

Classical Theories

Through a long history of dissemination and development, ancient Qigong gradually split and grouped into various schools and traditions. The major traditions include Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, Medical, and Martial Arts Qigong; the most notable are Buddhism, Daoism, and Medical Qigong. The following is a brief introduction to the theories of the major Qigong traditions with the focus on Medical Qigong.

1. Theories of Medical Qigong

Modern Chinese Medical Qigong grew out of ancient Medical Qigong. Therefore, the theory of ancient Medical Qigong is the precursor of modern Chinese Medical Qigong. Based on the fundamental theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), modern Chinese Medical Qigong theories concern the principles, forms or methods, and practical and clinical application of Qigong with the aim of constructing treatment rationales and interpreting various life phenomena. The theories of ancient Medical Qigong include the Yin-Yang Five Elements Theory, Essence-Qi-Spirit Theory, Zang-Xiang Theory, and Meridians and Qi-Blood Theory. Since the theories of ancient Medical Qigong are explained thoroughly in the textbook *Fundamental Theories of Chinese Medicine*, this chapter only introduces them briefly, but focuses on the application of those theories to Qigong practice and the difference from TCM.

I. Theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements

A. Yin-Yang and the Five Elements Constitute a Model of Nature, Society, and Human Life

In ancient times, people observed the weather, astronomical phenomena, and the landscape, and associated them with corresponding human activities and relationships, gradually forming philosophical concepts and categories through abstract summarization, analogy, deduction, and comprehensive analysis. Among these are the theory of prenatal Qi, which is concerned with the materiality of the world; the theory of Dao, which centers on the law of objective truth; the theory of Taiji with regard to the origin of the universe; and categories such as matter, movement, time, space, and quantitative change versus qualitative change, contradiction, and the negation of negation. The model of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements comprises all these concepts.

Ancient people believed that the universe originated from “Taiji,” which then engendered the two elementary forms (Liang Yi, 两仪), that is, Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang produced the four emblematic symbols (Si Xiang, 四相) from which the Five Elements, Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water, evolved. The four emblematic symbols further engendered the Eight Trigrams (Bagua, 八卦), which led to the formation of 64 hexagrams from which the myriad of things in the universe evolved.

This mathematic model could be used to interpret the phenomena of human life and expresses the notion that the universe developed and evolved from simple to complex. As the *Valuable Experiences on Chinese Medicine from Four Sages* or *Sisheng Xinyuan* (四圣心源)¹ states:

Before Yin and Yang began to be distinguished from one another, holistic Qi diffused vastly. There had been Yin and Yang in the Qi; the lucid Yang ascended and the turbid Yin descended... When Yin and Yang separated, two elementary forms came into existence... The lucid Qi spun left and up to become Fire, while the turbid Qi spun right and down to become Water... The lucid Qi that ascended halfway turned not to Fire but to Wood, whose Qi is warm in nature. If it continued ascending, Wood would heat up and turn into Fire. The turbid Qi that descended halfway turned not to Water but to Metal, whose Qi is cold in nature. If it continued descending, the Metal would cool down and turn into Water. Water, Fire, Metal and Wood are the four emblematic symbols generated by the ascending and descending of the Yin and Yang. And Yin and Yang themselves resulted from the ascent and descent of middle Qi (spleen-Qi, which stands for Earth). Water, Fire, Metal and Wood are called the four emblematic symbols when separated, and

Yin and Yang when combined. These are called Yin and Yang when separated, but they are just a variation of middle Qi when put together. The spinning wheel of the four emblematic symbols completes the four seasons of a year... It becomes Spring when Yang ascends halfway, Summer when Yang ascends fully, Autumn when Yin descends halfway, and Winter when Yin descends fully. [Everything is] born in the Spring, grows in the Summer owing to the Qi of Wood and Fire...and gets harvested in the Autumn and stored in the Winter owing to the Qi of Metal and Water... The four emblematic symbols, together with Earth, constitute the Five Elements.

It can be seen from these statements that Yin-Yang and the Five Elements might merely be a set of symbols used by the ancient people to describe the periodic variation of the climate, the growing cycle of plants, and the rhythmic metabolic changes in the human body based on the idea of the lucid Yang ascending and the turbid Yin descending. It is a hypothesis about the laws of the movement of things in the universe.

B. Yin-Yang, Five Elements, and Qigong

1. *Yin-Yang as a Guide to Qigong Practice*

Ancient people said that, in practicing Qigong, one must “have a profound insight into Yin and Yang” (from *Awakening to the Truth* or *Wu Zhen Pian*, 悟真篇²). “Ancient people who had knowledge of Dao followed the rule of Yin and Yang in compatibility with the celestial figures; they controlled their eating habits, regulated their daily activities, never being compulsive or over-exerted. Therefore, they were able to preserve both their physical health and mental ability and live up to a hundred years. On the other hand, those who consume alcohol as if drinking water, often exert themselves and go to sleep while drunk damage, even use up, their original essence and their health declines when they are fifty (half of a hundred)” (*Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic* or *Huangdi Neijing*, 黄帝内经).

The first step of Qigong practice is choosing an appropriate method or form, as “People are classified into lesser Yin (Shaoyin), greater Yi Yin (Taiyin), lesser Yang (Shaoyang), greater Yang (Taiyang), and balanced Yin-Yang five types or groups. Each differs in shape, muscles, bones, Qi and blood.” For patients, Yin or Yang hyperactivity or deficiency in particular should be distinguished so that different Qigong forms can be assigned to different individuals to achieve the optimal results.

The actual process of choosing Qigong forms for preserving health and treating illness is also guided by the Yin-Yang Five Element theory, and a few

forms can be combined accordingly to achieve the optimal result of Qigong practice for different individuals and disease patterns. For example, the Qigong forms for nourishing Yin and reducing Yang can be used for the pattern of Yin deficiency and Yang excess and coordinated with the methods of “Simultaneously moving the tongue around the teeth root to produce saliva and swallowing it slowly (Jiaohai tunjin, 搅海吞津)” and “contemplating or imagining ice and snow (Cunxiang bingxue, 存想冰雪).” Qigong forms for benefitting Yang and reducing Yin can be chosen for the pattern of Yang deficiency and Yin excess and coordinated with the method of “holding breath to produce heat (Biqi Fare Fa, 闭气发热法)” and “contemplating and imagining Fire and heat (Cunxiang Huore Fa, 存想火热法).”

When practicing Qigong, adjusting the body in motion and stillness, opening and closing, relaxing and tightening, being soft and hard, bending and stretching, and ascending and descending pertain to either Yang or Yin. Generally speaking, dynamic Qigong forms pertain to Yang while static Qigong forms pertain to Yin. Ascending and opening upwards and outwards elevates Yang, while descending and closing downwards and inwards restrains it. *Collections on Medicine* or *Yixue Huihan* (医学汇函)³ records that “People suffering from pathogenic Fire should practice Qigong with their eyes open while people without the pathogenic Fire may do it with their eyes closed. When practicing Qigong, a person can guide the Qi upwards to treat ear, eye, mouth or nose diseases by bending his body backwards; treat the head disease by raising his head; and treat the diseases below the waist by focusing on the feet.”

Yin and Yang also guide the adjustment of breath. Breathing in pertains to Yang, while breathing out pertains to Yin. *A Miraculous Canon on Long Life through the Original Qi* or *Changsheng Taiyuan Shenyong Jing* (长生胎元神用经)⁴ records the following: “fresh Qi taken in through the nose is Yang while the turbid Qi coming out from the mouth is Yin...” Holding the breath to retain Qi can eliminate cold, and breathing out turbid Qi can clear heat. Therefore, people with Yang deficiency should focus on breathing in, prolonging the act of inhaling. People with Yin deficiency should focus on breathing out, prolonging the act of exhaling.

Adjusting the mind also involves changes of Yin-Yang. Keeping the mind in focus (意守) and mental-visualization practice especially are fully characterized by variations of Yin and Yang. Focusing on external sight can remove heat Fire, while focusing on internal sight can warm Yang. Imagining a scene of Water and coldness can supplement Yin, while a mental-visualizing scene of Fire and heat can elevate Yang. As *Wen Shi Daoist Canon* or *Wenshi Zhenjing* (文始真经)⁵ stated: “Qi is induced by the mind... [In] contemplating a big Fire inwardly, heat will be felt; [in] contemplating a flood inwardly, cold feelings

will ensue.” *An Illustrated Explanation of Internal Qigong* or *Nei Gong Tu Shuo* (内功图说) said: “keep the mind on the elixir often to balance the Water and Fire within, so the mind is strong and Qi is sufficient that the evil will stay away”; and: “if one can adjust the breathing, moving the Qi downward to the sea of the Qi (lower elixir) and upwards to Niwan (upper elixir), then the Qi is harmonized and the mind is tranquilized, the Water and the Fire communicate well, and thus it is complete practice and real nourishment.” This is the function of minor cycle or Zhou Tian.

Traditional Qigong practitioners have made it a rule to nurture life or preserve health by taking the time variation of Yin and Yang, as well as the four seasons, into account. “Nourish Yang in spring and summer, and nourish Yin in autumn and winter.” In regard to the 12 two-hour periods (时辰), practicing Qigong fosters Yang during the six Yang time-periods (from 11 pm to 11 am) and Yin during the six Yin time-periods (from 11 am to 11 pm).

2. *Five Elements as a Guide to Qigong Therapy*

The five Zang organs, liver, heart, spleen, lung, and kidney, correspond respectively to the Five Elements. Applying the generating and restricting relationships of the Five Element theory into the breathing adjustment in Qigong can adjust the Zang-Fu organs' function. In a clinical setting, the Six Syllable Formula is guided by the Five Elements theory. Two concrete methods, introduced in *Inspection of the Pulses* or *Maiwang* (脉望) by Zhao Taiding (赵台鼎),⁶ have been used, both of them based on the generating and restricting relationships among the Five Elements.

The first method is used to treat deficiencies caused by excess in the preceding Zang-Fu organ. For example, excess lung Qi resulting in liver Qi deficiency can be released by uttering the “SI” sound, which corresponds to lung Qi. Excess kidney Qi leading to heart Qi deficiency can be released by uttering the “CHUI” sound. Excess spleen Qi resulting in kidney Qi deficiency can be released by the “HU” sound. Excess liver Qi leading to spleen Qi deficiency can be released by the “XU” sound.

The second method is used to treat excess syndromes of the Zang-Fu organs under the principle of “Release the subsequent (子) Qi in an excessive syndrome” according to the generating and restricting relationships of the Five Elements. For example, “XU” is employed to release excessive liver Qi. But when “XU” fails to do so, then releasing its sequential, the heart Qi, by uttering “HE” will cause the heart Qi to circulate, thus activating the liver Qi. Similarly, when the “HE” sound fails to release excessive heart Qi, releasing its sequential Qi, spleen Qi, by uttering the “HU” sound will cause the spleen Qi to circulate to activate the heart Qi. In turn, when the “HU” sound fails to release the spleen

Qi, release its sequential Qi, kidney Qi, by uttering “CHUI,” which will activate the spleen Qi once it starts to circulate. And when “CHUI” fails to release the kidney Qi, release its sequential Qi, liver Qi, by uttering the “XU” sound; when the liver Qi starts to circulate it may activate the kidney Qi.

Liu Hejian (刘河间), one of the four distinguished physicians during the Jin and Yuan Periods, used similar techniques in his own application of the Six Syllable Formula.

The five emotions, anger, joy, thinking, sadness, and fear, also correspond respectively to the Five Elements. Applying the relationship between the five emotional factors into the adjustment of the mind in Qigong practice according to the Five Element theory can treat certain illnesses. Adjusting the mind is the best medicine in treating the diseases according to ancient experts of health preservation. *Plain Questions—The Chapter of Pain* or *Su Wen—Ju Tong Lun* (素问·举痛论) says: “anger causes the Qi to go upward, joy causes the Qi to move slower, sadness reduces the Qi, fear causes the Qi to go downward, frightened scatters the Qi, and thinking causes the Qi to become knotted.” Here it is stated that excessive emotion leads to Qi turbulence, even symptoms of Qigong deviation. “Sadness overcomes anger,” “fear overcomes joy,” “anger overcomes thinking,” “joy overcomes worry,” and “thinking overcomes fear,” as stated in *Plain Questions—The Chapter of Yin/Yang Corresponding with Astrology* or *Su Wen—Yin/Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun* (素问·阴阳应象大论), explains the generating and restricting relationship of the five emotion elements clearly, which is a very important part of adjusting the mind in Qigong practice. Zhang Zihe (张子和) created concrete treatment methods according to “Controlling Cycle of Five Element Theory” in *Confucians’ Duties to Their Parents* or *Ru Men Shi Qin* (儒门事亲), saying: “Sadness can treat anger by touching the person and calming down his/her anger with a sad story, joy can treat sadness by distracting one’s mind with joyful or joking talk, fear can treat joy by scaring one with death, anger can treat thinking by insulting and humiliating, thinking can treat fear by leading one’s focus on another thought.” With this mind-adjusting method, “joy and anger can be balanced,” and the state of tranquilized mind and harmonized Qi can be achieved. However, it is quite difficult to apply this method unless one is very knowledgeable.

II. Zang-Fu (Visceral Manifestation) and Meridian Theory

A. Zang-Fu and Meridian Theory (Zang-Xiang (脏象))

The theory of Zang-Fu, or visceral manifestation theory, is a hierarchical model of the structure of the human body based on the Yin-Yang/Five Elements theory. The five Zang organs—liver, heart, spleen, lung, and kidney—

correspond respectively to the Five Elements—Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. They constitute a hierarchical and stable system of orderly generation and restriction and thus a model of the stable mechanisms of the human body. Qigong practice is intended to balance the functions of the Zang-Fu organs, to avoid the occurrence of hyperactivity or deficiency of any of them, and to keep the entire system stable by coordinating the functions of the Zang-Fu organs.

The Zang-Fu organs are inside the body, but they have corresponding figures, symbols, or appearances outside the body. “The outside mirrors the inside.” Thus, the conditions of the internal organs can be examined by observing the outside, and the function of the organs inside can be regulated by adjusting the outside form and structure. That is why it is named “Zang-Xiang” (脏象). The scientific aspect of the theory of Zang and Xiang can be explained in the modern theory of the “black box.” Based on the ancient anatomy of the human body using the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, the Zang-Xiang theory reveals some content within the “black box,” which is the relationship and interactions of all the functional systems, but which is not yet totally clear and completed. Therefore, it is only the model of a “gray box.”

B. Zang-Fu, Meridians, and Qigong

1. *Zang-Fu Theory and Qigong*

According to TCM the heart governs the spirit, mind, and blood, and it is regarded as governor of the entire body. It is only after the heart and mind are appropriately nourished that body function and coordination can be sound. As the *Secret Classic Collected in the Imperial Library* from *Plain Questions* or *Suwen—Linglan Midian Lun* (素问·灵兰秘典论)⁷ states, “If the king (the mind) is judicious, his courtiers (the 12 Zang-Fu organs) will work efficiently. Longevity ensues if one lives in this way.” In contrast, “If the king (the mind) is injudicious, his 12 courtiers (the Zang-Fu organs) will not be normal... Harm ensues if one lives in this way.”

Practicing Qigong can purify the heart (mind) and nourish the spirit by keeping awareness at Dantian (the elixir field below the navel), which enables the heart organ and the kidney organ to interact so as to achieve the dynamic balance between Yin and Yang and between Water (kidney) and Fire (heart). Regular and committed Qigong practice first improves the quality of sleep, making one feel more energetic. This in turn would gradually help to relieve such symptoms as dizziness, tinnitus, insomnia, amnesia, palpitation, lumbago, spermatorrhea, and premature ejaculation, all of which result from the failure of the interaction between heart and kidney. Keeping awareness at the elixir field can also reduce heart Fire and nourish the spleen. The spleen and stomach constitute a system that provides the human body with nutrition and energy, and

these organs work together to transform and transport food essence. Therefore, Qigong practice can also improve the appetite and digestion and keep weight in a proper balance. Adjusting the breathing and expelling the old and breathing in the new Qi nourishes the lung Qi, which helps the heart govern and adjust the functions of the internal organs. Adjusting the breath also restrains liver Yang and nourishes kidney Yin by channeling the Qi into the elixir field. The normal ascending and descending of Yin, Yang, Qi, and blood, as well as good Qi circulation, in turn help the transforming and transporting functions of the spleen and the receiving and digesting functions of the stomach.

The liver governs tendons, the kidney governs bones, the spleen governs muscles and limbs, the heart governs blood, and the lung governs the skin and hair. Therefore, adjustments of the body or Daoyin massage movements help disperse liver Qi, ascend spleen Qi, and descend stomach Qi to induce nourishment of skin and hair, strong muscles and bones, and a clear passage for Qi and blood to circulate by means of muscle-tendon movement. Thus it comes as no surprise that many Qigong practitioners look energetic, graceful, strong, and dexterous, and are happy in mood, quick in movement, and improved in appetite.

During Qigong practice, the mind and breath depend on each other, the intent and Qi follow each other, and the body and spirit reflect each other. After long-term persistent practice, the practitioner will reach the point that “where the mind goes, the intent (Yi 意) goes; where the intent goes, the Qi goes; and where the Qi goes, the force (力) goes.” This brings about harmonious connections among the five emotions and balanced circulation of Qi and blood. Thus, Qigong plays an important role in preventing disease.

2. Meridians/Collaterals and Qigong

Many Qigong forms were created based on meridian theory. For example, the method of guiding Qi circulation involves using the mind or intent (Yi) to direct Qi through the body following the meridians. Alternatively the mind operates alone, and Qi circulates by itself naturally. Many ancient Qigong forms were conducted in this way.

Meridian theory plays an obvious role in Qigong practice, especially in the performance of the three adjustments (posture, mind, and breath) of the body. In adjusting body posture, the phenomenon, “proper posture is followed by smooth Qi movement” indicates that correct body posture guarantees the smooth passage (through the meridians) and flow of Qi and blood. Patting and massaging also may be carried out on one or several acupoints along the meridians. Kneading the elixir fields and rubbing Yongquan (涌泉), for instance, are employed in Health Preserving Qigong, and patting and striking

the surface of the body along the route of the meridians helps one to relax and is used in Relaxation Qigong.

Adjusting the mind also may involve the meridians, especially the practice of keeping the mind “on” (意守). The places or areas on which to keep the mind are for the most part meridian acupoints, such as the three Dantian, which are used in the internal elixir art, or the points employed for breathing pauses (Zhixi Dian, 止息点) in relaxation Qigong. This is equally the case in the breath adjustments associated with visualization, in which the breath is focused to clear the meridians so that blood and Qi can circulate. Some types of fetal breathing, including body breathing, elixir-field breathing, skin-hair breathing, and so forth, are also conducted by regulating the opening and closing of certain acupoints along the meridians.

Meridian theory is most often employed in directing Qi to overcome diseases and in external Qi healing (spreading Qi). In the former, lucid Qi is guided along meridians to the diseased area, mainly during inhalation, while turbid Qi is let out of the body through the meridians when exhaling. Meridians, in this case, are the channels for directing Qi to “wash” the diseased area again and again. In external Qi healing, Qi is often emitted during exhalation. It is directed through the three Yin meridians along the arm to acupoint Laogong (劳宫) or other acupoints on the palm where it is then emitted. Some breathing styles in fetal breathing, such as body breathing, elixir breathing, and skin/pores breathing, actually consist of breathing through the controlled opening and closing of acupoints.

However, the view of meridians in Qigong practice is not the same as those described in most medical books. As Li Shizhen wrote in his *Study on the Eight Extra Meridians* (奇经八脉考),⁸ quoting *Classic of the Eight Channels* or *Bamai Jing* (八脉经) by Zhang Ziyang (张紫阳): “the meridians explained in *Classic of the Eight Channels* or *Bamai Jing* (八脉经) by Ziyang (张紫阳) differ from those stated by medical physicians.” They diverge in four ways by comparison:

1. They differ in the extent of the acupoints. Acupoints in Qigong are larger in scope with bigger corresponding regions. The acupoints used in acupuncture and moxibustion confined as points have a narrower scope.
2. They differ in the direction of Qi movement in the conception and governor vessels. In medical books it is said that conception, governor, and penetrating vessels share one source but diverge into three branches. They all originate in the uterus and move upward along separate routes. However, Qigong experts believe that, although the conception and governor vessels share a common source, the meridian Qi in them moves in opposite directions. In the governor vessel Qi moves from the

bottom upwards, playing the role of “ascending the elixir Yang,” while Qi in the conception vessel moves from the top downwards, playing the role of “descending the elixir Yin.” Thus a continuous flow guarantees the orderly ascent and descent of Qi and the harmonious balance of Yin and Yang.

3. They differ in connection. The medical books claim that the governor and conception vessels are connected by branches, while in Qigong they are held to be connected by the magpie bridge (*Què Qiáo*, 鹊桥).
4. The meridian pathways felt or experienced during Qigong practice are also somewhat different from those described in medical books.

The eight extra meridians are emphasized more than the 12 regular meridians by practitioners of Qigong cultivation, especially by those who practice the internal elixir art; their documentation of Qigong practice contains detailed explanations of such cultivation. As early as 400 BC, the *Zhuang Zi* (庄子)⁹ mentions that using “the governor vessel as a main channel to cultivate enables one to stay in good health, strengthen vital energy, and enjoy a long life.” Although the conception and governor vessels were not specified in the *Jade Pendant Inscription of Circulating Qi* (行气玉佩铭),¹⁰ it was very clear that breathing deeply to ascend and descend Qi along those two central meridians was already being used to coordinate Yin and Yang. Li Shizhen particularly favored the academic thought presented in writings on the internal elixir art, and expressed his opinions in his *Study on the Eight Extra Meridians* (奇经八脉考),⁸ stating that “the internal scenery and channels can be viewed only by those who reflect inwardly.” The important role that the interaction of the conception and governor vessels play, and the importance of merging Yin and Yang, are thoroughly discussed in material on the internal elixir art; and it is the core of all Qigong cultivating and practicing forms. More original discussion on this subject may be found in the *Large Heavenly Circulation, Eight Extra-Vessels and Eight Acupoints in Qigong* or *Qigong Dazhoutian Bamaixue Lun* (气功大周天八脉八穴论), written by the so-called “Sloppy Daoist.” Of the eight extra vessels described in this book, four correspond to the traditional eight, the conception, governor, penetrating, and belt vessels. The other four are referred to as net, elixir, heavenly, and regulating vessels, each corresponding respectively to one acupoint. The conception, governor, and penetrating vessels follow the route described in traditional eight-extra-channel theory. The belt vessel, however, is divided into four portions, each consisting of three ring belt vessels, and the elixir vessel is split into an internal and an external vessel. The net vessel is like a net, as its name suggests. To cultivate the net vessel, the conception and governor vessels are first unblocked, and then all other meridians and collaterals

in the body should be unblocked one by one so as to connect all the channels together. After cultivating the net vessel, all the meridians will be unblocked except for the Zhong Yuan (中元—the part between head and navel), which may still be blocked. When the original Qi is activated to unblock it, the Large Heavenly Circulation is complete. After that, the ability to emit elixir Qi to treat diseases with the eyes closed and mind still indicates success in the cultivation of the external elixir. As to the cultivation of heavenly and regulating vessels, this is even harder to grasp and therefore will not be discussed here. With regard to the positions of the eight acupoints corresponding to the above-mentioned eight extra channels, the acupoint of the conception vessel is at the heart, that of the governor vessel is in the brain, that of the penetrating vessel is in the perineum, that of the belt vessel is in the navel, that of the net vessel is in the front private part, that of the elixir meridian is in the eyes (left for the male, right for the female), and so on.

The “three vessels and four rings” theory (Sanmai Silun, 三脉四轮) of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism is somewhat similar to meridian theory. The middle vessel of the former is roughly identical with the conception vessel of the latter, and the ring is similar to the elixir field.

III. The Theory of Essence-Qi-Spirit

A. Essence-Qi-Spirit as a Concept

Essence (Jing) refers to all refined, subtle, and nutritious substances and is the material basis that constitutes the human body. In *Plain Questions—Sincere Remarks on the Synopsis of the Golden Chamber* or *Suwen—Jingui Zhenyan Lun* (素问·金匱真言论)⁷ it is said: “Essence is the base or source of the body.” *Spiritual Pivot—Meridians* or *Lingshu—Jingmai* (灵枢·经脉)⁷ says: “The essence is a prerequisite to a person. Once essence comes into existence, brains and marrow will grow. The bones act as a stand for the body, meridians act as passages and channels to nourish the body, muscles and tendons connect bones, and the flesh acts as protection. Hair grows after skin becomes strong.” *Plain Questions—On True Man of the Remote Antiquity* or *Suwen—Shang Gu Tian Zhen Lun* (素问·上古天真论)⁷ says: “Kidney accepts and stores the essence of five-Zang organs and six-Fu bowels.” Thus every part of the body contains the element of essence, and all the organs and tissues are based on essence.

Qi is a refined subtle substance, or a functional activity of the organs in the body. As *The Eighth Problem* from *Classic on Medical Problems* or *Nan Jing—Ba Nan* (难经·八难)¹¹ states: “Qi is the root of the human body. If the root dies, all the stalks and leaves will wither up and perish.”

Qi is given different names according to its distribution, locations, and corresponding functions. For instance, the Qi inherent in the prenatal state is called original Qi, genuine Qi, or genuine original Qi. Qi obtained from breathing and diet is called acquired or postnatal Qi, or breathed Qi, or Qi from water and grain.

The Yang aspect of Qi is called Yang Qi, while the Yin aspect of Qi is called Yin Qi. Qi that runs on the exterior or body surface is called defensive Qi. Qi that moves within the vessels is called nutritive Qi. Qi stored in the heart organ is called heart Qi; in the lung organ, lung Qi; in the liver, liver Qi; in the spleen, spleen Qi; and in the kidney, kidney Qi. In the upper warmer (energizer, 焦) it is pectoral Qi; in the middle warmer (energizer), middle Qi; and in the lower warmer (energizer), original Yin Qi and original Yang Qi. These all stem from the original Qi stored in the lower elixir field. As Xu Lingtai (徐灵胎) says in *Treatise on the Source of Medicine* or *Yixue Yuanliu Lun* (医学源流论):¹²

The five Zang organs have their own genuine essences that are manifestations of the original Qi. By Daoists their origin is called elixir-field, which is equivalent to the Vitality Gate of the *Classic on Medical Problems*, or the “xiaoxin” (小心) beside the seven vertebrae of *The Yellow Emperor’s Internal Classic*. It is where Yin and Yang sprouted and breathed Qi is rooted. The original Qi is not Fire but can warm up the whole body; it is not Water but can moisten the five Zang organs. It is where the power of the human metabolism lies. Should the original Qi prevail, life will not perish.

Spirit (Shen) is the governor of life activities. Though it is intangible, spirit represents the active nature of human life activities. It is the instinctive regulating and controlling function, inherent in human life, for thinking and spiritual activities, as well as the instinctive regulating and controlling functions. The *Spiritual Pivot* says: “The original substance of life is called essence; the combined Yin-Yang essence is called spirit (Shen).” The material basis for the spirit is the interaction of the essence Qi, and all activities of the spirit rely on postnatal nourishment.

The essence, Qi, and spirit, “the three treasures” of traditional Qigong, are actually one in the prenatal stage and are all transformed from original Qi. Thus the *Balanced Instructions on Spirit and Life* or *Xing Ming Gui Zhi* (性命圭旨)¹³ says: “Although the fundamental medicine can be divided into essence, Qi and spirit, the three share a common source... Showing the trait of circulating, it is called Qi; of cohesion, it is called essence; of magical function, it is called spirit.” Having the same origin, they can be transformed into and facilitate each other. As Zhang Jingyue points out in Volume II from *Classic of Categories* or *Lei Jing—Juan 2* (类经·卷二),¹⁴ “The foundation of human life is essence and Qi.

Essence generates Qi and Qi in turn generates essence. When Qi is adequate and essence ample, the spirit flourishes. But when Qi dissipates and essence decreases, the spirit will deteriorate.”

B. Essence-Qi-Spirit and Qigong

In the Daoist school of Health Preserving Qigong, essence, Qi, and spirit are taken as the original life drive and the material basis of life, hence the terms three-yuan (三元, a collective name for the locations of the three elixir fields), three-cai (三才, a collective name for heaven, earth, and human), and three-bao (三宝, three treasures, a collective name for essence, Qi, and spirit). As Dong Dening (董德宁) wrote in *Annotations on Awakening to the Essence* or *Wuzhen Pian Zhengyi* (悟真篇正义),¹⁵ “Three-yuan (三元) is equivalent to the three-cai (三才), and refers to the three lights in heaven: the sun, the moon and the stars; the three elements on earth: Water, Fire and Earth; and the three aspects of the human body: essence, Qi and spirit.” *Mind-Seal Scripture of the Jade Sovereign* or *Yuhuang Xinyin Jing* (玉皇心印经),¹⁶ an ancient book on Qigong, mentions that “the upmost three ‘medicines’ are essence, Qi and spirit.” In Volume XXVIII of the *Classic of Categories* or *Lei Jing—Juan Ershiba* (类经·卷二十八),¹⁵ Zhang Jingyue (张景岳) also points out: “Thousands of words in my books on cultivation have come to nothing but the three words: essence, Qi and spirit.” Indeed, traditional Qigong practice fundamentally targets the cultivation of the three treasures for keeping fit and obtaining longevity by regulating, nourishing, resuming, and replenishing essence, Qi, and spirit.

Approaches to Nourishing Life without Medicines or *Wu Yao Yuan Quan* (勿药元诠)¹⁷ says it well: “It is from nonexistence to existence by storing up spirit that we produce Qi and store up Qi to produce essence. It is from existence to nonexistence that we refine essence and convert it into Qi, refining Qi to nourish the spirit, and refining the spirit to return to nothingness.” That is how the ancient people understood human life. The spirit (Shen) is occult, and as the mental activity of life it directs functional activities so as to absorb external nourishment to duplicate itself, proceeding from nonexistence to existence. Conversely, consuming food and energy and transforming them into mental and functional activities proceeds from existence to nonexistence.

Qigong cultivation is after all about cultivating essence, Qi, and spirit, and maintaining these three treasures. *Effective Approaches to a Long Life* or *Shoushi Qingpian* (寿世青篇)¹⁸ states: “Refine the essence and convert it into Qi, and refine the spirit to return to nothingness. But where to start? The first stage always concerns the mind.” These words show that the key to Qigong practice is adjusting the mind so that it can govern the process of generating and transforming essence, Qi, and spirit, as well as maintain the proper metabolic

cycle. Thus, “accumulating essence to nourish and complete spirit (积精全神),” essence and spirit can be stored and the body and spirit can be kept steady in the unity of opposites over a long period of time to ensure good health and longevity.

More specifically, purifying the mind and diminishing the desires contribute to keeping the mind tranquil and avoiding over-consuming the spirit or Shen. Keeping the right thoughts and clearing out unnecessary thinking so that the spirit is bright and unconfused means that all activities of the organism are likely to be in conformity with the principle of health-preservation, which is the law of nature. As *Spiritual Pivot—Central Zang* or *Lingshu—Benchang* (灵枢 • 本藏)⁷ puts it, “A person’s will power enables him to control his mind, constrain his ethereal soul (hun, 魂) and corporeal soul (po, 魄), adapt himself to the environment, and moderate his mood.”

In the process of making the three adjustments while practicing Qigong, when one focuses on the lower elixir field, heart Fire can descend to warm kidney Water so that the practitioner can avoid the “frenetic stirring of ministerial Fire” and can maintain Yin essence. And as Fire generates spleen earth, the acquired essence is replenished and the inborn essence nourished.

Quietly adjusting the breathing can stop the consumption of genuine Qi, and blowing out the old and breathing in the new helps replenish the pectoral Qi. When Qi penetrates the elixir field, the original Qi returns to its source, and food Qi is sufficient to maintain the body. With adequate Qi, ample essence, and thriving spirit, those suffering from diseases will be restored to health naturally. To prevent illness is to prolong life.

2. Theories of Other Qigong Schools

During their long history of development, the theories of various Qigong schools have intermingled and facilitated each other; each has different aspects, but they all share some aspects in common. The Qigong theories of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the martial arts have exerted considerable influence on Medical Qigong, and their influential theories and points on Medical Qigong are briefly introduced in this section.

I. Daoist Qigong Theory

The purpose of the cultivation and practice of philosophical Daoism (including the religious Daoism that emerged later) is different from the practice of Medical Qigong, which is to keep fit, to prevent illness, and to nourish health by refining

and nourishing essence, Qi, and spirit in their postnatal shape and base. This cultivation follows the natural path of human life and was called the biological regimen. The Daoist practitioners, however, aimed at seeking the innate Dao by reversing the natural postnatal trace back to the prenatal original being. They believed that, in so doing, they would become immortals or perfected men who would free themselves from all encumbrances by letting things take their own course. The so-called Great Dao of nothingness does not mean vacuum. Rather it stands for the origin of the universe, which has no postnatal shape or attachment but was filled with vitality.

Daoist Qigong has split into many branches in the history of its evolution and development, including the Tuina and Gulping Qi School (or Branch), Daoyin Life Nourishing School, Mental-Visualizing and Nourishing the Spirit School, and the Internal Elixir Cultivation School. Each school possessed its respective theories. The following is a discussion of the theories of the two major schools of the Daoism tradition.

A. The Daoist Theory of the Internal Elixir (内丹)

The art of internal elixir was the most important practice of later Daoist Qigong cultivation and enjoyed great popularity and wide historical influence. Some of its rudimental Qigong forms are still in use today. As a form of interior practice, internal elixir Qigong stresses turning the intention or awareness inward to induce interdependence between Yi (intent or mind) and Qi, and making the internal Qi circulate along the conception, governor, and other meridians. By cultivating essence, Qi, and spirit internally, it aims at obtaining the same effects as the taking of “immortality pills” in the external elixir art. Therefore it was called internal elixir art, internal elixir Qigong, or elixir tripod art. As it is characterized by the circulation of internal Qi within the conception, governor, and other meridians’ pathways, internal elixir Qigong is also referred to as Heavenly Circulation Qigong.

The interior practices performed in traditional internal elixir art was divided into four stages: refining essence and converting it into Qi, refining Qi to nourish the spirit, refining the spirit to return to nothingness, and refining nothingness to integrate into Dao. The stage of refining essence to convert it into Qi is also termed Small Heavenly Circulation. The following is an introduction to the basic theories and preliminary methods of the internal elixir art.

1. *Three Essentials of the Internal Elixir Art—Stove-Ding,ⁱ
Medication, and the Fire Heating Control (Huo Hou, 火候)*

STOVE-DING (FURNACE)

The term “stove-ding” was borrowed from the external elixir art to describe different body parts of the practitioner in the internal elixir art.

The characters Qian and Kun (乾坤) from *The Book of Changes* or *Zhouyi* (周易) are used respectively to represent furnace and stove, namely the two elixir fields. Qian stands for the head on the top and is therefore the Ding; Kun stands for the abdomen on the bottom and is the stove.

The elixir field has three parts: upper, middle, and lower. The Ding furnace is, in general, considered to be the upper elixir field that lies in the *Niwan* palace between the eyebrows. The middle elixir field lies in the purple-red palace between the breasts, and the stove is thought to be the lower elixir field located at the navel or below it in an area of about four square cun (寸, a unit of length of approximately 1.2 inches).

The internal elixir form involves refining essence and converting it into Qi at the lower elixir field, refining Qi to nourish the spirit at the middle elixir field, and refining the spirit to return to nothingness at the upper elixir field. There are also the theories saying that spirit-cultivating Qigong commences in the upper elixir field, while body-preserving Qigong may commence in the lower elixir field. Equally, one may start to practice at the front elixir field, the navel, or start the form from the back elixir field, the gate of vitality.

MEDICATION

The term medication is also borrowed from the external elixir art. Essence, Qi, and spirit are regarded as medical materials and objects for practice in the internal elixir art. Other terms frequently used to stand for medication are kan (Water) and li (Fire), lead and mercury, dragon and tiger, golden crow (the sun) and jade rabbit (the moon), baby boy and little girl, and so forth, in which the first term represents spirit and the second, essence and Qi.

In terms of refining essence, Qi, and spirit, traditional internal elixir art stresses the importance of cultivating the prenatal original essence, Qi, and spirit, but avoiding the postnatal essence of semen, breathed Qi, and the thinking mind. However, a dividing line can hardly be drawn between the original and postnatal elements, as they are always interacting with each other. When postnatal essence, Qi, and spirit are vigorous, they benefit the original, and when the originals are strong, the individual is ready to cultivate internal elixir.

i Ding (鼎) is an ancient Chinese furnace with three or four legs. It was used to burn fire or refine elixir.

FIRE HEATING CONTROL (HUO HOU, 火候)

Fire (Huo) stands for the coordination of the intention of spirit and breathing during practice. It is the motive power or driving force of cultivation. Heating control (Hou) stands for the timing, duration, and sequence of cultivation, including the exact steps and control over the circulation of internal Qi.

It is hard to find a common solution for problems that may arise, as these differ from individual to individual. In view of this situation, the ancient masters always emphasized the significance of extempore instructions at “the stove.” In the matter of heating control, the temperature and duration of Fire, much attention should be paid to the right timing. For example, the time to start the Fire is Zi Shi (around midnight, from 11 pm to 1 am, 子时), the winter solstice, or “the ascending of single Yang,” referring to the time that Yang Qi ascends. But for the ancient masters, Zi Shi or Yang Qi ascension was determined by the internal vision and feelings of the practitioner, not by solar or other periodical time.

In regulating the heating control of Fire, one should note the proper application of fierce Fire (武火) and mild Fire (文火). Fierce Fire, also known as “Yang breathing,” is the coordination of strong breathing with focused intention (mind) to promote the swift ascent of internal Qi through narrow channels. Mild Fire, or “Yin breathing,” is the coordination of gentle breathing with mild intention to slowly ascend and descend internal Qi.

Between Yang breathing and Yin breathing is a stage called “bathing,” which is conducted at the periods Mou (卯) and You (酉). Mou occurs between 5 and 7 am and You is the period between 5 and 7 pm, during which time the Fire is stable without being either stronger or milder. Again, these time periods during practice are flexible and determined by the practitioner’s internal vision, feeling, and experiences.

2. *Forms and Procedures of the Internal Elixir Art*

Traditional internal elixir art includes three stages of cultivation. Small Heavenly Circulation refines essence and converts it into Qi (or a preparatory stage may precede this stage). Grand Heavenly Circulation refines Qi to nourish the spirit, and the final stage refines the spirit and returns it to nothingness. Small Heavenly Circulation is also known as “refining essence and converting it into Qi,” “Kan and Li intercourse,” or “Noon and Midnight Circulation” (Zi Wu Zhoutian, 子午周天). The entire process of cultivation can be divided into five steps: training the self, and mixing, producing, gathering, and refining the medications. These processes can be roughly presented as follows.

To train the self, one should adjust the body, exclude stray thoughts, gradually tranquilize the mind, and focus the attention internally. Second, one

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