, “*Dao that can be expressed in words is not the real or ‘eternal’ Dao. Masters and writers can help to point the way, but each person must find his or her own Dao.*”²¹

²⁰ The Paris Review. John Wray. Haruki Murakami, *The Art of Fiction*, no. 182. 2004. < <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2/the-art-of-fiction-no-182-haruki-murakami> > [accessed 09/10/21]

²¹ Hartz, P R. *Daoism*, P.11

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