



CULTIVATING THE FIELD OF THE ELIXIR:

THE DAN TIAN REVISITED

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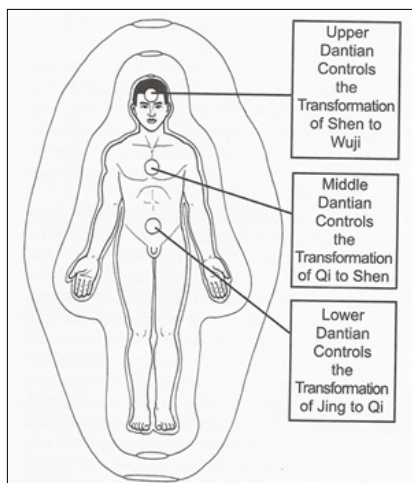
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Activating and working with the *dan tian* is one of the most vital principles in Qigong. Dan tian “cultivation” is also central to Daoist and Buddhist meditation, Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Ch'uan) and most Chinese and Japanese martial arts such as Karate and Aikido, as well as many other Asian arts, including calligraphy, painting, flower arranging and dance.



Where Exactly Is this Dan Tian?

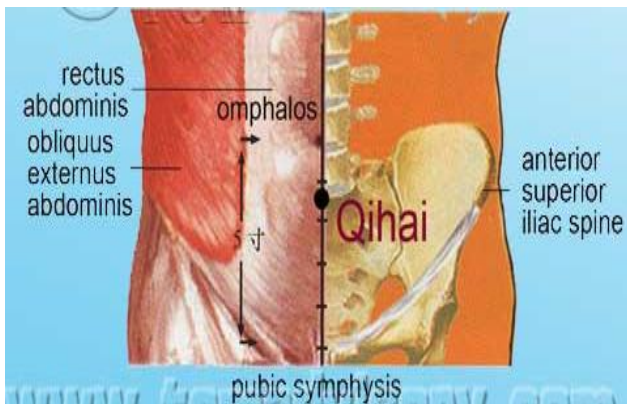
The dan tian is considered by some to be the most important energy center of our body. There are actually *three* dan tians: lower, middle and upper.



The Lower Dan Tian is generally located in the lower abdomen between the spine and the navel, with its center about 1.5 to 2 inches below the level of the navel. The Middle Dan Tian is located in the center of the chest near the heart. The

Upper Dan Tian is located in the center of the brain. When teachers speak of “the dan tian” without any qualification, this always refers to the Lower Dan Tian, the most important of the three.

There are differing views on both the location and names of the dan tian, variations that can be confusing to beginners. For example, some texts refer to the acupuncture point commonly called *Qi Hai* (Sea of Qi, Conception Vessel-6),

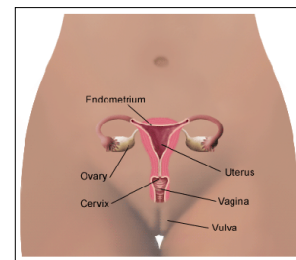


located 1.5 inches¹ directly below the navel as Dan Tian.

“Sea of Qi” is also another name for the Lower Dan Tian. However, the acu-point point is superficial, located just below the skin on the surface of the body, whereas the

more traditionally accepted location is deeper, in the central core, between the spine and the navel.

Some texts claim that, in women, the uterus is the dan tian. Others simply state that the uterus (and prostate in men) is located within the dan tian’s sphere of influence. The idea that the Lower Dan Tian in women *is* the uterus is too simplistic.² I would rather side with the latter



description that the uterus falls within the energetic dominion of the Lower Dan Tian, and interacts with it.

¹ In traditional Chinese medicine, the Chinese word for inch, *cun*, is relative to each person when measuring the surface anatomy. For example, the distance from the center of the navel to the crest of the pubic bone is 5 cun, *on everyone*. Thus, 1 cun on a large person would be much longer than 1 cun on a child. To locate a point along the midline of the lower abdomen, 1/5th of the distance between the navel and the top of the pubic bone is considered to be 1 cun.

² If so, it would follow that a hysterectomy would also be a “dantianectomy,” and the patient would die!

Sometimes teachers describe the dan tian as being about 3 inches interior to *Qi Hai*. This location, however, must be varied to take into account the varying physiques of people, tall, short, thin and fat. The dan tian may also be slightly higher or lower from person to person, depending on build.

Most Qigong and martial arts systems say that the *Qi Hai* point is *the* doorway into the dan tian. I agree that *Qi Hai* is a major pathway into the dan tian, but it is certainly not the *only* one, nor is it necessarily even the best. For example, *Guan Yuan* (Gateway to the Original, CV-4), located 3 cun below the navel, is also an extremely powerful point for accessing and affecting the Original Qi in Chinese medicine. Other potent and frequently used exterior doorways include *Ming Men* (Door of Life, GV-4) located on the spine directly opposite the navel below the 2nd lumber vertebra, and *Hui Yin* (Meeting of Yin, CV-1) at the perineum between the genitals and the anus, to name but two.

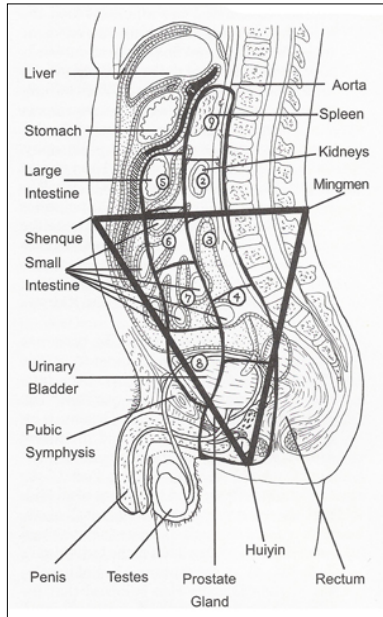
Some Qigong masters prefer the navel (*Shen Que*, Spirit Palace Gate, CV-8) as the most easily accessible entry to the dan tian.³ One point in its favor is that it is certainly easy for everyone to locate. But a far more compelling reason is that it was the doorway through which we received Original Qi and nourishment from our mother while in the womb. Even after the umbilical cord is cut, the navel remains a very sensitive area for most people. Stimulating the navel activates Qi sensations deep in the belly, making it a point of preference as an energetic path to the dan tian. However, from a physical standpoint, *Qi Hai* is usually a more accurate landmark marking the level of the dan tian's center.

Teachings vary as to the size of the dan tian as well. Some teach that the dan tian is the size of a ping pong ball, or the size of a large marble, or as big as a tennis ball.

³ Mantak Chia, in particular, favors the navel as the main portal to the dan tian.

The Nine Palaces

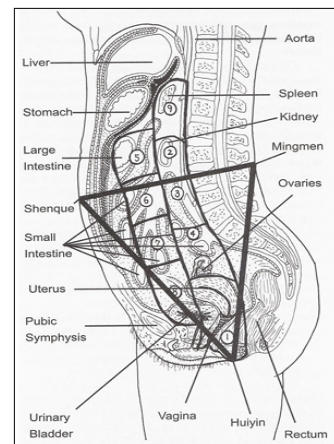
An interesting view of the dan tian coming directly from the Daoists is that each of the three dan tians has nine sections or “palaces.” Each palace varies in size,



ranging from about one inch in the Upper Dan Tian to 1.5 to 2 inches or more in the Middle and Lower Dan Tians. The central palace of each is considered the “dan tian proper,” and is surrounded by eight subordinate palaces. Each palace has a descriptive name, as well.⁴ In later developments within Daoism, each of these palaces was said to be inhabited by a god. The lord of each of the three dan tians resides within the central palace, and his entourage, male and female gods and guardians,

dwell in the surrounding palaces.⁵

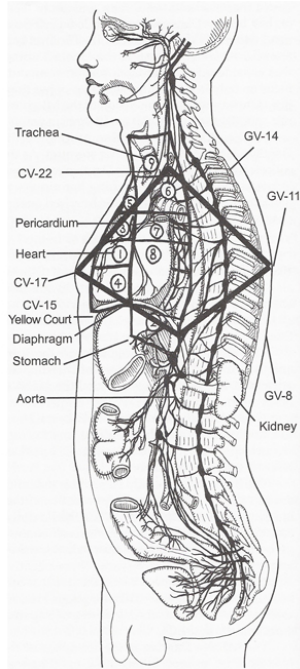
This *nine palace view* of the three dan tians helps reconcile some of the confusion about the various names, locations, and parts of each dan tian. For example, within this framework, the Lower Dantian is seen to embrace the Jing Gong (Essence Palace) as one of its lower chambers. This helps explain how the Lower Dan Tian can be both the storehouse of Essence and the seat of the Original Qi. It also explains how the uterus can be placed within the sphere of the Lower Dan Tian.



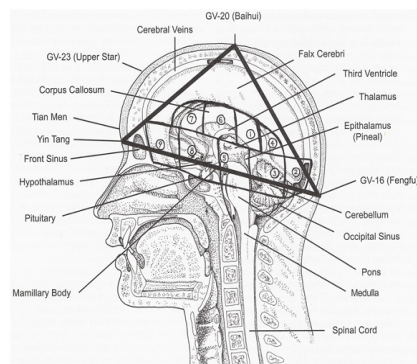
⁴ For illustrations and further comments on these, see Dr. Jerry Alan Johnson, *Chinese Medical Qigong Therapy*, pp. 93-101, (Pacific Grove, CA: International Institute of Medical Qigong, 2000). For online excerpts and illustrations, go to <http://www.integrativehealthcare.net/html/dantian.html>

⁵ Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, pp. 268-269. See also Kristopher Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, pp. 108-112 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, and Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*, pp. 79-80 and 100-103.

Also, in this framework, the upper palaces of the Lower Dantian embrace areas above the navel (upper abdominal area between the navel and the ribcage and below the diaphragm) as well as below, including the stomach, spleen and intestines. The upper area, called the *Huang Ting* (Yellow Court), is



described in the *Huang Ting Jing* as one of the most important cauldrons for cultivating the elixir. Yet, curiously, the Yellow Court is entirely left out of the Three Dan Tians model in other Daoist writings. The Nine Palaces framework helps to explain this seeming discrepancy.



Upper Dan Tian

Meaning of the term Dan Tian in Daoist Alchemy

I have found it very useful to explore the etymological roots of the name dan tian to better reveal an understanding of this vital center of being.

Although dan tian is often written as one word⁶, in Chinese it is written as two separate characters: “dan” (pronounced *dahn*) and “tian” (pronounced *tee-en*). 丹田. The word *dan* literally means *cinnabar*, although since cinnabar is the supreme alchemical agent in China, dan is more often translated



⁶ Dan tian is also written as *tan t'ien* in Wade-Giles transliteration, and as *tanden* or *hara* in Japanese.

figuratively as *elixir*.



The word *tian* means *field*, as in a rice field. The Chinese have been an agrarian culture for thousands of years. As a people, they well understand the metaphor of “cultivating a field” so that something new and positive can take root, sprout, flower, and bear fruit. It takes work, time, patience, knowledge, skill, and mindful attention to successfully cultivate a field so that one can harvest the fullest results for one’s labors. Put together, the term *dan tian* means “cinnabar field” or “elixir field.”

So why is this vital area named “the Cinnabar Field?” In Daoist outer alchemy (*wei dan*), the foundation of Chinese chemistry, cinnabar symbolizes the ideal elixir for attaining longevity and immortality. However, in inner alchemy (*nei dan*), rather than taking outer substances such as herbs and mineral medicines to catalyze internal transformation, one works instead with the precious substances within one’s own body and mind to prolong life and achieve a higher level of being.

In its raw mineral ore form, cinnabar, or mercury sulfide, is bright scarlet to brick red in color. According to the Wikipedia, “Cinnabar resembles quartz in its symmetry and certain of its optical characteristics. Like quartz, it exhibits



birefringence. It has the highest refractive power of any mineral. Its mean index for sodium light is 3.02, whereas the index for diamond—a substance of remarkable refraction— is 2.42.⁷ To produce liquid mercury,

⁷ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinnabar>

crushed cinnabar ore is roasted in rotary furnaces. Pure mercury separates from sulfur in this process and easily evaporates. A condensing column is used to collect the liquid mercury, which is most often shipped in iron flasks.”

Cinnabar, jade and gold were considered by the Daoist alchemists to be the most valuable of all the alchemical elixirs. Unlike herbs, which could be burnt up and destroyed in the cooking process, minerals maintained their integrity and often produced an even superior substance, such as when cinnabar is refined into liquid mercury or iron into steel.

Cinnabar refined by the *Nine Turns* was said to confer longevity and supernatural powers, or even to make one an immortal (*xian*). The Nine Turns uses the mystical number 9, the emperor of numbers and the number of creative power, as its numerological foundation for the refinement of cinnabar into quicksilver and then turning quicksilver back into cinnabar by re-adding sulfur to it in a cooking process. The final substance is called “Returned Elixir.”⁸



The famous 2nd century Daoist adept, Ge Heng (Ko Hung), wrote of this process, “Quicksilver is originally cinnabar, which is roasted to make it quicksilver. In this case quicksilver is roasted and becomes returned cinnabar, the cinnabar returned to its original substance. That is why it is called ‘returned cinnabar’”⁹

In *Taoism and Chinese Religion*,¹⁰ Henri Maspero writes, “Alchemical procedures consist essentially in the preparation and absorption of cinnabar (*tan*:

⁸ J.C. Cooper, *Chinese Alchemy*, pp. 51 and 69-70. (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1990).

⁹ J.C. Cooper, *ibid*, p.69

¹⁰ Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, pp. 330-331. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981

mercury sulfate). They do not dispense with other procedures, but complement them. It is the crowning glory of the Adept's career if he can get that far.

Circulation of breath [*qi*] and ingesting of drugs are the procedure for the Female

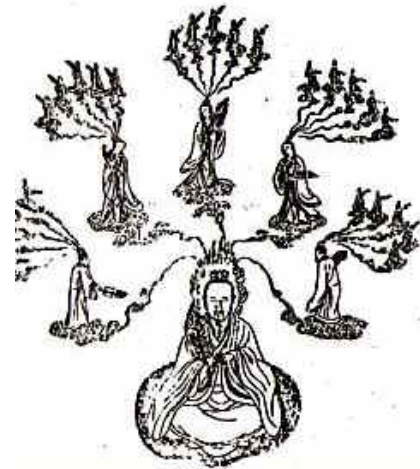


cinnabar (*yin-tan*); through them immortality can be attained, but only of the lower degrees. Alchemy is the procedure of the Male Cinnabar (*yang-tan*); by it alone can one become a "Flying Immortal" (*fei-hsien*) and attain the highest grades in the hierarchy of the Immortals.¹¹

"....The cinnabar has to "come back" nine times to get it into its sublimate form: that is, to carry out the transformation of cinnabar into mercury and of mercury to cinnabar nine times.... The operation is repeated nine times, and at each transmutation the cinnabar becomes more active and more powerful."

Each transmutation grants immortality more quickly; taking the Returned Elixir after one transmutation is said to grant immortality within three years, whereas taking the full Nine Turns Returned Elixir grants immortality within three days!

This idea of Nine Turns extends into Qigong and inner alchemy as well. The great contemporary Qigong master Li Jun Feng teaches a lying down non-moving version of the Macrocosmic Orbit called *Jiu Zhuan Zhen Dan* (Nine Turns True Elixir), claimed to be Lao Zi's original method.¹²



¹¹ To paraphrase Maspero's footnote here, *yin-tan* includes sexual practices, qigong and breathing exercises, as well as other practices, but excludes taking herbal medicines and alchemical procedures

¹² In this style, before circulating Qi throughout the body, one first circles the tongue around the mouth, lightly touching the inside of the mouth, beginning in the floor of the mouth, then moving up the left side to the palate and descending down the right side. This movement is repeated nine times. Simultaneously, as the tongue turns, one guides the Qi in a 2 inch radius circle around the navel nine times. One starts two inches below the navel as the tongue is at the

The fact that cinnabar is red made it of value and auspicious in and of that fact alone. Red is China's favorite color, representing light, fire, and brightness. As J.C. Cooper writes in *Chinese Alchemy*, the color red "is also the bridal and good luck color, so that any red-colored stone, and cinnabar in particular, shared this virtue. It had a particular alchemical significance in the white-to-red transformation, the powers of water and fire, opposing but complementary, in the Work. Cinnabar was *yang* to the *yin* of quicksilver; in alchemy the two were spoken of as 'the fire of the heart is red as cinnabar, the water of the kidneys is dark as lead', and 'as medicines we value the kinds which are as red as a cock's comb and have a brilliant luster.'"

Cinnabar was used in ancient China to make the vermilion ink which only the emperor was allowed to use for writing imperial edicts. Vermilion has long been considered a royal color in China. As it did not fade or vary in shade over time, it was held to be unchanging like gold, making it an auspicious color sought after by people seeking perpetual youth and long life.



Cinnabar is also used as a mineral ingredient in Chinese herbal formulas. Although toxic, if prepared according to proper instructions and taken in very small doses for short periods, it is a potent medicine for tranquilizing the spirit and heart and clearing excess heat in the body. Cinnabar is also used in Feng Shui and Daoist magic.

The Three Treasures and the Three Dan Tians

Just as cinnabar is cooked in an alchemist's stove or crucible in outer alchemy and transformed into a potent elixir of immortality, in inner alchemy

floor of the mouth. As the tongue moves up to the left side of the mouth, the Qi is guided to the left side of the navel; as the tongue moves up to the palate, one guides the Qi to a point two inches above the navel, and so forth. In this way, the Qi circles the navel nine times. See Li, Jun Feng, *Sheng Zhen Wuji Yuan Gong: Qigong of Unconditional Love*. (Lotus Press, Twin Lakes, WI)

our internal substances of body, breath and mind are combined in special esoteric ways, with the three dan tians brought into service as inner alchemical crucibles or cauldrons of transformation. The ingredients of the internal elixir can be understood in several ways, depending on one's goal for producing them.

Daoism frequently groups things into three:

Yin	Neutral	Yang
Earth	Man	Heaven
Physical Body	Breath	Awareness
Jing (Essence)	Qi (Energy)	Shen (Spirit)
Kan (Water)	Cauldron	Li (Fire)

From the perspective of inner alchemy and classical Chinese medicine, our essential vital human substances are *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. Collectively these substances are called *The Three Treasures* (San Bao).

Jing, translated roughly as *essence*, is the most material substance of the three. Jing is stored in the Kidneys¹³ and circulated through the Eight Extraordinary Vessels of our bodies.¹⁴ Jing governs the sexual organs and energies,

¹³ The understanding of the internal organs and their functions is different in classical Chinese medicine than it is in Western anatomy and physiology. Therefore, following the convention of contemporary Western translators of Chinese medical terminology, I have capitalized the first letter of the organs when using their classical Chinese medical connotation, and in lower case when following Western biological understanding.

¹⁴ The Eight Extraordinary Vessels are the first energy channels to form in the fetus. They form an energetic matrix for the formation of the body, defining the eight dimensional parameters of upper and lower, left and right, front and back, outer and inner. They are: (1) *Governing Vessel* or Du Mai;

endocrine system, DNA, bones, teeth, marrow and brain. Jing rules our slower moving cycles of growth, maturation, maturing, and aging, measured in 7-year cycles in women and 8-year cycles in men, according to the first chapter of the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine (Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen)*.

Qi, life force energy, is a more subtle substance, our animating principle, the source of all movement, the energy that holds things in place, warms and protects our body and mind. Qi is compared to wind in that, although it is invisible, one can see it moving things. There are many different varieties of qi in our bodies.



Yuan Qi (Original Qi) is our inherited constitutional energy. Our *Yuan Qi* is stored in our Lower Dan Tian, and circulates to the other channels through the *Triple Warmer* (San Jiao). *Yuan Qi* is the foundation of all the other types of Qi in the body.

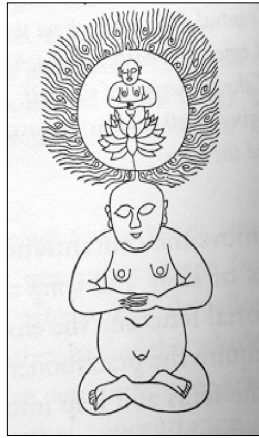


Shen, spirit, is our most subtle substance, and refers to all the various parts of our consciousness and awareness: spirit, will, intention, intellect, decision-making and planning, memory, reflexes and emotions, and to the different aspects of our soul. Daoists make an important distinction between our *Original Spirit* (*Yuan Shen*), also called our Pre-Natal Spirit, and our *Human Spirit* (*Zhi Shen*), also called our Post-Natal Spirit.



Our Original Spirit is our unconditioned consciousness, unborn and undying, our non-dualistic awareness of union with the Dao, our immortal mind realizing Wu Ji, the Source. Our Post-Natal Spirit is our dualistic discriminating mind, that rational logical part of our consciousness that perceives Yin and Yang

as distinct and separate. By becoming fixated on the projections of our Post-Natal Spirit as real, we gain mastery over our world but lose the Dao.



Since the Song dynasty (960-1279AD), the way to spiritual awakening and immortality in Daoist inner alchemy is to preserve, gather, increase and transform our vital substances until we have literally metamorphosed our ordinary body, breath and mind into immortal body, breath and mind. We start with jing, conserving our sexual essences, gathering and increasing them in the cauldron of the Lower Dan Tian. There they are transformed into qi, vital life force energy.

Qi is gathered, increased, and then transformed into shen, spirit, in the cauldron of the heart, the Middle Dan Tian.

Spirit is gathered, increased and refined to dissolve into Wu Ji,¹⁵ emptiness, in the cauldron of the Upper Dan Tian in the brain. However, as long as we cling to emptiness as “something,” we are still imprisoned within a subtle state of dualistic vision. In other words, we are still trapped within the relative constructs of yin and yang, self and other, good and evil. We have not arrived at the ultimate oneness until we “crush even the emptiness.”¹⁶

The specific details of the methods and practices for transmuting our vital substances are traditionally passed on as direct oral transmissions from teacher to student. What is written about them is often hard to decipher for the

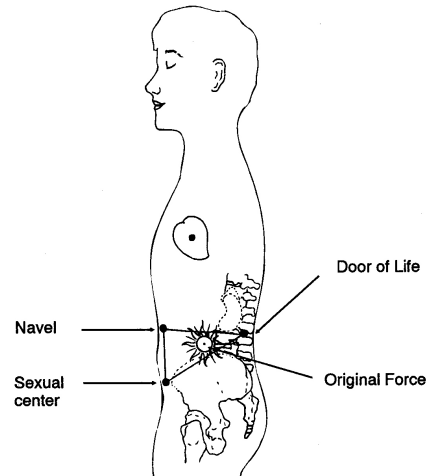
¹⁵ Wu Ji is the Daoist equivalent of the Buddhist idea of sunyata, emptiness. *Wu* means no, not, nothing. *Ji* means zenith, ultimate, absolute. Wu Ji is often depicted as an empty circle, representing a state of undifferentiated oneness.

¹⁶ “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!” Don’t fixate or reify anything.

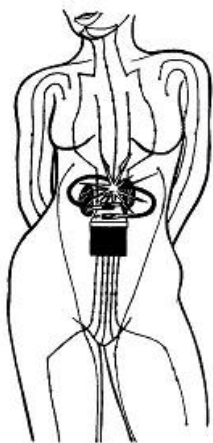
uninitiated. However, in over the past thirty years, more Daoist masters have begun to teach these ancient esoteric methods more publicly.¹⁷

The Lower Dan Tian Houses Our Original Qi The core of these methods begins with restoring and gathering our *Original Qi (yuan qi)* in our Lower Dan Tian.

Our Original Qi is the energy that we inherited from our mother and father, the qi that was in their egg and sperm when we were first conceived. This Original Qi is also supplemented by the nourishment we received from our mother while in her womb through the umbilical cord. It forms the basis for our constitutional strength, our inherited



energy, and acts like a car battery to fire all of our other life processes. Original



Qi is the main type of *Pre-Natal Qi* or *Early Heaven Qi (xian tian qi)*. As we grow from a single cell to a multi-trillion celled being, our Original Qi is gathered and stored in our Lower Dan Tian. It is the basis of all other types of qi in the body. Once we are born, we begin to eat and breathe, to draw qi from the air, from our food and drink, from the sun and other parts of our environment. This category of acquired energy is called *Post-Natal Qi* or *Later Heaven Qi*, and is the main energy that

circulates throughout our body. Just as a car creates energy through the fuel it burns in the presence of air, yet needs the battery to get it going, our body runs on acquired qi, yet needs the Original Qi to start the process.

¹⁷ Most notable among these teachers is Master Mantak Chia, world renowned teacher and author of over 20 books on Daoist practice. Chia received a complete transmission on the progressive stages of Daoist inner alchemy meditation from a mountain hermit, I Yun, while living in Hong Kong in the 1970's.

If we use more energy than we bring in, we begin to drain our battery, our Original Qi. The strength of our Original Qi has a direct role in our longevity. The stronger our Original Qi is, the more likely we are to live a long life.

Our Original Qi can also get scattered and weakened when we overwork ourselves or disperse our attention in too many directions through habitual over-activity so common today in civilized cultures.

Restoring our Original Qi

Perhaps the simplest method of restoring the Original Qi is through sitting or standing meditation, with our body, breath and mind all focused and integrated together in the Lower Dantian. First we align ourselves on the physical level so that we establish our center of gravity inside the bucket of our pelvis. Second, we breathe naturally so that our breath expands all the way down to the lower abdomen and lower back.

Last, but certainly not least, we focus our attention and awareness on and in our Lower Dan Tian. We do this by paying attention to the subtle physical sensations in our lower abdomen, in the triangle between our navel, our spine, and our sexual organs. We may notice warmth, tingling, pulsing, expansion, effervescence; these are all sensations of the life force itself. As the great 4th century B.C. philosopher Lie Zi said, “The mind (*yi*) leads, and the qi follows.” This means that wherever we focus our attention, we will automatically activate and gather more energy there.

But there is more here than just attending to the sensations in the Lower Dan Tian; we also want to awaken our dan tian as a center of awareness, to wake up that aspect of our conscious knowing that resides there.

“The point of true positive energy, which exists before the dichotomizing of the primordial, is the same as nothingness [Wu Ji], the same as breathing. This is only coming and going, not dichotomy.

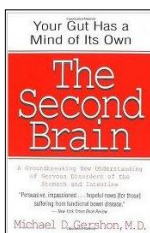
“That is why it is said that the unified energy becomes dichotomized due to the disturbance caused by conditioned cognition [Post-Natal Spirit].

“To absorb and cultivate the primordial energy [Original Qi], suspend discursive thought and watch serenely; then you will see natural reality.

“This may be done by keeping the mind on the point between the genitals and the navel [Lower Dan Tian], while poised between forgetfulness and mindfulness.”

--*Records of the Source Teachings of the Pure Clarity of the Spiritual Jewel of the Exalted*¹⁸

Dr. Candace Pert’s research in the last quarter of the 20th century established that the neuropeptides, the chemical foundations of consciousness, are not limited to the brain. In fact, neuropeptides and their receptor sites are abundantly present almost everywhere in all tissues throughout the body, including the white blood cells¹⁹ and internal organs. It is no coincidence that they are especially profuse in the intestines, the home of the Lower Dan Tian. Here we have cutting edge scientific research proving that consciousness is not limited to the brain, but pervades the whole body.



In his book, *The Second Brain*, Michael Gershon, MD, shares his groundbreaking research into the enteric nervous system, a gut-centered series of neurons that function independently from the central nervous system, and can even override direct signals from

the brain in favor of its own decisions. The enteric nervous system was discovered at the same time as the autonomic nervous system in the early 20th

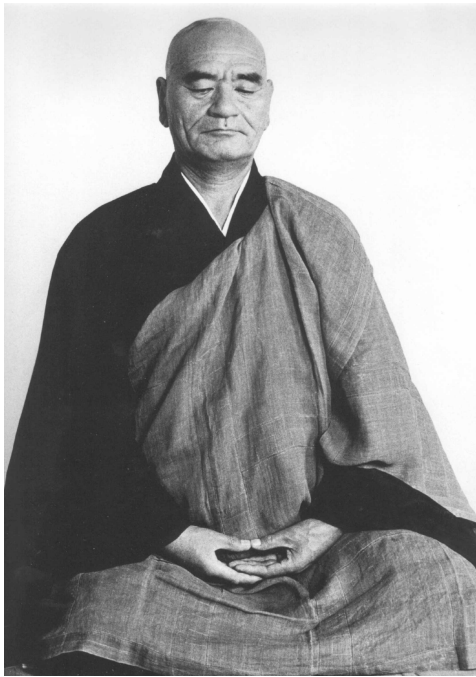
¹⁸ Translated by Thomas Cleary, in *Vitality, Energy and Spirit*, p. 143. Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1991.

¹⁹ Interestingly, by as early as the 2nd century B.C., the knowledge of the mind residing in the blood was already a part of Daoist thought. See Hidemi Ishida, *Body and Mind: The Chinese Perspective*, pp. 49-51, included in a collection of essays edited by Livia Kohn, *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1989.

century, but had for some reason been neglected until Gershon and his team resurrected interest in the abdominal brain.

Zen and the Art of Cultivating the Hara

It is in Japanese Zen Buddhism, heavily influenced by Daoism, that we find a profound refinement of cultivating the dan tian, or *hara*, as it is referred to in the Japanese version of the tradition.

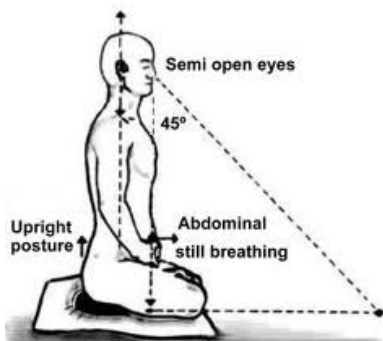


In his modern classic, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Roshi Philip Kapleau states, “Hara literally denotes the stomach and abdomen and the functions of digestion, absorption, and elimination connected with them. But it has parallel psychic and spiritual significance. According to Hindu and Buddhist yogic systems, there are a number of psychic centers in the body through which vital cosmic force or energy flows. Of the two such centers embraced within the hara, one is associated

with the solar plexus, whose system of nerves governs the digestive processes and organs of elimination. Hara is thus a wellspring of vital psychic energies. Harada-roshi, one of the most celebrated Zen masters of his day, in urging his disciples to concentrate their mind’s eye (i.e., the *attention*, the summation point of the total being) in their hara, would declare: ‘You must realize’ –i.e. make

real—“that the center of the universe is the pit of your belly!’

“To facilitate his experience of this fundamental truth, the Zen novice is instructed to



focus his mind constantly at the bottom of his hara (specifically, between the navel and the pelvis) and to radiate all mental and bodily activities from that region. With the body-mind's equilibrium centered in the hara, a seat of consciousness, a focus of vital energy, is established there which influences the entire organism.

“That consciousness is by no means confined to the brain is shown by Lama Govinda, who writes as follows: ‘While, according to Western conceptions, the brain is the exclusive seat of consciousness, yogic experience shows that our brain is only *one* among a number of possible forms of consciousness, and that these, according to their function and nature, can be localized or centered in various organs of the body. These ‘organs,’ which collect, transform, and distribute the forces flowing through them, are called *cakras*, or centers of force. From them radiate secondary streams of psychic force, comparable to the spokes of a wheel, the ribs of an umbrella, or the petals of a lotus. In other words, these other or penetrate each other. They are the focal points in which cosmic and psychic energies crystallize into bodily qualities, and in which bodily qualities are dissolved or transmuted again into psychic forces.’²⁰

“Settling the body's center of gravity below the navel, that is, establishing a center of consciousness in the hara, automatically relaxes tensions arising from the habitual hunching of the shoulders, straining of the neck, and squeezing in of the stomach. As this rigidity disappears, an enhanced vitality and new sense of freedom are



²⁰ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*. p. 135

experienced throughout the body and mind, which are felt more and more to be a unity.

“Zazen²¹ has clearly demonstrated that with the mind’s eye centered in the hara, the proliferation of random ideas is diminished and the attainment of one-pointedness accelerated, since a plethora of blood from the head is drawn down to the abdomen, ‘cooling’ the brain and soothing the autonomic nervous system. This in turn leads to a greater degree of mental and emotional stability. One who functions from his hara, therefore, is not easily disturbed. He is, moreover, able to act quickly and decisively in an emergency owing to the fact that his mind, anchored in his hara, does not waver.

“With the mind in the hara, narrow and egocentric thinking is superseded by a broadness of outlook and magnanimity of spirit. This is because thinking from the vital hara center, being free of mediation by the limited discursive intellect, is spontaneous and all-embracing. Perception from the hara tends toward integration and unity rather than division and fragmentation. In short, it is thinking which sees things steadily and whole.

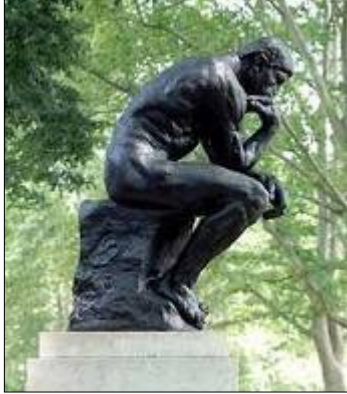


“The figure of the Buddha seated on his lotus throne—serene, stable, all-knowing and all-encompassing, radiating boundless light and compassion—is the foremost example of hara expressed through perfect enlightenment. Rodin’s ‘Thinker,’ on the other hand, a solitary figure ‘lost’ in thought and contorted in body, remote and isolated from his Self, typifies the opposite state.”²²

²¹ Zazen is the practice of Zen meditation.

²² Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 67-69.

While centering one's body, breath and mind on the hara (Lower Dan Tian) is vital to Zen practice, it is not considered highest spiritual cultivation in and of itself. One's motivation for practice is paramount in determining the



results one attains from practice. The three fruits of spiritual cultivation are wisdom, universal love/compassion, and power.²³ Focusing on any one of these to the neglect or exclusion of the others makes for an unbalanced result; emphasis on power to the neglect of wisdom and love is what separates the black magicians from the sages. Martial artists may cultivate

their Qi and Dan Tian to a high degree and develop miraculous skill and psychic powers, but they may end up even farther from enlightenment than before they started.

One might also cultivate the dan tian for health reasons or to reduce stress. These are certainly worthy aims, but, again, are not to be confused with spiritual attainment.

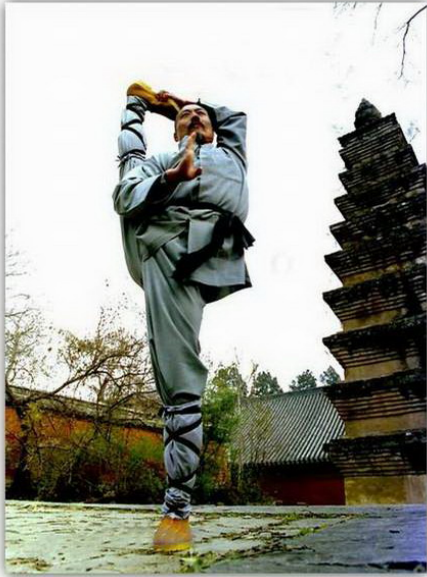
Asian Martial Arts and the Importance of the Dan Tian

Spiritual cultivation and martial arts have long been close bedfellows in both China and Japan. This tradition encompasses both Daoism and Buddhism. In the 6th century AD, Bodhidharma (Ta Mo), the 18th Indian patriarch, traveled from India to China. He settled at the Shaolin Temple in Henan province, introducing the meditative tradition of Buddhism (dhyana), which became known as Ch'an or Zen.



²³ This model is drawn from Buddhism, where the three bodhisattvas – Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrapani – represent wisdom, compassion and power respectively.

Legend has it that Bodhidharma also introduced martial arts (18 Lohan Boxing) and Qigong (Yijinjing and Xixuejing) to improve the health of his monks, but there is little verifiable historical reference to support this. Nonetheless, the



Shaolin Temple became famous both for its martial arts and qigong as well as its meditative tradition. Ch'an meditation emphasizes keeping the mind in the dan tian. Certainly the masters and students there would have carried awareness of the dan tian into their martial arts and Qigong training.

Similarly, the Wudang Mountain Temple (whose name means "Warrior

Deserving") in Hubei province has been renowned for centuries for its Qigong, internal martial arts and swordsmanship as well as for its inner alchemy meditation.



Wudang is also the legendary birthplace of the Chinese internal art of Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Ch'uan).



The martial-meditative tradition continued on and evolved its own unique form in Japan. The warrior cult of the samurai embraced the Zen Buddhist tradition of meditation.²⁴ A

²⁴ Although spiritual realization and martial arts are by no means synonymous, the famous samurai Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1685 attained enlightenment through the way of the sword, coupled with his Zen Buddhist studies.

warrior faces death as part of his job. Staying awake, responsive and mindful are a life and death matter, so mind training was absolutely vital. This tradition of



training the tanden or hara continues today, perhaps reaching its zenith of emphasis in the art of Aikido.

The Dan Tian in Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Ch'uan)

Many practitioners first heard about the term dan tian in their experiences with learning Taiji. Most Taiji teachers introduce the idea of centering in the dan tian in the very first lesson. Chen Wang-Ting, retired general and creator of Chen style Taijiquan at the end of the Ming dynasty (1644AD), was well aware of Daoist inner cultivation as well as martial arts.

Chen wrote,

“Recalling past years, how bravely I fought to wipe out the enemy troops, and what risks I went through! All the favors bestowed upon me are now in vain! Now old and feeble, the *Huang Ting*²⁵ is my sole companion. Life consists in creating sets of boxing when feeling depressed, doing fieldwork when the season comes, and spending leisure time teaching disciples and children so that they can become worthy members of the society.”

My teacher, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, a contemporary descendant of Chen Wang-Ting and senior family lineage holder of Chen style Taijiquan, views the dan tian as central to Taiji practice:

“The dantian is the [major] energy center of the body and requires coordination of the entire body. The force generated originates from the dantian

²⁵ The *Huang Ting Jing* or *Yellow Court Classic* is one of the more famous Daoist esoteric inner alchemy training manuals and a part of the *Dao Zang* (Taoist Canon). For an English translation, see Michael Saso, *The Gold Pavilion*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1995.

and coordinates with the rest of the body, gaining force, spiral force coordinated through the movement of the body.



“When the dantian turns, the body turns and pushes the hands. The dantian area is like the center of a circle. When the dantian begins moving, you connect the muscles of the legs and back to follow the dantian.

“Every part moves together, all connected. The hand does not move by itself; the dantian pushes the hand. It's a three dimensional movement, using the whole body. The dantian, hip, knee, leg all coordinate, initiating in the spiraling through the body.

“The small force [of the dantian] pushes the rest of the body (muscle and bone). Qi by itself is weak, soft. The dantian "communicates" to the muscle and bone. When the qi goes from the dantian out to the hand it is yang. When it returns to the dantian, it is yin.

“The dantian is the storage of all the qi. The jing-luo [channels and vessels] directs the qi through the body. When qi is generated, it is communicated (wired like a bomb) through the body. It is very important to understand the relationship of dantian to qi, qi and muscle, and muscle and bone. The main communication is between the dantian and muscle -- this is the essence of Chen Taijiquan.”²⁶

In a personal conversation with Chen Xiaowang in 1981, I asked him about the passage in the *Taijiquan Jing (T'ai Chi Ch'uan Classic)* of the Yang family

²⁶ From “Discussions with Chen Xiaowang,” an interview appearing on the website of Centro Pedagógico de Tai Chi Chuan, Venezuela. For the full article, go to <http://taijiyang.wordpress.com/2007/11/09/discussions-with-chen-xiaowang/>

Taiji tradition where it says, “The energy is rooted in the feet, developed in the legs, directed by the waist, directed by the waist, and expressed through the fingers.”

Chen’s response was that this is not quite right; *every movement in Taijiquan always begins in the dan tian*. In the above instance, one should direct the qi from the dan tian to the feet first to establish the root. Then the energy would travel up the body from the foot to the fingers.

Similarly, the great 20th century Taiji master Professor Cheng Man-Ch’ing wrote,



“The method of practicing this is extremely simple. First, whenever you have a spare moment, feel as if your *ni-wan* point is holding up Heaven, absorb Heaven’s *ch’i* and sink it to the *tan-t’ien*. Second, when you are in the midst of activity, sitting, or just standing about and there is an opportunity to really pay attention, then use the sole of the foot to stick to the earth and imagine that it is sinking into the earth. After a long time imagine that the power of your foot is connected to the gravitational pull of the earth. If you can do this, then the foot will possess root. Third, the ancients referred to the *tan-t’ien* in these words, ‘Walking, sitting, retiring or sleeping, you just can’t get away from it.’ The most important thing is to keep the mind and *ch’i* in the *tan-t’ien*, just like a hen incubating her eggs. This is what is meant by ‘knowledge arriving at the highest good.’ The *tao* cannot be forsaken for a single instant. If it can, it is not the true *tao*. This is also what Mencius meant when he referred to ‘my great *ch’i*.’ All of this means never leaving the *tan-t’ien*. If even this little bit of what I have learned is conscientiously put into practice, it absolutely cannot be matched by any casual exercise. Health and longevity then become a simple matter.”



So how *does* one gather one's qi in the Lower Dan Tian? First, align your posture -- whether standing, sitting, or moving -- so that your physical center of gravity sinks to the dan tian. To do so, align the center of your three dan tians

vertically with gravity and relax your upper body. Second, relax your waist and belly and breathe naturally and deeply so that your breath fills your lower abdomen. Third, focus your attention on your dan tian. Wherever the mind focuses, qi automatically gathers. With practice, you'll awaken that part of your consciousness that abides in the Lower Dan Tian. Gradually you will think, sense, perceive and act from the Lower Dan Tian rather than from the brain.

In reading the Taijiquan classical writings, the authors sometimes use the word qi to refer to breath in the sense of respiration, and at other times to the energy gathered there. The phrase "Sink the qi to the dan tian" is



deliberately ambiguous and poetic, designed in part to obfuscate and in part to illuminate the deep connection between qi and breath.

Daoist Inner Alchemy and Returning to the Source

In addition to martial arts, Daoist practitioners use their knowledge of the dan tian and apply it toward spiritual cultivation, with the goal of attaining

immortality, returning to the Source, or union with the Dao. Their methods vary, depending on their lineage of teachers.

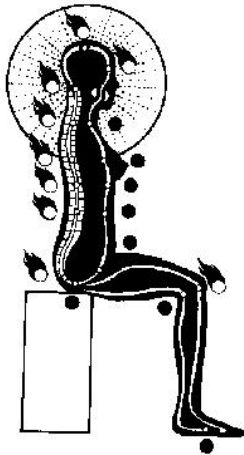


Some schools visualize the *Three Ones*, the *Three Lords of the Dan Tians*, Daoist gods residing in the palace of each dan tian. The Upper Dan Tian is the palace of the Celestial Emperor; the Middle Dan Tian is the palace where the Cinnabar Sovereign resides; while the Lower Dan Tian, here

represented as the Yellow Court (Huang Ting), is the abode of the Primordial King.²⁷ The practitioner is exhorted to keep his/her focus on the presence of these deities, not only while sitting in meditation, but throughout the course of daily life. From this, spiritual cultivation will naturally occur.

Other schools²⁸ practice the meditations of the *Microcosmic Orbit* (Xiao Jou Tian), the *Fusion of the Five Elements*, and the *Enlightenment of Kan and Li* (Water and Fire), using the Three Dan Tians as alchemical crucibles or cauldrons.

Microcosmic Orbit Meditation



The Microcosmic Orbit meditation is the foundation of inner alchemy. It involves first gathering and activating the Original Qi in the Lower Dan Tian, and then using the mind and/or specific hand positions (mudras) to guide the Qi through the main yang channel, the Governing Vessel (Du Mai) and the main yin channel, the Conception Vessel (Ren Mai). Through this practice, one learns to sense Qi in one's

body, and gains skill in guiding Qi.

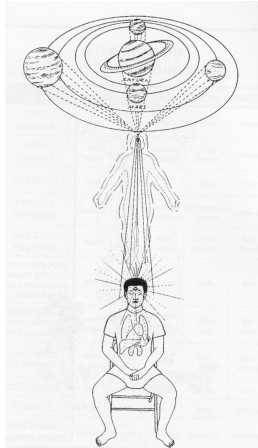
This practice also helps to balance yin and yang Qi throughout the body. It does this because all the ordinary yang channels in the body connect and draw

²⁷ See Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience*, p. 204

²⁸ In particular the Taoist tradition disseminated by Master Mantak Chia and disciples.

energy from the Governing Vessel, which in turn draws its energy from the Lower Dan Tian. The Conception Vessel connects to all the yin channels in the same way. Together they help to energize and balance all the other channels and organs.

Fusion of the Five Elements Meditation



The Fusion of the Five Elements meditations are the next step of the inner spiritual alchemy process. In the Daoist view, shared by classical Chinese medicine, the five main yin organs each house a part of our mind and spirit, as indicated by the table below:

Organ	Element	Spirit Agent	Negative Emotion	Virtue	Sense Organ
Kidneys	Water	Zhi (will)	Fear	Wisdom, gentleness	Ears
Heart	Fire	Shen (spirit)	Arrogance	Joy, honor, propriety	Tongue
Liver	Wood	Hun (ethereal soul)	Anger	Kindness, generosity	Eyes
Lungs	Metal	Po (corporeal soul)	Sadness	Courage, righteousness	Nose
Spleen	Earth	Yi (intellect)	Worry	Fairness, justness	Mouth

In the Daoist path one works to reduce and eliminate the dominance of the negative emotions and the mental activities, words and deeds that stem from them. When the clouds of the negative emotions are dispersed, the sun of our Original Spirit can radiate without hindrance and the virtues manifest naturally.

“The five energies are the true energies of five fundamental forces. When they are correctly aligned they congeal into one.

When your body is not agitated, your vitality [Jing] is stable, and its energy returns to the origin.

When your mind is not agitated, your breath is stable, and its energy returns to the origin.

When your nature is always tranquil, the higher soul [Hun] is stored, and its energy returns to the origin.

When emotions are forgotten, the lower soul [Po] is subdued, and its energy returns to the origin.

When the physical elements are in harmony, the will [Zhi] is stable, and its energy returns to the origin.

When these five forces are in their proper place and at peace, they revert to their reality, which is the source of religion.”²⁹

The negative emotions are often referred to as the “Five Robbers.” The method used in the Fusion of the Five Elements meditations is to distill the qi of the negative emotions out of each organ, and neutralize that energy by blending the energies using the *control cycle* (Ke cycle) relationship of the Five Elements.³⁰

²⁹ *Records of the Source Teachings of the Pure Clarity of the Spiritual Jewel of the Exalted*, translated by Thomas Cleary, in *Vitality, Energy and Spirit*, p. 142.

³⁰ Also referred to as the grandmother-grandson cycle. Water controls fire; fire controls metal; metal controls wood; wood controls earth; earth controls water.

This neutralized energy is then gathered into the Lower Dantian and condensed into a pearl or subtle luminous ball of condensed qi.

In addition, the sensory organ qi, which is usually dispersed outward towards its sense objects, is also gathered first into its related organs, distilled into a collection vessel, brought into a blending vessel in the form of a Bagua symbol either at the navel, Door of Life (Ming Men) on the back opposite the navel, or the left and right side at waist level, and then united into the pearl at the Dan Tian.

The pearl is then circulated again through the organs and their collection points according to the sequence of the *creation or nourishing cycle* (Sheng cycle) of the Five Elements.³¹ In this way, one nourishes the organs and their respective virtues. The virtues are like food that nourishes and enhances the energy body and the Original Spirit.

This enhanced pearl of refined qi is then circulated through all of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels of the body, helping to restore and strengthen the integrity of the energy body.³²

“People are born with the energy of the five forces, so they have the energy of the five forces in their bodies. The mind is the host of the body, the body is the house of the mind. When the five robbers are in the body, really they are in the mind.

“The mind, however, is divided into the human mind and the Tao mind. When you do things by means of the human mind, the five robbers become active as emotions and desires. When you do things by means of the Tao mind, the five robbers turn into benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and truthfulness.

³¹ Also called the mother-son cycle. Water nourishes wood; wood feeds fire; fire creates earth; earth creates metal; metal nourishes water.

³² For further details, see Mantak Chia, *Fusion of the Five Elements*, Inner Traditions/Bear & Company.

“If you can observe Heaven, understand the waxing and waning of the five forces, and use the Tao mind to function, then every step you take comes from Heaven, not from humanity. Great though the universe may be, it is as though in the palm of your hand; many though the myriad transformations be, they are not outside your body. Can it not be difficult to assemble the five forces, combine the four forms, and thereby realize essence and life?”

-- Liu I-Ming, *Commentary on Yin Convergence*,³³

Kan and Li Meditation

In the next stage of Daoist inner alchemy meditation, one progresses to the *Enlightenment of Kan and Li* (Water and Fire).

The theory behind this method is partly derived from the *Yijing* (I Ching). In the state “before the Fall,” the Early Heaven (*Xian Tian*) view, the primary expressions of pure yin and pure yang in the harmonious universe are heaven (yang) and earth (yin). In the Later Heaven (*Ho Tian*) stage, the state “after Eden,” the primary expressions of yin and yang are fire (yang), and water (yin).

In the body, the fire element is centered in the heart. When the heart is dominated by the conditioned human mind, the passions of the five negative emotions arise.

The water element is centered in the kidneys, which also rule the sexual organs. When the kidneys are dominated sexual desire, we are ruled by that influence and again the passions are strong.

Fire naturally rises, while water flows downwards. Because of this, the emotions and sexual desire are hard to control, and we are helplessly blown about by our impulses.

³³ Translated by Thomas Cleary, in *Vitality, Energy and Spirit*, p. 225.



In the Kan and Li meditations, we bring the fire of the heart energy down below the cauldron of the dan tian, and the water of the kidney energy up and place it in the cauldron. In this way, the fire warms and activates the water and the water controls the fire.

This interaction produces a purified energy like steam, which is then directed throughout the body for healing. The diffusion of steam also creates a feeling of inner spaciousness and helps us break up the illusion of our body being fixed and solid. The experience is one of vastness, inner stillness, peace and bliss, ultimately allowing our Original Spirit to emerge and shine.

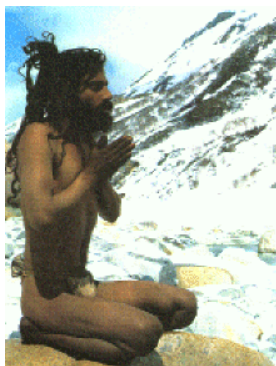
“To learn the Way we first kill off the chief hoodlum. What is the chief hoodlum? It is emotions. We need to wipe out that den of thieves to see once again the clear, calm, wide open original essence of mind. Don’t let conditioned senses spy in.

What is this about? It is about quelling the mind. One removes emotions to quell the mind, then purifies the mind to nurture the great elixir.”

Lu Dong-Bin, *Sayings*³⁴

The Dan Tian in Buddhist Inner Alchemy – Tibetan Tantric Buddhism

There are some fascinating and illuminating similarities between Daoist inner alchemy and Buddhist inner alchemy, which is foremost within the Tantric Buddhist tradition preserved in the mountain fastness of Tibet.



In the very secret stages of highest yoga tantra, the fundamental practices of completion stage yoga or “the method path” also work with the Lower Dan Tian as a vital center of spiritual transformation through energetic manipulation. To enter into these secret practices first

³⁴ Translated by Thomas Cleary, in *Vitality, Energy and Spirit*, p. 86

requires a firm foundation in faith, compassion, ethics, concentrative meditation practices, visualization, and pure motivation. Only then is one ready to begin.

In this tradition, mind and Qi (in this system called *prana* in Sanskrit and *rLung* in Tibetan, usually translated as “wind” in English) are viewed as interdependent. The channels are like roads, the energy wind is like a horse, and the mind is like the rider.

Each emotion and thought has its own specific energy wind that supports its functioning. The various types of winds that support the conditioned dualistic mind with its negative emotions and their associated concepts and thoughts, are called *karmapranas*, or karmic winds. They arise due to our karma, cause and effect, from our deluded habitual patterns of thoughts, words and deeds. These karmapranas flow through most of the channels of the body, which are known as the karmic channels.

Our true nature of mind is supported by the *jnanapranas* or wisdom winds, as its mount. This true nature of mind is also referred to as *clear light consciousness*. As in the Daoist system, where the Original Spirit resides in the heart, the wisdom wind that supports clear light consciousness resides in the



center of the heart chakra, in a pearl-like sphere called the *indestructible drop*.

The wisdom winds mainly flow through the central channel of the body. The central channel also penetrates through the core of each chakra.³⁵ When the karmic winds are flowing strongly, as they usually are, they constrict the

³⁵ Different systems have different views of the chakras. In the Buddhist system, the chakras are viewed like wheels with “spokes” or channels extending outward from their hub. The central channel flows through the hub like an axle.

central channel and inhibit the flow of the wisdom winds. This makes it hard for the clear light consciousness to arise in our field of awareness, much like the way that the clouds obscure the sun. So, for one who is practicing the method path, the goal is to reduce the flow of the karmic winds by gathering them into the central channel, which is also relieved of its constriction in the process. When the karmic winds enter the central channel, they are automatically transformed into wisdom wind, ultimately giving rise to clear light consciousness or buddhahood.

In the Tantric system, there are ten different doors through which one can guide the karmic winds to enter, abide, and dissolve into the central channel. The main Tantric practices that use these methods are called the *Six Yogas of Naropa*. Each of the Six Yogas uses a different door for a different result.

The key practice of the Six Yogas is the *tummo* or Inner Heat Meditation. Those who have mastered the tummo practice are renowned for being able to elevate their skin temperature to the degree where they can sit outside naked in the middle of a Himalayan mountain winter and melt the snow around them!³⁶



The tummo practice uses the navel chakra, in the center of the body within a range of one to four finger widths below the navel (sound familiar?) as the door to guide the karmic winds into the central channel. The navel chakra is perhaps the most easily accessible door to the central channel because it has 64 branch channels connected to it, more than any of the other doors.

Through a combination of special postures, breath control and visualization, one then generates heat in this area by visualizing a red hot ember

³⁶ For a fascinating account of modern research verifying this skill, see Herbert Benson, M.D., *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, pp. 29-61. New York: Times Books, 1984.

or red mantric syllable inside the central channel at the level of the navel or slightly below. This heat, or “inner fire”, viewed in this tradition as red and feminine, rises up the central channel to the brain, “melting” a white sphere or mantric syllable of blissful energy there (viewed as masculine). The energy of the melting white bliss energy sphere then descends down the central channel, giving rise to increasing sensations of bliss or joy at each chakra as it gradually flows down. When it meets the red ember at the navel chakra, there is an explosion of bliss like water hitting white hot rocks. The blissful heat then flows out to every cell of the body, creating a feeling of happiness, spaciousness and pleasure. Uniting this bliss with the view of emptiness and non-grasping, one’s channels open throughout the body, all of one’s winds are ultimately transformed into wisdom winds, and after much practice, one may eventually attain buddhahood.³⁷



To summarize, in the Tantric Buddhist system, the dan tian is significant in several ways: as the easiest doorway into the central channel, where the wisdom winds reside, and as a cauldron to initiate the union of bliss and emptiness. One’s negative habitual patterns of thought and emotion are subdued through the path of energy transformation; mind and winds are interconnected.

The Tantric Buddhist systems originated in India and Kashmir and were later introduced into Tibet where they flourished and were preserved as a living tradition to the present day. However, at various

³⁷ For more on tummo meditation, see Kathleen McDonald, *How to Meditate*, pp. 134-138. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1984). See also Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Clear Light of Bliss*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1982).

times from at least the 13th century on, famous Tibetan masters such as Karma Pakshi (the 2nd Karmapa) and Sakya Pandita were invited to the royal courts in Mongolia and China and received imperial patronage. Even today, Tantric Buddhist stupas and temples can be found as far east as Beijing. Debates and interchanges took place between the Buddhists and Daoists at these times, and it is almost certain that some cross-pollination occurred. However, without evidence to the contrary, it appears that the Buddhist and Daoist systems of inner energy alchemy as a path of spiritual accomplishment developed independently, yet along parallel lines.

Summary

As a child I scoffed at the idea of yogis who contemplated their navels. How ridiculous! Yet when I began to practice Zen at age 17, this was precisely what I was directed to do: focus my mind in my hara. A part of me believed, while another part was still skeptical. I did not see any quick results to take away my doubt, although I did feel calmer and more centered. My ethnocentric conditioning made me question whether this was all just so much superstition and nonsense. Yet a certain curiosity tempered with faith and wonder led me to persist.

At age 21, I began to practice Taiji and Qigong, and again, I was directed to direct my movements from my belly and to sink my breath to my dan tian. I read in T.T. Liang's commentaries to the Taiji Classics, "When you practice T'ai Chi and breathe with your abdomen, the abdominal respiration makes the ch'i that is latent in your body active and effective. The ch'i will then sink deeply into the tan t'ien from which it will



circulate through the entire body without hindrance, so that your movements will be active and alert. This is beneficial to health, and is also the way to immortality.”

As I continued to practice Taiji and Qigong, I began to actually experience qi in my dan tian and qi circulating through my body! I noticed that my reflexes were quicker even within the first few months of practice. If I knocked something off the kitchen counter, I instinctively found myself catching it before it hit the ground. Sometimes I would feel as if my body was a cork, floating weightlessly on a river of qi.

Later as I learned Daoist inner alchemy meditation and Qigong healing, I could feel the energy expanding and pulsing in my dan tian and roaring through my channels, sometimes swaying me to and fro as if I was caught in an ocean current.

Still later I studied with great Tibetan lamas and began to learn the method path. Amazing events invariably occurred, life changing and blissful experiences that removed all doubt as to the efficacy and reality of these practices.

All of these experiences led me to the practice of Chinese medicine. Now as a licensed acupuncturist I move my patients' qi with needles and herbs to rebuild their Original Qi to their dan tian. I teach them dan tian breathing to restore their health. I've now been cultivating the field of the elixir for forty years. The fruits I harvest grow richer over time.

It's springtime here in my home of Austin. Shanti and I have been planting flowers and medicinal herbs over the last few days. We work the soil these lovely warm Texas April afternoons, planting, fertilizing, weeding, mulching and watering. Now most of the plants are in the ground.

I survey my garden and the fruits of our initial labors. The plants seem so small. A part of me is anxious; I want to see them flourishing right away! Yet another wiser inner voice tells me that cultivating a garden takes time. Be patient, keep cultivating, and this garden will flourish as the seasons unfold. It won't be long before it begins to bear its precious fruit.

So it is with cultivating the field of the elixir. There are marvels in your belly awaiting your discovery. For those of you who are skeptical and scientific, I cannot say much, except: try it for yourself! Be your own research subject. As my Taiji teacher, Shing Perng, once told me, "The time is going to go by anyway. You might as well be learning something."

The experiences and skills don't come overnight, but they *do* come if you practice. It's the same patience and confidence you apply to your garden. I invite you to join in the qi adventure, work the field, and harvest the fruit lying latent in the dark rich soil of your dan tian.

THE END