

Than Quyen

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The comportment of a magnanimous sage, the strength of a vivacious tiger, and the furtive edifying capacity of a saint, these were the images of Kwai Chang Caine I held in my youth. I remember how I, as a teenage adolescent, would rush home from school each day in order to watch what I now consider mostly inane reruns of the martial art TV series “Kungfu.” These “old western” style Kungfu episodes added much to my interest of martial arts in my youth...one episode that I remember was most inspiring is one in which Kwai Chang lectured a brash, belligerent youth on the proper use of one’s martial skill, “Suppose there is someone who intends to strike you with a stick. What can you do? You can submit to a beating, you can fight back, or you can ‘take away the stick.’ You must know how to choose between these three.”

It was easy for me to identify with the youth. In our daily struggles, whether with fists or elsewhere in life, how should we respond to adversity? How can we harmonize the stressful and competitive environments in which we live?

The objectives of this research are to demonstrate how the teachings of internal martial arts attempt to attain harmony and resolve conflict and to explain fundamental Taoist concepts essential to understanding this harmonizing process. This will be accomplished by briefly outlining the Taoist theories of the Three Creative Powers, Qi, The Five Elements, and the Eight Trigrams and then demonstrate how they relate to external, internal, and spiritual martial arts training.

Through his research into the Chinese art of Feng-shui (風水), Dr. Stephen Fields has recovered the “lost” meaning of the eight-trigrams (八卦). According to his findings three of the trigrams describe attitudes that resemble the wisdom of Kwai Chang Caine. These are the attitudes of: Xun (巽) - Yielding, Gen (艮) - Resisting, and Dui (兌) – Mediating. The goal of Taoist Fengshui, like Taijiquan and other internal martial arts, is through these attitudes to harmonize adverse forces and one’s contentious surroundings. Specifically, the Taoists seek to harmonize the forces of the three creative powers.

The Three Creative Powers 三才

The Taoist creation myth is in some ways similar to the big bang theory. In the beginning of existence (or before the beginning of existence) there was an indefinable chaos, the Hun-dun (混沌). The Hun-dun then split with the lighter elements rising to become Heaven (天) and the heavier elements falling to form Earth (地). Finally, between heaven and earth, men were born. The Dao De Jing (道德經) reads, “One begot two; two begot three; and from three all things were born.” These three, Heaven, Earth, and Mankind are the three creative powers (三才). The Taoist goal is, as the third creative power, man, to harmonize the forces of Heaven and Earth.

What constitutes a “Creative Power?” To understand this, we must understand the meaning of Qi (氣). Here I propose a translation (interpretation) that takes Qi to mean simply “movement.” This will help us understand the Taoist concept of the “Original Unified Qi,” (朝元一氣) in which all forms of Qi ultimately are threaded into one unified and indefinable body. However this Unified Qi can be frozen at particular moments and is then distinguishable.

Qi is movement; the more movement there is in a system, the greater the frequency of change and transformation in the system. With an infinite increase in the number of spontaneous events of change, comes a spontaneous creative capacity. This capacity, energy in movement, or Qi is innate in heaven, or the cosmos, through solar winds, radiation and electromagnetic energy; it is present on earth in the water, wind, and soil; and it is inherent in humans in our cognitive powers. This power to “create,” possessed by the Three Creative Powers of heaven, earth, and man, is based on a boundless quantity of Qi, refined through endless events of change.

The Celestial Stems and Earthly Branches 天干地支

Chinese Taoists turned the study of Qi into a careful science. This study was closely linked to the study of astronomy and the movement of heavenly bodies, most importantly the movement of the sun and moon around what was perceived to be a flat and central earth. Heaven was thought to have six directions and a cycle of six types of Qi, while Earth possessed 5 directions and a cycle of five kinds of Qi. Each phase in the cycle was further divided into a beginning and ending phase, yielding the

Ten Celestial Stems (天干) and the Twelve Earthly Branches (地支). The 12 Earthly Branches manifested themselves through the 12 watches of the day (更) and the 12 months of the year. The Ten Celestial Stems came to be linked with the five agricultural seasons: planting, nurturing, maturation, harvest, and storage, along with the five directions (South, East, North, West, and Center) and their energy relations to the five seasons (spring, early summer, late summer, autumn, winter). This gave rise to the Five Elements (五行) theory which shall be discussed in greater depth later. In the creation of the lunar calendar, the cycle of the Ten Celestial Stems were superimposed on the cycle of the Twelve Earthly Branches and formed the 60 year cycle calendar.

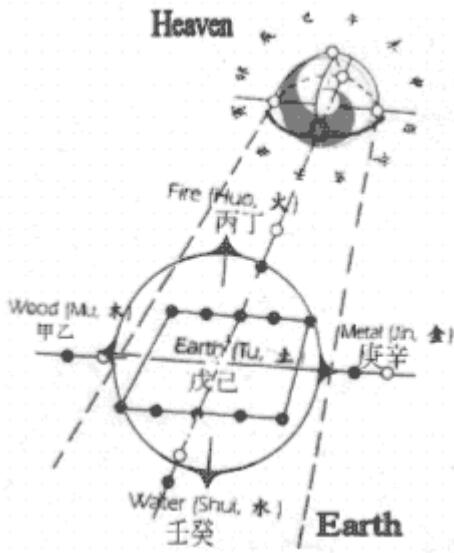


Figure 1- Celestial Stems and Earthly Branches

The Polar Opposites of Yin and Yang 兩儀陰陽

This division of processes into beginning and end/ waxing and waning is representative of what may be the most important principle of Taoist thought, that of Yin and Yang (陰陽). There is already a preponderance of literature on Yin and Yang; what we want to note here is that as soon as there is motion, Qi, there is the distinction of Yin and Yang, that is Yin and Yang describe particular and relative phases of Qi – waxing and waning. To better understand this, let us return to the Taoist creation myth.

In the creation myth, the indefinable chaos of pre-existence is ultimately distinguishable with its separation into heaven and earth. This is similar to Taiji theory. In Taiji theory, before there is movement, there is absolute stillness called Wuji (無極), which can literally mean “without polarity.” Because there is no movement in Wuji, nothing in Wuji can be differentiated; it is without polar distinctions. However, as soon as there is movement, there is Taiji or absolute polarity/distinctions. These distinctions are differentiated as Yin and Yang. This is similar to the energy wave of physics. Energy in motion, whether it be radiation, sonic, or electric energy can only move through waves. These waves cannot exist without their fluctuations of upper and lower troughs. This is like Yin and Yang. One cannot exist without the other and each is defined relative to the other.

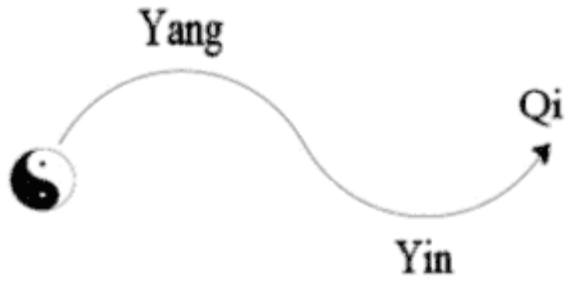


Figure 2- Yin and Yang

Through the ages a plethora of characteristics and phenomena have been analyzed through Yin and Yang (Light/dark, male/female/, day/night, pure/murky, light/dense). The most significant and fundamental however is waxing in waning. This is because Yin and Yang describe a process in which Yin and Yang are continuously changing from one into the other, the same way an energy wave is constantly in motion. Taiji theory and Yin and Yang are attempts to depict this change in motion/Qi.

Once there is motion/Qi and its movement is differentiated into Yin and Yang, specific points in the constant interchange between Yin and Yang/waxing and waning can be further divided into two, again according to Yin and Yang. This yields the four phases (四像). Further division of the four phases then gives Taoist another powerful tool in the study of Qi, the Eight Trigrams (八卦).

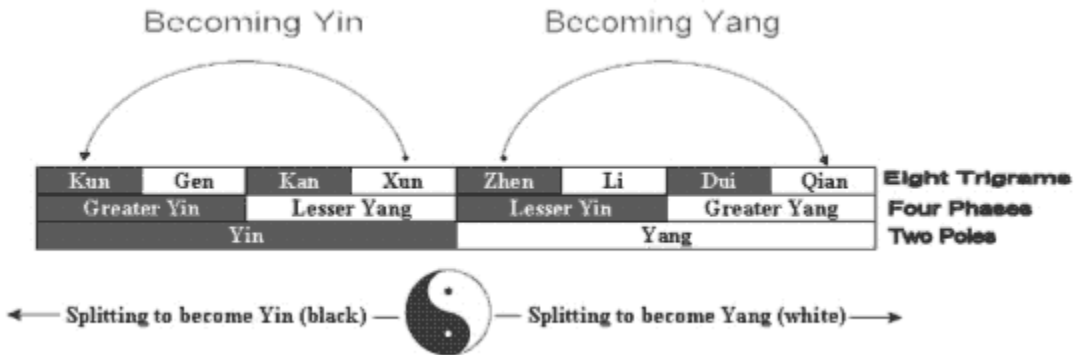


Figure 3- Derivation of the Eight Trigrams

The Four Phases 四像

The Four Phases are Greater Yang (太陽), Weaker Yang (少陽), Greater Yin (太陰), and Weaker Yin (少陰). Two of the phases are Yin and Yang at their polar extremes and two of the phases are transition stages. Weaker Yin is becoming aYang Qi; Weaker Yang is becoming Yin Qi. The Four Phases yield the Five Phases or Five Elements, with the addition of Earth, a central balancing element.

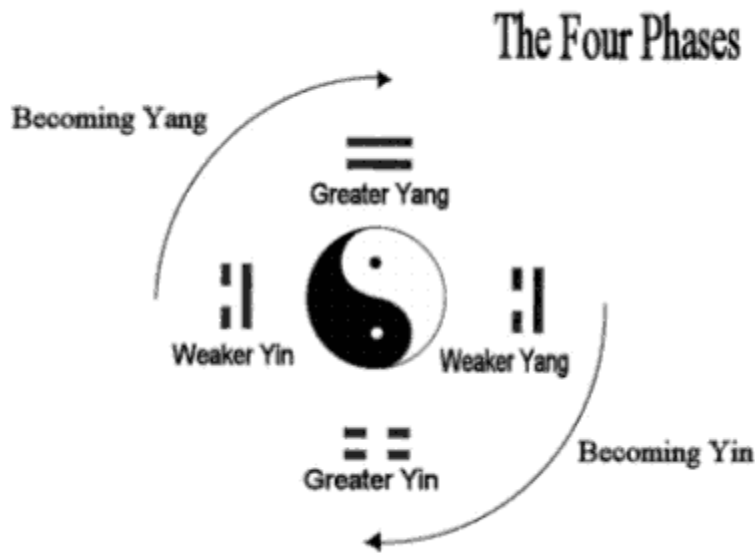


Figure 4- The Four Phases

The Eight Trigrams and the Pre-heaven Diagram 先天八卦

With the eight trigrams, Taoists have isolated Qi's transformation process at eight particular and distinct moments. The Eight Trigrams are: Qian 乾 – maximum Yang, Xun 巽 – beginning Yin, Kan 坎 – (mostly) Yin, Gen 艮 – ending Yang, Kun 坤 – maximum Yin, Zhen 震 – beginning Yang, Li 離 – (mostly) Yang, and Dui 兌 – ending Yin. If the Eight Trigrams are placed in order around a circle they represent the natural cycle of change from Yang to Yin and Yin to Yang, and create the pre-heaven diagram (先天). The pre-heaven diagram describes perfect balance and the underlying forces of movement/Qi in a universe without conflict. This perfectly balanced transformation of Qi is called the “The True Unified Qi of Pre-Heaven” (先天真之一氣) which, like Wuji, is formless and indistinguishable.

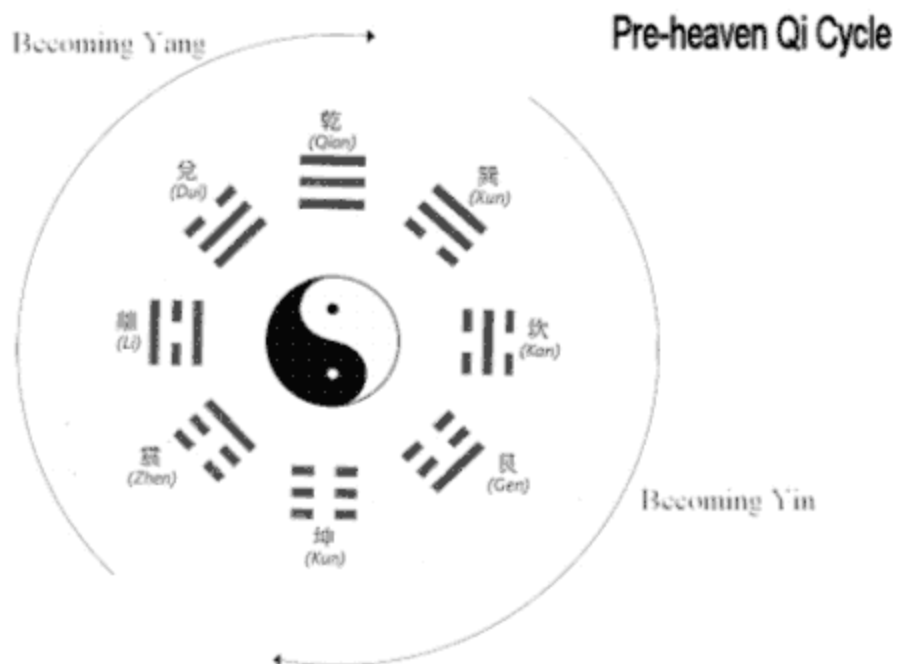


Figure 5- Pre-Heaven Diagram

However, the extreme phases of Qian and Kun cannot exist long on the “real” world. The *Dao De Jing* reads, “*The movement of the Dao is like drawing a bow; the upper and lower parts are drawn to the center.*” Thus it is the Yin and Yang trigrams Li/fire and Kan/water, each of which contains a ‘balancing’ element of its counterpart that become the actual polar forces in the world. The result is the post-heaven diagram (後天) in which Li and Kan act as polar opposites.

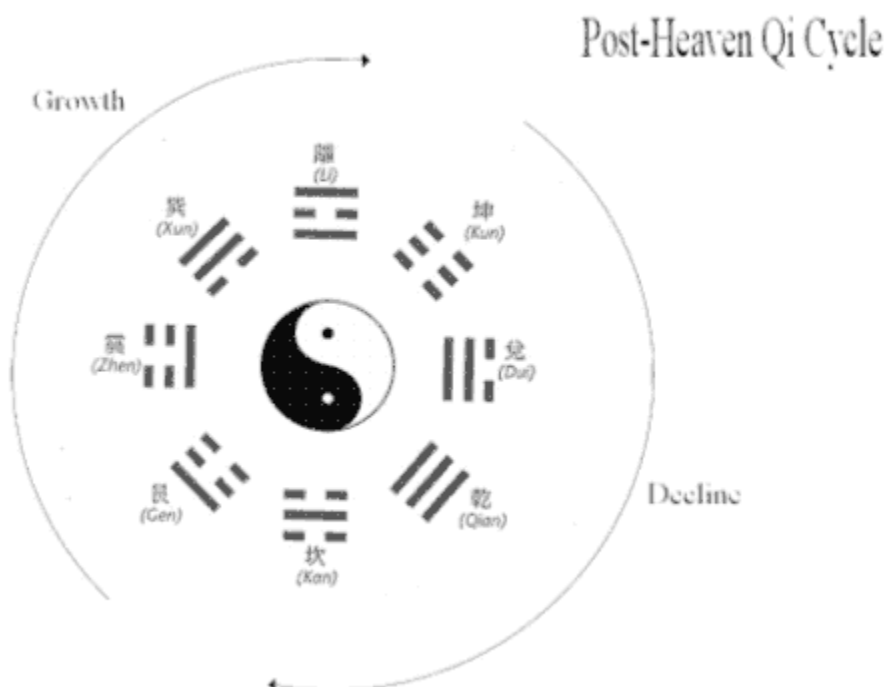


Figure 6- Post-Heaven Diagram

The Post-heaven Diagram 後天八卦

The post-heaven diagram describes dynamic change and the complex interplay of Qi. Li and Kan serve as polar opposites. Zhen and Xun, the two trigrams that represent initiating change are placed together in the east. Qian and Dui, the two trigrams that represent completion of change are placed together in the west. The trigrams of inertia/stillness, Kun and Gen are balanced in the southwest and northeast. The post-heaven diagram, also known as the Luotu (洛圖) diagram in Feng-shui, originally described the energy and movement of the sun over the five directions. The sun rose in the east, peaked in the south (Li/fire), and set in the west. The north (Kan/water) received the least Qi and the center remained a place of balance between the other four directions.

The post-heaven diagram also describes the cycle of growth and decline. This cycle becomes clear if we combine the two “growth” trigrams, Zhen and Xun, and the two completion trigrams, Qian and Dui, into one. This simplification yields the following sequence: growth (Zhen & Xun), nourishment (Li/fire), maturation (Kun), completion/decline (Dui & Qian), and dormancy/death (Kan), and return to earth (Gen); we then return to birth/growth. This is the Five Elements (五行) cycle.

The Five Elements 五行

The English translation of “elements” is inadequate and seems to be an attempt to harmonize the Taoist concept of Wuxing (五行) and the western concept of matter. This is a problem even in Chinese where the homonym “Xing 形 - shape” is often substituted for “Xing 行 - movement.” It is imperative however that we view the Five Elements not as components of matter, but rather as phases of Qi in motion.

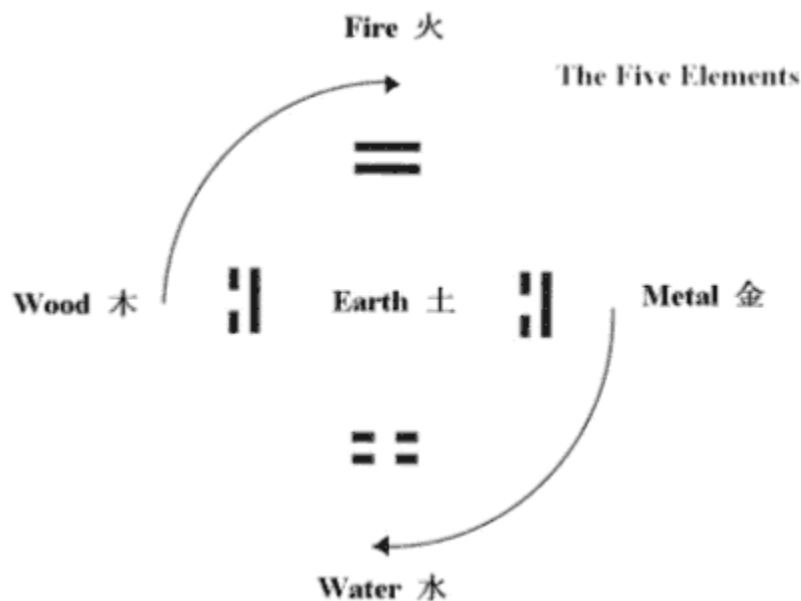


Figure 7- The Five Elements

As we have seen, the Five Elements are manifested after the second derivation of Yin and Yang – the Four Phases (四像). Each phase is assigned a direction. On the “flat” earth, the additional direction of “center” is included. This is why it is said that “Earth has five Qi’s.” (Heaven, thought to be round, is said to have six Qi’s, the four directions plus up and down). These five Qi’s are associated with the five directions and five seasons of Feng-shui and their related functions: Birth/growth, nourishment, maturation, completion/decline, and dormancy. These are each assigned an “element” that corresponds to these five functions: Wood (木), Fire (火), Earth (土), Metal (金), and Water (水) and their general functions are: growth, release,

inertia, gathering, and storage.

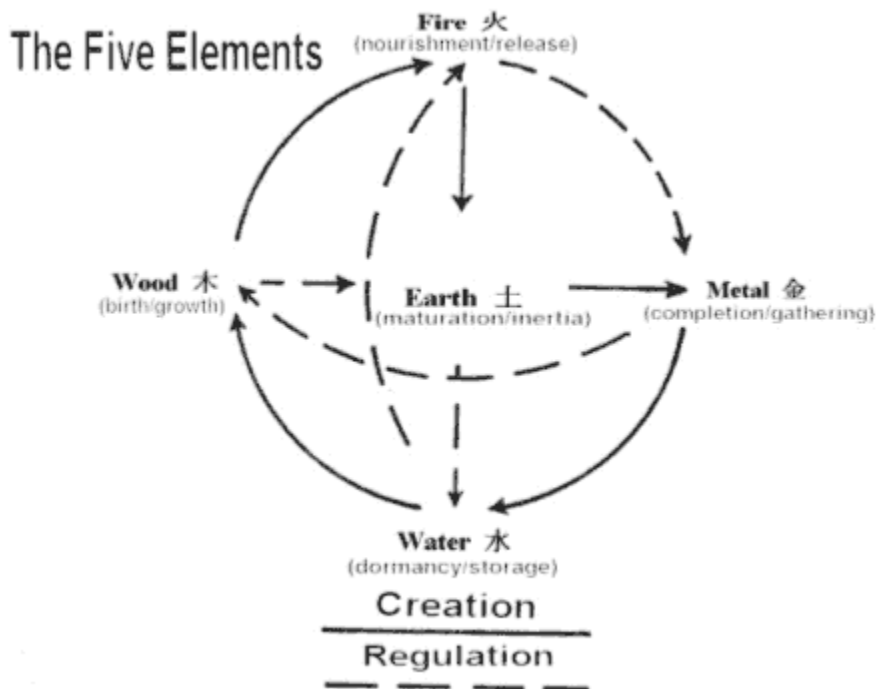


Figure 8- Creation Cycle and Regulation in the Five Elements

The Post-heaven Diagram and the Five Elements

後天八卦與五行

The Post-heaven diagram and the theory of the Five Elements are closely related. Both are used by Taoists to outline the cycle of Qi from birth to decline. The difference is that the post-heaven diagram is more detailed (being of the third derivation of Yin/Yang) and is used analytically in the study of Qi by consulting the Yijing (易經) or expanding the diagram into the Nine-Palace (九宮) formation. Usage of the Five Elements (which is of the second derivation of Yin/Yang and thus closer to Wuji), on the other hand, tends to be more intuitive and is accomplished by assigning relative characteristics to each element and then applying the laws of mutual nourishment and restraint. In effect, the Five Elements are a means to intuit the “flavor” of Qi and its transformation.

The relationships between these two Qi analysis tools become evident if we add the Five Elements to the Post-heaven diagram.

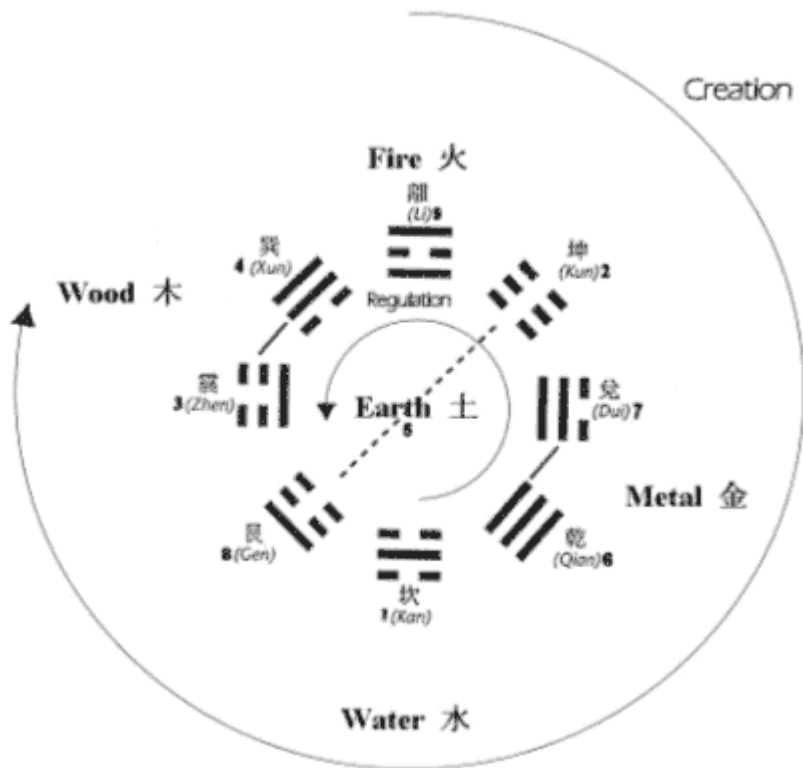


Figure 9- The Post-Heaven Diagram and Five Elements

Zhen and Xun belong to Wood; Li equates to Fire, Kun, Gen, and star 5/10 belong to Earth, Dui and Qian belong to Metal, and Kan to Water. A clockwise path along the outside of the diagram gives us the creation cycle (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) and a counter-clockwise path through the Nine-palace sequence yields the destructive cycle (Water, Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire). Qi passes through the central earth trigrams (Gen, Kun, and stars 5/10) after meeting each element. It is also important to note that Li and Kan are equivalent to the elements Fire and Water.

The Qi described by the Five Elements and the Post-heaven diagram is ever-changing. It is the Post-heaven Qi of absolute impermanence (後天無常之氣). The Post-heaven Qi, like Pre-heaven Qi, is formless and indistinguishable. However, whereas the Pre-heaven Qi is indefinite in its unity, the Post-heaven Qi is fathomless in its infinite capacity to change.

Unifying the Pre-heaven and Post-heaven Qi

將先天真之一氣與後天無常之氣渾然一體

One of the ultimate goals of the Taoist is to unify the Qi cycles of Pre-heaven and Post-heaven. In their unison, the Pre-heaven diagram cultivates the natural underlying movement of energy, while use of the Post-heaven diagram yields its applications.

This unification process involves returning the Pre-heaven Qi to Wuji, on the verge of creation, and returning the Post-heaven Qi to Taiji at the point where creation had just emerged. This process is thought to yield the Golden Elixir(金丹), which is to suspend the transformation of Qi in a void between existence and non-existence and action and non-action. This is Returning to the Void.

These relationships between the Pre-heaven Qi and Post-heaven Qi are significant to external, internal, and spiritual training.

From the above discussion we have seen how the Taoist theories of The Heavenly Branches and Earthly Stems, Taiji, the Pre-heaven diagram, the Post-heaven diagram, and the Five Elements all describe Qi's waxing and waning cycles. We have also seen that a key Taoist ideal is to unify the Pre-heaven Unified Qi and the endlessly transforming Post-heaven Qi. With this in mind, let us now look into their applications to the internal martial arts.

Internal Martial Arts 內家武功

There are numerous schools and branches of internal martial arts. However, the most widely accepted and propagated styles are three: Taiji-quan (太極拳), Xingyi-quan (形意拳), and Bagua-zhang (八卦掌). It is not in the scope of this article to give a detailed analysis of movement/Qi in each of these styles, but rather to give a general analysis of martial Qi training and applications according to the above described Taoist theories. In this discussion we will first analyze external training (外功), or physical techniques, and then discuss internal (內功) and spiritual training (神功).

External Training 外功

External training is conditioning the physical body and perfecting techniques. In internal martial arts this training emphasizes practicing from slow to fast and from soft to hard. It is said:

*Internally train to unify the breath,
externally train the muscles, bones, and skin.
In combat one will have abundant strength
if one's strength stems from Qi.
The key to training Qi is to be slow and relaxed,
the key to using Qi is to be violent and quick.
The techniques of slow and relaxed/violent and quick,
must be mastered to the utmost in every single breath.*

In internal martial arts, the training sequences are performed slowly in order to relax the body, eliminate tension, and unify the mind and body. In combat the techniques are sped up and Qi is released in what is called emitting “Jin.” Jin (勁) is applied Qi, which is defined as a combination of physical strength (力) and uninhibited Qi/movement. The “slow” Pre-heaven training methods of meditation and Long-form practice cultivate the Qi, while the “fast” Post-heaven training teaches releasing Qi, as Jin, and its applications.

Sun Lu-tang states in his thesis of Bagua-zhang:

The Pre-heaven provides a frame for the Post-heaven and in the Post-heaven are the applications of the Pre-heaven. Without the Pre-heaven the Post-heaven has no foundation and without the Post-heaven the Pre-heaven cannot complete its form. Even though the Pre-heaven is the Post-heaven's foundation, if the Pre-heaven is without external form then it can only perform the Tao of non-action...however if it can borrow the body of the Post-heaven and carry out the Tao of action and change, then it will be able to compliment and complete the movement (Qi) of Pre-heaven...

The Pre-heaven is the invisible Jin of martial art techniques. Its harmonization forms the Original Unified Qi. As for the Post-heaven, form and body, and yin and yang arise from it.

As in the “Long form” of Taiji-quan, the form is deliberately slow without conflicting or excess movement/Qi. Emphasis is placed on clearly distinguishing Yin and Yang. This results in an emphasis on the Qian and Kun trigrams and the smooth, natural, and continuous cycle of change between them. This allows the practitioner to cultivate and understand the underlying Qi cycle and balanced change in the Pre-heaven diagram. In training according to the Pre-heaven diagram, Qi and Jin is circulated and transformed, but not released.



Figure 10- Pre-Heaven Qi in Peng

However, in combat the pre-heaven cycle cannot apply. One must counter conflicting forces and utilize and release Qi. This is accomplished by circulating Qi following the post-heaven diagram.

In using Post-heaven Qi, emphasis is placed on the movements of Li (releasing) and Kan (storing). This process of releasing and storing Qi is done in correlation with exhalation and inhalation. Whereas before with the pre-heaven diagram one is left vulnerable and overextended in Qian and Kun, following the post-heaven diagram, some of one's Qi is held back when emitting or withdrawing Qi. The motion/Qi is still continuous as it was when following the pre-heaven diagram, however the cycle of change is shorter and more dynamic, follows the Five Elements growth cycle, and allows for the release and storage of Qi and Jin.

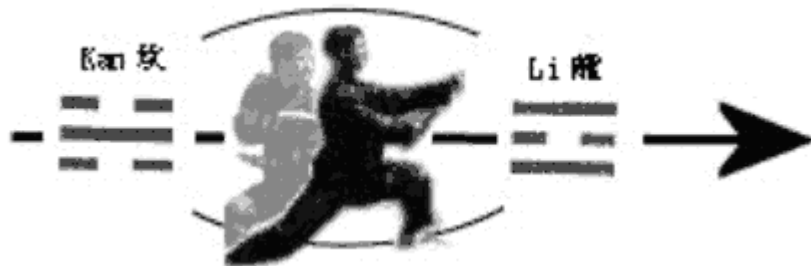


Figure 11- Post-Heaven Qi in Peng

Let us return to the diagram of the Post-heaven and Five Elements to see how they relate to technique and emitting Qi. For purpose of example, let us use Yang Style Taiji's "Peng" technique. The two feet occupy the positions of Kun and Gen (Earth) and facilitate stability and balance. The Dantian (丹田) occupies the star 5/10 and is the center of the movement. When the weight is on the rear foot in the "hold the ball" position, one is in Kan (Water). As one initiates forward movement one moves into Zhen and Xun (Wood). Once the forward motion reaches its furthest extent, it is in Li (Fire), and as the motion reverses it is in Dui and Qian (Metal).



Figure 12- The Five Elements in Peng

The Five Elements and Emptiness and Fullness 五行虛實

Let us analyze the act of releasing and storing Qi according to the Five Elements.

When one is in the position Water/Kan, one is storing Qi. In this position one can neutralize the fully



emitted force of your opponent (Fire - releasing), but because the stance is empty and withdrawn, if the opponent penetrates and occupies one's center (Earth – central balance) one can be easily thrown.



When in the Wood phase of the technique one can use growing and wrapping Jin to uproot the opponent's balance (Earth – central balance). However, while one extends oneself forward, one is vulnerable to plucking, tearing, and grabbing Jin's (Metal – gathering).



When in Fire/Li one is able to emit Qi to overwhelm the opponent as he is moving backwards (Metal – gathering). If he is too quick however, and can reach Water before one's Fire is released, one will be neutralized.



When in Earth one can throw an opponent, who's stance is empty (Water - storing), but are vulnerable to growing and sticking Jin's (Wood).



In Metal one can pull an opponent's forward momentum (Wood) off balance with a sudden tug, but are open to an overwhelming attack from fire.

Any movement or technique that emits Qi or Jin can be analyzed with the Five Elements and countered in a manner that does not require a direct clash of opposing forces. This is the study of neutralizing Qi (化法) and using the full to strike the empty (以實功虛). An internal martial artist faces battle the way Zhuangzi's butcher faces his ox. He first meets it in spirit (Qi), and then using his blade, attacks the empty places. The butcher and the martial artist never meet force with force. Their opponent collapses and comes apart seemingly without effort. They never dare to "strike bone" and so their energy is never dulled or diminished.

Thus, In internal martial arts, the key is to intuit the nature (element) of the opponent's movement/Qi, and neutralize his force (化法) by attacking the "emptiness" (虛) of his technique with a "full" (實) movement of the appropriate element.

Technique and Style 武術與拳法

Our discussion of the Five Elements's applications has thus far been limited to the analysis of physical motion. It can however also be used to categories and analyze technique, as in Xingyi-quan's five fists. In addition, the theory of Five Elements extends to personality, spirit, and fighting style. For instance in Qi Shan Shen Quan (七山神拳), Seven animal styles are aggregate into the Five Elements. The Tiger style (Fire) is characterized by quick strikes, the crane by balance and flexibility (Wood), snake by fluid movements and empty stances (Water), eagle and monkey by grabbing and tricky movements (Metal), and dragon and phoenix that contain trapping and throwing techniques (Earth).

The tiger can overwhelm the eagle and monkey, but cannot strike the snake and succumbs to its venom. The Snake in turn is trapped by the dragon. The Dragon attacks the crane, but the crane guarding its nest leaves no place to enter. The tricky monkey and the eagle, however, are able to throw off the crane's balance and defeat him. They in turn are beaten by the tiger.

In a similar manner every movement, martial technique, and all styles of martial arts can be approached by the Five Elements theory and countered by attacking emptiness with fullness. When the internal martial artist engages in combat, these principles are the key to victory.

These principles of Emptiness and Fullness and the five elements are essential elements of the internal martial artist's strategy. These principles are found in the Art of War in the following passage:

"The martial artist's form is like that of water. The form of water avoids the high and favors the low. As for the martial artist, he avoids the full and attacks the empty. Water meets the earth

and accordingly its course is determined. Likewise, the warrior meets his enemy and lays the path to victory. Thus, the warrior's movements and stance must vary boundlessly, just as water is infinitely formless. The ability to achieve victory through meeting changes in the opponent's condition is called 'Spiritual Power.' Therefore, if the Five Elements change without bound, there will be victory and as the Four Seasons go round endlessly your position will be secure. Change as the days grow long and short and as the moon waxes and wanes."

This is the secret of attacking emptiness with fullness as explained by Sunzi. As we see, the key to victory is in making one's own movements "formless" through infinite and spontaneous change (Post-heaven Qi) and then attacking the opponent where he is vulnerable. In this passage Sunzi mentions "Spiritual Power" (神力) and the art of "meeting the enemy" (因敵). To see how this is accomplished, let us first discuss internal training.

Internal Training 內功

According to traditional East Asian medical theory, human Qi exists in three forms: Jing-Qi (精氣), Xue-Qi (血氣), and Shen-Qi (神氣). These are the "Three Treasures" (三寶) of Qigong. Jing-Qi, "essence," is described as pre-natal Qi acquired while in the womb and is stored in the kidneys and bone-marrow after birth. Jing-Qi also has critical reproductive properties.

Xue-Qi, "blood Qi" is the Qi of metabolism and is usually referred to simply as Qi. Xue-Qi nourishes the body's organs and is circulated and cultivated throughout the body by Qigong and internal martial artists. Xue-Qi is stored in the Dantian, is "burned" at the middle burner (solar plexus), where the inner Qi of the lower organs meets external Qi from the lungs, and is converted into Shen-Qi at the "third eye" (上丹田).

Shen-Qi, "spiritual Qi," is the most refined form of Qi in the human body. It dwells in the heart, or mind, and its cultivation is said to yield "mystic" powers which can lead to enlightenment.

In cultivating Qi, one converts the stored pre-birth Jing-Qi and converts it into Xue-Qi (煉精化氣). This Xue-Qi meets external Qi in the middle burner and facilitates metabolism. Xue-Qi can then be led to the third-eye and converted into Shen-Qi (煉氣化神). These systemic processes are automatic. However, through Qigong training, as the cultivation of Shen-Qi becomes advanced, one can "refine the spirit and return to emptiness" (煉神還虛) and reach enlightenment.

Humans as a Small Universe 人身之小天地

The human body, as the third creative power, is seen as a miniature universe. The natural circulation of Qi (Xue-Qi) in the body flows through twelve meridians (十二經), which follow the energy cycle of the Twelve Earthly Branches. Internally, the circulation of Qi in the 5 viscera (五臟) or Yang organs, (heart, spleen, lungs, kidneys, and liver) corresponds to the Qi flow of the Ten Celestial Stems and their Qi circulation follows Five Elements theory. Thus, Qi in the meridians flows according to the 12 watches of the day, while the Qi of the five viscera follows the five seasons. In this way the Qi flow of the outside universe matches the Qi circulation within the human body.

The body also contains eight Qi reservoirs (八脈). Whereas the meridians transport Qi, the reservoirs store it. These reservoirs are important to Qigong and internal martial arts as they are the vessels through which Qi is gathered, stored, and cultivated. The most important of these are the Governing (督脈) and Conception vessels (任脈), which facilitate the Li/fire path, and the Thrusting vessel (衝脈/spine), which facilitates the Kan/water path of Qi circulation.

The goal of Qigong and internal martial arts are to unify the Qi of heaven, earth, and man in the human body. As the body is a miniature universe, the practitioner can lead Qi on "journeys" throughout this universe. In leading and transporting Qi, the Taoist seeks harmony between heaven and earth within himself. This is accomplished by quieting the five viscera and six bowels and the Qi in the 12 meridians, such that a pre-heaven state of harmony, without detrimental conflict is achieved. The Five Elements of the body's Qi are also harmonized such that each organ nourishes and keeps in check the other organs. If the body's Qi is in harmony, then the system will create positive feedback and continue to grow and one's Qi will be in harmony with the Qi of heaven and earth.



Figure 13- Humans as a Small Universe

Refining the Spirit and Returning to the Void 煉神還虛

The pre-Qin Taoist adept, Guigu-zi (鬼谷子 - The Master of Ghost Valley), in the text attributed to him, states:

“Striving through non-action, quiet the five viscera and harmoniously circulate the six bowels. Carefully guard the (four elements of the mind) ‘vital,’ ‘creative,’ ‘ethereal,’ and ‘corporeal’ spirits, without disturbing them. Then one will be able to peer inward and listen reflectively. Settle the ultimate void of one’s thoughts and await the coming and going of the spirit.”

In Taoist thought, the mind is visualized as hollow and filled with Qi. It is a Creative Power that, like bellows and pipes, creates more with movement/Qi. The more Qi there is the more music that can be produced. The mind possesses creative powers the same way the expanse of Qi between heaven and earth create all phenomena. The more Qi there is (the more movement and change) the more refined and more divine the spirit of man becomes. The key is to quiet the void, the expanse of Qi in the mind and origin of creation and thought, and harmonize its energies. This is refining the spirit and returning to the void.

There are two parts to the process of refining the spirit (Shen-Qi). The first is advancing the fire (進火) and the second is returning to emptiness (反虛). Advancing the fire is converting Jing-Qi to Xue-Qi, circulating and storing Xue-Qi, transforming Xue-Qi into Shen-Qi, and finally cultivating Shen-Qi. Returning to emptiness is, as described above, quieting and harmonizing the “music,” Qi, of the mind’s bellows.

Let us now analyze this process and the Taoist concept of the mind and its structure.

The Five Elements and the Taoist Mind 五行心意

As the external training and physical world can be analyzed through use of the Five Elements, so too can internal training and the mind. The Huangdi Neijing (黃帝內經) gives us the following aggregate parts of the mind: Fire – Shen (神), Earth – Yi (意), Metal – Po (魄), Water – Zhi (志), and Wood – Hun (魂). Guigu-zi gives us: Fire – Shen (神), Earth – Zhi (志), Metal – Po (魄), Water – Jing (精), and Wood – Hun (魂). These are not contradictory if we take into account the meanings of the Five Elements.

The elements of the Taoist mind can be described using three pairs of Chinese characters: Jing-Shen (精神) - vitality, which describes the energy states of the Three Treasure or three Qi’s in the body, Hun-po (魂魄) - soul, which describes the nature

and “feeling” of the dynamic mind, and Yi-zhi (意志) - ideas, which denotes thought and cognizance. These are aggregated pursuant to the laws of the Five Elements.

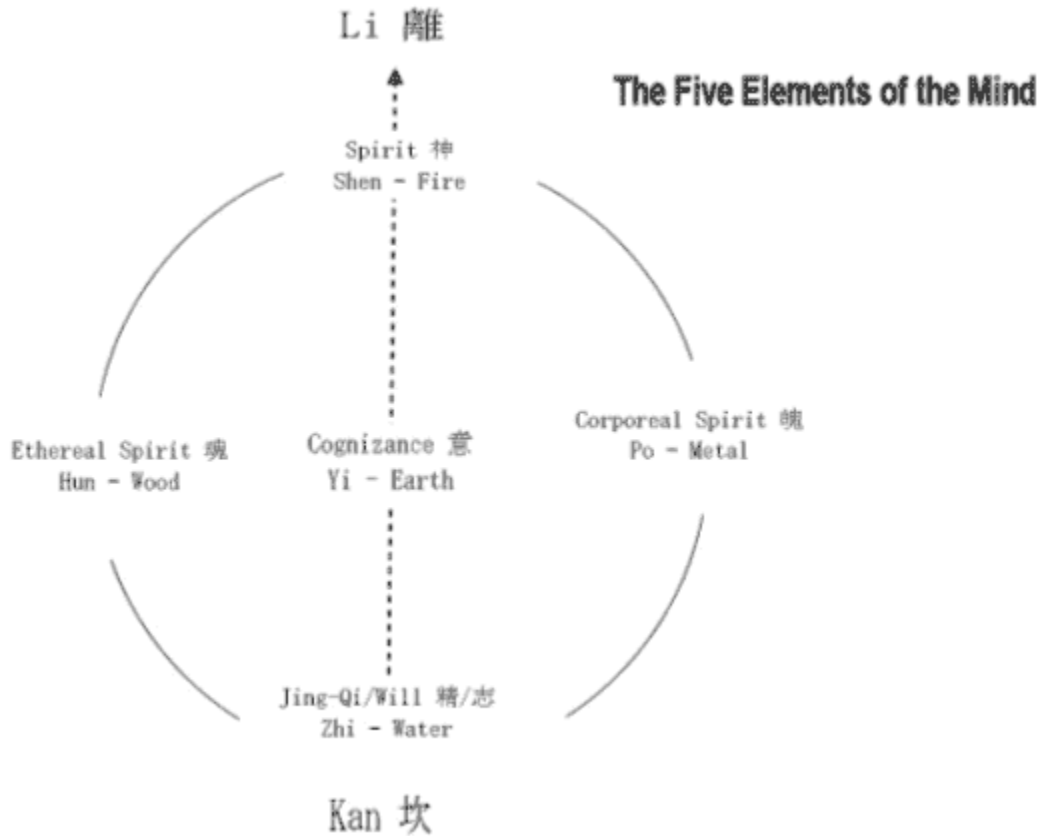


Figure 14- The Five Qi's of the Taoist Mind

The mind is aggregated into the Five Elements as follows:

Fire – *releasing/breaking through*: Shen is the characteristic of the mind that is “Divine.” It can transcend thought and possesses creative and artistic powers. It can “break through” the earthly world and so its cultivation is said to lead to enlightenment. The emotions of fire are bliss and excessive joy (insanity).

Earth – *center/inertia*: Yi and Zhi here mean cognitive thought and ideas. All other areas of the mind are centered around thought. The emotions of Earth are pensiveness and worry.

Metal – *gathering/decline*: Po is the corporeal spirit. It is the intuitive mind and is likened to the instinctive minds of animals. The emotions of metal are calmness and sadness.

Water – *dormancy/storage*: Jing is stored Qi. Zhi, “willpower”, is reserve. That is why Jing and Zhi both belong to water. Stored Jing-qi fuels Shen-qi through its transformation into Qi and Zhi cools and regulates Shen’s fire and prevents it from burning out of control (i.e. going insane). The emotions of Water are reserve and fear.

Wood – *growth/initiative*: Hun is the ethereal spirit. It is agile and intelligent (possessing the quality Ling 靈), possessing qualities that set humans above animals. Hun is associated with emotion and higher thought processes. The emotions of Wood are courage and anger.

Advancing the Fire: Kan and Li. 進火: 坎離之功

In Qigong the highest levels of training involve creating and cultivating Shen-Qi. This requires one to lead Xue-Qi through

the Governing and Conception Qi reservoirs, the Li/fire pathway, and concentrating on the “third eye” in order to cultivate Shen-Qi. It is believed that if the Shen-Qi is released through the third-eye a “spirit embryo” (神胎) is born. Once this stage is reached, the Taoist is said to be able to communicate with and mediate the forces of heaven and earth through his spirit (Shen).

However this process of advancing the fire along the Li pathway and cultivating and releasing Shen-Qi is extremely dangerous. If the “bellows” of the mind and the Five Elements are not in perfect harmony, then the fire of Shen-Qi may burn wildly and out of control. Shen, in the Five Elements of the mind, possesses creative powers and if the fire of the mind is not carefully regulated, then these creative powers will begin to manifest itself in wild illusions, crazy behavior, and insanity. This is a condition known

as “Catching on fire and becoming possessed by demons” (走火入魔). Dr. Daniel Amos and Ma Kai Sun recorded a practice session of Shenda (神打) martial artists who had been possessed by spirits. Included in their findings were such actions as: 1) Swallowing an enormous quantity of water and going to sleep, 2) trying to play chess without a chessboard, and 3) rolling around on the ground and bumping one’s head against a wall.

It is quite salient that advancing the fire is a precarious process. In order to carefully guard and regulate the fire, Qi is lead through the Kan/water path through the spine (Thrusting vessel). The kidneys, the water organs, are about the lower spine and the Kan path leads water-Qi to the third eye, cooling Shen-Qi.

Actualizing the Mind’s Intent, Cultivating Willpower, and Raising the Spirit

實意養志提神

In Qigong it is a common inculcation that the mind is used to regulate the heart and lead the Qi (以意運氣). I take this to be an idea of mostly Buddhist influence. The older Taoist theory, based on the Five Elements is carefully outlined in the Guigu-zhi. There are similarities; ultimately it is Yi that is used to lead the Qi and raise the Spirit. However, the Taoist model closely follows Five Elements theory and the principles of Kan and Li.

Let us return to the Five Elements diagram of the mind. Fire is regulated by water, which in turn is regulated by earth. Thus by actualizing one’s thoughts/intent (earth), one can control one’s willpower and restraint (Kan/water). In this way, one is able to regulate the fire and “keep a cool head.” The process in the Guigu-zhi is three fold. First thought/intent must be actualized (實意); it must be made full, substantial, and true. Next the willpower is cultivated (養志) so that it is able to control the spirit. Finally the spirit is raised (提神) and can be trained to meet outside forces.

As for thoughts (earth), they are controlled by the intelligent spirit, Hun (wood), which in turn is kept in check and balanced by the Po, intuitive mind (metal). As Shen-qi is cultivated, the fire if the Spirit returns to feed and nourish one’s cognitive powers, as fire gives rise to earth in the Five Elements creation cycle.

In this way, each of the Five Elements is in perfect harmony and produces positive feedback while maintaining sufficient regulating power so that Shen-Qi can be properly and safely cultivated.

Returning to the Void 煉神還虛 - 復歸無極

The *Dao De Jing* states: “Return is the movement of the Tao.” Once Shen-Qi is refined, the next step is to return the Spirit to emptiness. On this, Sun Lu-tang explains:

“The Pre-heaven diagram describes the cycle of Unified Qi, which is merged with the underlying principles of the universe. The Post-heaven diagram differentiates between Yin Qi and Yang Qi, and in its changes are the catalysts of creation.

The marvel of Non-action is achieved by following the Pre-heaven Yang Qi (that is moving towards creation - Taiji) while going against its flow. In this way one can store away the Yang Qi of Pre-heaven and transform the Yin Qi of the Post-heaven so that they can return to their likenesses just before creation (Taiji).

The key to Action is to be able to go against the flow of the Yin Qi (that is returning to its origin - Wuji) while following it back to its source. In this way the Post-heaven Yin Qi and Pre-heaven Yang Qi can return to their likenesses just after creation (Taiji) ... and return to the embryonic Unified Qi. Follow and transform the Yin Qi of Post-Heaven and protect this Unified Qi.”

From this passage we see that the goal of returning the Spirit is to return the creative power of the Spirit to the original state of creation. This is accomplished by going against, or slowing down, the flow of Qi in the Pre-heaven and Post-heaven cycles, thereby regulating its transformation. In “Long-form” practice and in sitting meditation, the Taoist follows the natural flow of Pre-heaven Qi as one “advances the fire” and cultivates the Yang Qi of creation (Taiji). At the same time one must actively slow down the Qi and quiet it (還稀) so that it settles into its pre-existence (Wuji) state.

The Post heaven Yin Qi, which is returning to pre-existence must also be cultivated. The Taoist circulates Qi following the creation cycle of Post-heaven Qi, but at the same time emphasizes the reverse flow of Qi – the Five Elements regulation cycle. In this way, by keeping the organs and their associated energies regulated and balanced, the Post-heaven Qi can be quieted so that it returns to the state just after creation (五氣朝元).

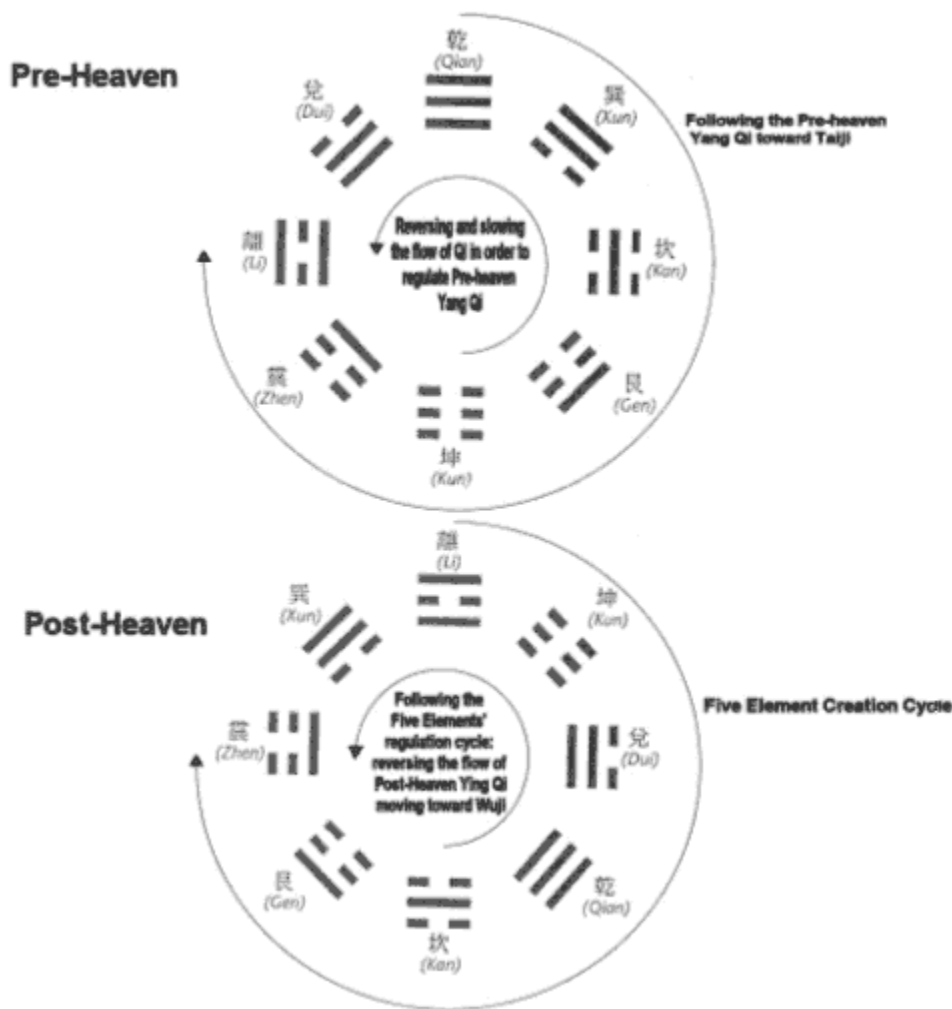


Figure 15- Returning to the Void

As the Pre-heaven Qi is settled and approaches creation, yet is not released, and as the Post-heaven Qi is returned to its Wuji state, yet is still in existence, with the unification of the two Qi cycles – a void that is neither existence nor non-existence is created. This is the furnace (丹爐) of the “Golden Elixir,” where the Spirit can dwell and be born. This is where internal training is consummated and ultimately the refined, ethereal, Shen-Qi is “Planted in the void of nothing whatsoever.” This practice is said to lead to enlightenment.

Spiritual Training - Meeting in Spirit 神功氣合

The Guigu-zi reads:

“Those who are skilled, in that their thoughts can penetrate the conditions of others, must quiet the five spirits (Qi) internally and externally observe the emptiness and fullness of others. When they move into action, they do not lose fullness while diverting and dispersing Qi.”

The first step in confronting external forces is to quiet the mind's void and harmonize its five Qi's. Then the spirit will be ready to penetrate the external conditions. Next one is able to observe the strengths and weaknesses (虛實) of outside forces using a balanced mind and a quickened spirit. Lastly one strikes the empty spaces, where the opponent is weak, while maintaining one's own fullness (以實攻虛). Such an attack is irresistible and infallible.

In addition, the martial artist in combat will utilize the “Qihe” (氣合), or battle cry. Each of the Five Elements has a vocal sound associated with it. By utilizing the Qihe, the martial artist is able to condition himself to: balance energy and assess the battle (earth), regulate the breath, gather Qi, and cool the organs (metal), raise the spirit and emit Qi (fire), calm the spirit and conserve Qi (water), and increase volition (wood). Emotional Qi, like Jin, is released according to Five Elements theory so that the opponent's empty spirit will be destroyed by one's full spirit. That is why the battle cry is called Qihe, “Meeting of Spirits(Qi).”

Storing and Emitting Jin 畜發勁法

The key to storing and emitting Jin is the unification of Qi. This transformation of Qi involves Kan, the storage and conversion of Jing-Qi, and Li, releasing Jin in the form of Shen-Qi. External, internal, and spiritual training must all be combined and carefully coordinated for it to be possible to manifest Jin.

On the storage and release of Jin, General Yue Fei in his thesis of Xingyi-quan states:

“The body is like a bowstring; the hands are like arrows. Initiate movement in the hands like lightning – lightning so fast one cannot close one's eyes quickly enough. Strike like thunder – thunder so swift that one cannot cover one's ears in time... the heart's fire (Spirit) must be fierce. The five elements are metal, wood, fire, water, and earth – the flaming fire Qi ascends while the water Qi descends. My five viscera and their five Qi's each contribute their power so that my technique is flawless.”

From Yuefei's statement, we see that Jin is the storage and release of Qi through the physical body. In emitting Jin, first the intent is generated. Next Qi is gathered and stored through inhalation and is released through exhalation. In every technique, this process goes from Kan/water – storage to Li/fire – release, following the Post-heaven and Five Elements cycles described in our discussion of external training.

— Kan坎 ————— Li離 —→

Storing Jin 蓄勁
Condensing Jing-qi 斂氣於髓

Releasing Jin 發勁
Releasing Shen-qi 達氣於神



五行 Element	土 Earth	金 Metal	水 Water	木 Wood	火 Fire
氣 Qi	立 Equilibrium	收 Gathering	藏 Storing	動 Initiating	發 Release
五臟 Viscera	脾 Spleen	肺 Lungs	腎 Kidneys	肝 Liver	心 Heart
心意 Mind	思慮 Cognizance	鎮靜 Calmness	克心 Reserve	勇氣 Volition	明神 Quickened Spirit
精神 Spirit	意 Yi Cognizance	魄 Po Corporeal Spirit	志 Zhi Willpower	魂 Hun Ethereal Spirit	神 Shen Quickened Spirit
氣合 Qihe	呼 Hu	嘿 Hei	哼 Heng	呵 He	哈 Ha

Figure 16- Kan/Li, Jin, and the Five Elements

First, the mind creates the intent (earth - 呼) to move and utilize Qi, giving it direction. The lungs (metal) take in air with the Qihe sound of metal (嘿 - drawn out gasp as if weeping). At the same time Qi is absorbed through the pores of the skin and the joints. Next, Qi is gathered deep within the bones, which are associated with water and store Jing-Qi, with the Qihe sound of water (哼 - sudden gasp as if startled). After the Qi is stored, the Qihe sound of wood (呵 - deep shout like a growl) is used to raise volition and initiate the release of Jin, which is then emitted with the Qihe sound of fire (哈 - clear shout like laughter).

As for the energy transformations of the Kan/Li Jin emitting process, external Qi drawn in by the lungs meets Jing-Qi in the bones and is condensed. This storage of Qi is Kan. The Qi is then circulated and led to the extremities and limbs to energize one's martial technique. Lastly, the spirit, Shen-Qi, is manifested and released through the Qihe. This release is Li. The process of emitting Jin, from Kan to Li, is a quickened form of the process of Refining Spirit; Jing-Qi is converted into Shen-Qi and the spirit is raised and released through the Qihe so that the spirit can observe, communicate with, and overcome external forces, spirits, and Qi.

Once the martial artist is able to master spiritual training and the emission of Jin, the practitioner then combines the external, internal, and spiritual trainings into one Qi. Qi is movement. The “denser” (濁) Qi of external movement and Jing-Qi is treaded into the “lighter” (清) Qi of internal circulation. Finally, these two are combined with the lightest, refined, Qi of the spirit. The denser Kan/Water Qi is condensed and stored in the bones and the ethereal Li/Fire Qi is released and manifested through the spirit.

This unification of external, internal, and spiritual Qi must be effectuated in each and every movement. This is the meaning of “moving with unified Qi.” The body's actions and movements, from the coarse physical body, to refined Qi and spiritual energies must all be coordinated and concentrated into one movement – one Qi.

This Jin training ultimately leads to Spiritual Power, the highest level of martial arts practice. As the spirit is raised and

returned to its unadulterated state in the void, man's Creative Power is actualized to the utmost. This is transforming martial training into a living art. On this General Yue Fei states:

“Achieving extraordinary technique is entirely a matter of making the techniques alive. One must be able to go and arrive, be soft and hard, attack and withdraw. When still, be firm as a mountain. The techniques must be made hard to discern through variations of Yin and Yang, as inexhaustible as heaven and earth. The Qi must be as abundant as a great storehouse, as vast and boundless as the billowing of the four oceans, and as brilliant as the sun, moon, and stars.”

As the morning dew, springtime rains, autumnal wind, and wintry snow are all of the same element, yet transformed and differentiated at specific moments, Qi too is ultimately one, but it is captured at particular moments and categorized. This play of Qi's flow and ebb and its transformation and unification into one body is the way (Tao) to achieve natural harmony – the more refined the Qi becomes through boundless change, the more marvelous are its creative powers.

Harmonizing the Tao – Combining External, Internal, and Spiritual Training

與天道合 - 將外內神功三者結合為一

We have seen that internal martial arts training involves external, internal, and spiritual elements. When the Qi of all three of these elements are mastered and combined, the practitioner achieves “spiritual power” (神力). With spiritual power, the Taoist is able to unify the three creative powers, harmonize heaven and earth, return to the void, observe the inner workings of the Tao, manifest one's spirit, and meet with and harmonize external spirits and forces.

In internal martial arts, through Jin training, spiritual power is trained and forged to the utmost in each and every breath. This is accomplished by combining the Pre-heaven and Post-heaven Qi cycles, unifying heaven and earth in the small universe of the human body, quieting the mind's bellows, harmonizing its energies, and then observing external conditions while maintaining inner quietude. The practitioner, by quickening his spirit is able to carry it into the world, succeeding not only in form, but in spirit as well.

The Taoist adept is likened to a vessel that stores and emits moving energy, Qi, and carries the creative Spirit. As an “empty yet inexhaustible” vessel, the Taoist possesses the power to resist, follow, and mediate the external forces of heaven, earth, and the all myriad beings.

Furthermore, through Jin training, the art of transforming Qi (化法) is refined through endless events of change, as Shen-Qi is withdrawn and released. Spiritual training becomes an art as one's creative power is expressed freely, following the natural Tao, and the bounds of one's spirit become bright and uninhibited. Therefore, the ultimate goal of this martial training is not to kill, but rather to fully actualize the creative power of the spirit.

Conclusion 結論:

We have seen the way in which Taoist and internal martial art adepts attempt to unite the three creative powers, maximize their spiritual powers, and harmonize and overcome conflicting forces through the transformation of energy and through the applications of Qi and Spirit through the theories and principles of Taoism. The Taoist strives first to know himself and then observes the outside world, countering emptiness with fullness, but never competing with direct head on force. The Taoist must know the proper times to yield, to resist, and when to serve as a vessel of spiritual mediation.

Ultimately such meditations allow the Taoist to realize the enlightened wisdom of the “*Fight of Non-contention and Achieving through Non-action*” (無爭之戰, 無為而為). Martial arts train the hands, feet, and unarmed body and forge them into a lethal weapon. This is a weapon that can never be removed from oneself; it must be carried everywhere. With it comes great responsibility. Internal training, for the Taoist, serves as a constant reminder of the Tao and its natural principles. Its true usage, at the highest level, is in the waking world - carrying a lethal power into our contentious world and yet never wielding it. That is the pinnacle of martial achievement. Likewise, for the Taoist, the spirit must be refined and pure. Carrying the spirit into the dusty world the Taoist leaves no trace, and so the spirit shall never be tainted or dull and remains perfect, complete, and free.

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