The term Qigong can translate as the cultivation of vital energy. It is essentially an experiential practice. Describing it is like trying to describe the experience of eating ice cream or of being touched by a beautiful piece of art. It is by being in the practice, with an open mind and an open heart, that you get to know what it means.

An understanding of the basic theories can deepen our experience of the practice and guide our intention. Some guiding principles of Qigong are Daoist philosophy, the notion of Yin and Yang, and Five Phase Theory.

The Nature of Yin and Yang

The Chinese character for Yin can be translated as “the shady side of a hill/mountain”, while the character for Yang is “the sunny side of a hill/mountain.” Think of the different energetic aspects of those two opposites: on the shady side of the mountain, the air is cooler, the soil more moist, the plants are a little more tender, the light is more subdued. On the sunny side, the air is warmer, the soil drier, the plants have to be more sturdy, the light is brighter.

This point of view extends into all aspects of the world. Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yin</th>
<th>Yang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>Initiating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Universe (heavens)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night</td>
<td>Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>Sun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expressed in the Tai Chi Symbol, every entity (human being, plant, rock, etc) has its own unique balance of Yin and Yang energies. In Qigong, we aim to restore this balance in our organs, meridian pathways, and tissues.

“Yin and Yang aren't sentimental. They exist without moralizing. They act regardless of our wishes within the ebb and flow of every pregnant moment.” Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, translated by Ralph Alan Dale.

Daoist Philosophy and The Three Dantiens

An essential starting point of Daoism is the idea that man is ideally placed in the cosmos, right at the perfect midpoint between Earth (Yin) and the Heavens (Yang; in this context “Heavens” is simply understood as the space where all the planets and stars are found, the vastness between them, as well as their interlinking forces) In qigong practice this idea is reflected in the cultivation of the Three Dantiens.
The Three Dantiens are areas in the body where energy gets stored and mixed, and can be viewed as pools of energy.

The Lower Dantien is situated right below the navel. It is connected to the energy of the Earth, and it is where our physical energy is stored. This is where food is transformed. Cultivation of the lower dantien will help build our physical strength. It has a relationship with the endocrine and enteric nervous system (digestion).

The Middle Dantien is in the chest area and is connected to the human plane, manifested through our emotions. It is connected to the cardiac nervous system. In Daosist thought, all emotions are connected with a specific organ, but the heart is considered “the emperor of emotions.”

The Upper Dantien is in the cranium and is the province of our thoughts and connection to spirit. It is related to the cerebral nervous system, and has the highest vibration. The lower dantien has the lowest vibration, and the middle is in perfect balance between the two.

Five Phase Theory

“The Five Elements are not elements so much as activities” John Blofeld

The Taoists observed that five basic energy transformations flow from the yin and the yang interactions: Wood represents energy that is a developing and generating. Fire represents energy that is expanding and radiating. Earth represents energy that is stabilizing and centering. Metal represents energy that is solidifying and contracting. Water represents energy that is conserving, gathering, sinking.

Each organ is energetically connected to an element according to their own types of activities or functions. In some cases the connection is obvious: Just as fire is expanding and radiating, the heart propels fresh blood (our main source of energy) throughout our entire body. With practice, one can begin to feel these energies internally.

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