

Within the field of Chinese medical thought – the philosophical/physical force of 'Qi' is not only central, but essential to the entire edifice that is today referred to as 'Traditional Chinese Medicine' (or 'TCM'). An underlying, invisible force of one sort or another permeates ancient cultures, from the 'ether' of the Druids, to the 'prana' of ancient India.

Qi: One Energy – Two Expressions

Much confusion abounds both in the West and in modern mainland China about what exactly 'Qi' is, how it should be cultivated and developed and what should be done with it once developed. To understand clearly, we must consider the Chinese ideogram for the word pronounced Qi.

Essentially, the character for Qi consists of a cauldron hanging over a fire. 氣. In the cauldron there is boiling water and in the water, rice (米) is cooking. There is a lid on the cauldron, which rises gently up and down as the steam (气) in the cauldron builds up pressure and the steam escapes.

This character denotes in virtually its entirety, the spiritual, medical and martial foundations of the internal arts of ancient China. But the external is still allowed for, although in a subtle way. The cauldron lid, as it rises and falls, serves as an illustration of what it means to perform physical martial movements in an external way. From this, it may be deduced that the 'external' state is intended to be only temporary and not permanent. The philosophical implications are clear – the internal condition is the highest level and is attainable by the cultivated human being.

There is only one Qi power in the universe that animates matter and links spirits of the world. The external and internal states are intrinsically linked at their base. What separates the Qi into a predominantly external expression on the physical plane is simply that the practitioner has not yet deepened his/her understanding. This natural state of 'un-knowingness' is common to us all. As we get older and become more fully aware of our bodies and minds, our appreciation for Qi deepens and we perceive what it means to express our minds and bodies in an internal manner.

page 20 Qi Magazine Jul/Aug/Sep 2007

Qi, being universal in nature, has a physical component and a psychological (i.e. spiritual) component. When we are young, we tend to focus only on the physical and can not see beyond our own physical structure. Eventually, with the appropriate training, we can focus and develop our minds so that our awareness can expand beyond our bodies. We exist as if we are in a three-dimensional sphere of awareness which can permeate far beyond the arbitrary boundaries set by our physical limitations. In this heightened state, we move freely in any direction and there is nothing that cannot be achieved.

External Force

In Chinese medical thinking, any movement that has its origins of power generation on the outside of the bone, i.e. through the muscles, ligaments and tendons, is termed external in nature. This is important and the main way that human beings produce power from an early age.

"Soft and gentle cannot exist without the hard unyielding force."

It is as if we are genetically pre-programmed to produce power only from the musculature, even in our untrained state. External training then harnesses this power in a systematic manner. A practitioner will learn how to control their bodies via their musculature in a well co-ordinated and well timed series of martial exercises. The basic power for this expression is essentially forward or backward motion with an un-dropped bodyweight (i.e. when muscular tension is used to 'suspend' the body structure in a solid sheet, in one orientation, to protect

against incoming blows). The 'weight' of the practitioner, (using the body joints as levers), propels the weight forward, through an arm or a leg, in a fast ripple-like fashion.

A sudden 'breaking' of forward motion acts as the vehicle for energy transmission from the attacking limb to the target area. This kind of power can have a devastating effect over a wide area, but seldom, if ever, manages to penetrate more than an inch or two into the target. This power emanates entirely from the musculature, and is, therefore, entirely dependent upon the participating and supporting muscles being fit, strong and fresh.

The hip and shoulder joints are used as a 'hinge' mechanism, as if one were slamming a door. As the muscles tire, so does the power output, and blows start to lose their effectiveness. This is why external styles emphasise extensive muscular development through the practice of external Qigong, or in other words training the musculature to store Qi. This makes the musculature hard and robust when tensed for combat. This is called external 'iron vest' training (editor's note: Hard Qigong), whereby the musculature acts as a barrier to the possible harmful effects of incoming, external blows.

External training prepares the mind and body for a journey toward transformation. Slowly, over time, the practitioner will develop an ever-increasing awareness of his/her mind and body. The older traditional styles usually have a clear external component, and a clear internal component. However, as the soft and gentle (i.e. Yin), cannot exist without the hard unyielding force (i.e. Yang), we must acknowledge that any style that conforms to ancient Chinese scientific thinking must fully embrace both aspects of the energy spectrum and training will reflect this.

Generally speaking, at the start of the journey, the human body is overly tense and hard. The external training harnesses this state. As the practitioner progresses, the musculature begins to relax. This process may be observed with the analysis of technique. Initially, if a punch was observed, the arm would be extended forward, with much thrusting force and in order to prevent injury, the muscles of the hand would be tensed throughout the entire process, to protect the fist structure from the re-coil of impact.

This tension would also exist in the arm and throughout the body. Any other observed technique would reveal the same dynamic of movement. As the practitioner progresses – tension recedes and more and more of the technique starts to be performed in a relaxed manner. This is the slow path toward the internal from the perspective of the external. Eventually, the practitioner is able to punch with a relaxed hand of the

Qi Magazine Jul/Aug/Sep 2007 page 21

point of contact. How this happens can be understood by the clear investigation of what it means to produce internal force.

Internal Force

Internal force – or that force which is cultivated and produced in the internal martial arts of China (Xingyi, Baguazhang and Taijiquan, etc.), has its basis (like external force) in the philosophy of ancient Chinese medicine and the science of Qi. Simply stated, internal force is that power which is produced within and around the bone.

The musculature, in this instance, becomes secondary as it is no longer required/used as a prime producer of energy but continues to fulfil its function for defence and mobility. Internal power generation is essentially dependent upon postural alignment. The basic Qigong exercise for the development of alignment trains both the body and mind. The bones must be anatomically placed so that they 'sit' squarely upon one another. The shoulder girdle sits squarely over the pelvic girdle and the pelvic girdle sits squarely over the ankles and heels.

The hips are connected to the shoulders by a naturally 'S' shaped spine and connected to the feet by slightly springy knees. The feet are approximately shoulder width apart and the head sits squarely on the shoulders with the back of the neck extended and the chin tilted slightly forward. The mind focuses upon full, deep breathing, utilising the full lung capacity. For this to occur, muscular tension in the torso and chest (which prevents full deep breathing) must be relaxed. Initially, tension is relaxed with the focus of the mind upon the tense area.

Tension is acknowledged with the inward breath, and literally expelled from the muscle with the outward breath. An aligned posture does not require muscular tension to stay in place. With deep, full breathing, the heart beat slows down whilst having more oxygen available per breath, per beat of the heart. Tension would normally prevent oxygen transference around the body – but when tension is relaxed, oxygen and energy may flow freely.

When the skeleton is aligned, gravity acts upon the body mass – creating body weight which is pulled downward into the ground. The unobstructed body weight travels downward through the centre of the bone gently massaging the bone marrow. The bodyweight hits the ground – thus 'rooting' the practitioner like a tree. In this state, it is difficult for an external force to move the body. As the weight hits the ground, an opposite and equal rebound force is created, that travels back

up the body, through the bone marrow, again massaging the bone marrow in the opposite direction.

This gentle massaging of the bone marrow, ensures that the bone is both robust and yet flexible, two essential components of a healthy bone structure. Over time the bones toughen. At this point it must be pointed out that an aligned posture is a rounded posture. The bones of the legs, torso and arms assume a rounded posture that forms what is known as 'Internal Iron Vest'. The rounded posture absorbs, deflects and reflects incoming power. As a blow strikes the aligned posture, the incoming power is automatically reflected back into the attacking limb, causing damage to that limb at the point of contact. With the concentration of the mind through deep breathing and postural alignment, the mind is brought to a single point – concentrating and releasing the energy of the mind. As the intellect relaxes, the intuition comes to the forefront and is experienced as an expansion of awareness that goes beyond the physical limitations of the body. Over the years, this expansion deepens and matures – this is Qigong of the mind.

From this still position, the rudiments of internal power are both acquired and cultivated. The next stage is to be able to maintain and produce internal power whilst moving the physical body around through time and space.

The structure of the sequential forms of the internal arts, exist to exercise and manifest this internal force whilst on the move. The rebounding, upward force is used to emit energy from the centre of the body outwards, whilst the dropping body weight force is used to absorb incoming power. As this force is not dependent upon the rules of muscular power, immense force can be produced with virtually no movement or gravity is at work regardless as to whether one is moving or not. No single muscle group can produce the same amount of force created by the bodyweight. Also, muscles tire and need resting, whereas internal force is constant and never grows tired. On a genetic level, human beings are programmed to see muscular movement and prepare to counter it. However, the ability to produce substantial force with virtually no muscular involvement bypasses the natural human instinct for survival. An internal master literally exists and moves within a perceptual gap. If one is not of equal development, then it is very difficult to confront and counter the internal.

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page 22 Qi Magazine Jul/Aug/Sep 2007