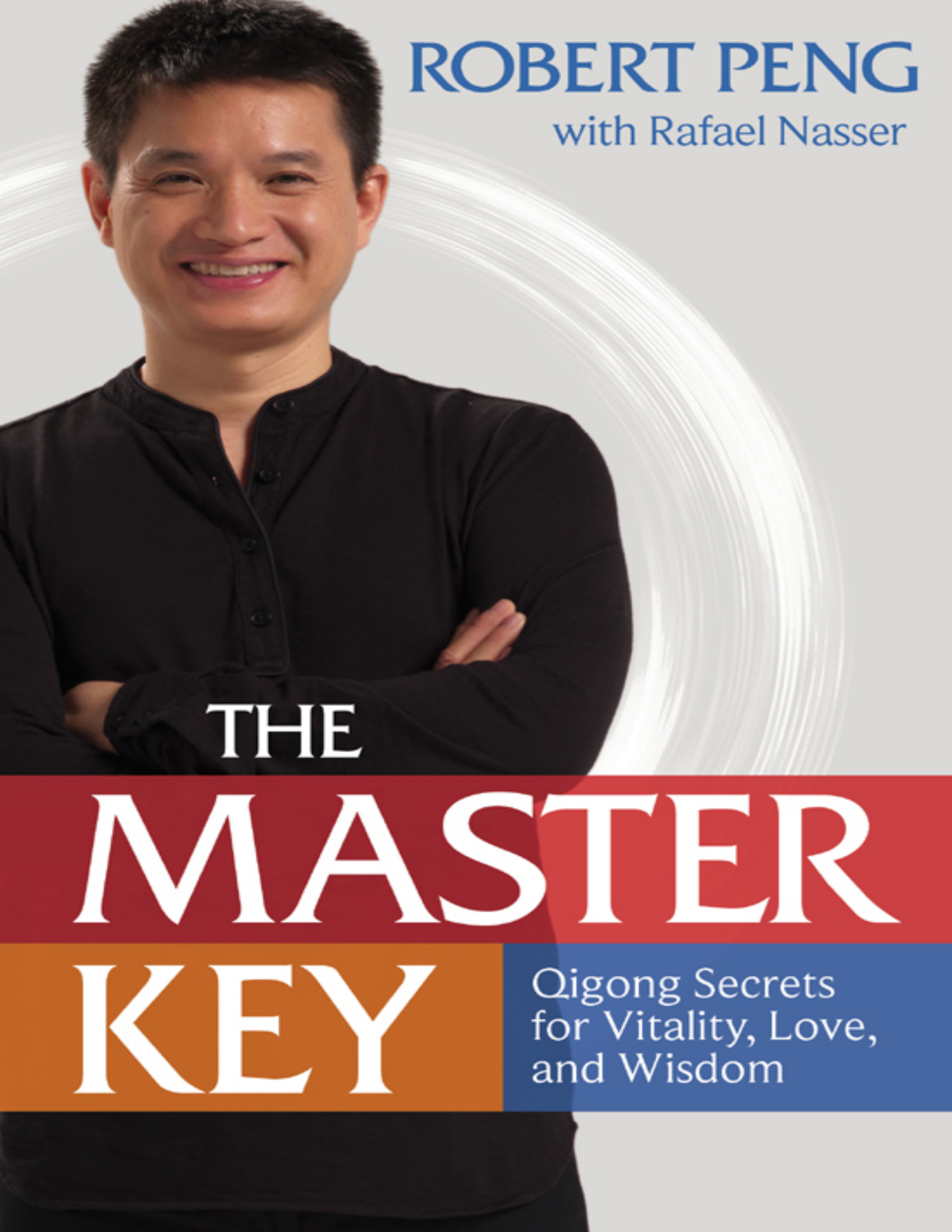




ROBERT PENG

with Rafael Nasser

THE

MASTER

KEY

Qigong Secrets
for Vitality, Love,
and Wisdom

THE MASTER KEY

Qigong Secrets For
Vitality, Love, and Wisdom

ROBERT PENG

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Dedicated to my master, Xiao Yao (1889–1985)

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Companion Videos Guide

Samples of instructional videos are available online as companions to the following exercises. View them at SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises.

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Introduction

I met my spiritual master, Xiao Yao (*shao-yaow*), when I was an eight-year-old boy suffering from a heart condition. As far as I could tell, he was simply a kind man who recounted colorful Chinese folktales with great animation. He brought mythological characters like the Monkey King to life, mimicking their gestures and voices with comical theatrical flair, transforming my world into an enchanted realm full of mystery and magic. I loved all the stories he told me, but as I look on our adventures, I now realize that none of them compare to the tale of the journey we shared.

Through my youthful eyes Xiao Yao looked like an ordinary man, although in actuality, he was a high-ranking Buddhist monk who possessed extraordinary spiritual powers that rivaled those described in his epic stories. He had spent most of his life meditating and praying in a peaceful monastery perched high up in the misty peaks of Hunan Province in China. Then, one day, the world around him was suddenly uprooted.

The Cultural Revolution swept across China in 1966 like wildfire, and within a few chaotic months the country changed in radical ways. Religion was outlawed and religious institutions were disbanded. Overnight, Xiao Yao's life was turned upside down. He relocated to Xiangtan, my hometown, two blocks away from where my family lived. There he took on a lowly, menial job. Eventually, our

destinies intertwined and he began to delight me with his stories.

In those days people didn't disclose much information about their past, especially if they had held significant positions that were no longer deemed socially acceptable. Since I didn't realize who my new friend really was, I had no way of knowing that while "Xiao Yao the storyteller" was entertaining me with his tales, "Xiao Yao the healer" was quietly curing my heart condition with his extraordinary healing powers. All I knew was that I liked this kind man who made me feel good.

One day Xiao Yao offered to teach me martial arts and guide me in my spiritual development. I accepted without hesitation. This was a dangerous proposition given the political climate, so I became his secret disciple, and I spent the next thirteen years studying a system called Dan Ming Qigong, which translates as Elixir Light Qigong. This system includes Daoist, Buddhist, and Shaolin practices intended to develop the body, mind, and spirit.

The word *Qigong* (pronounced *chee-gung* and sometimes spelled *Chi Kung*) is made up of two Chinese characters: *Qi* and *gong*. "Qi" refers to our Life Force, an invisible but discernible type of energy that permeates our bodies, much like an electromagnetic field, and powers our vital functions. We all have both *high energy* days and *low energy* days and the difference between them depends on the quality of our Qi. The second word, "gong," means work or practice.

Qigong, then, is the science of cultivating our Life Force through specific practices as well as the art of applying this energy in the service of the Dao, or the greater good. When we practice Qigong, *every* day can become a good day.

Xiao Yao embodied the benefits of Qigong. He constantly radiated an aura of happiness and peace that enriched the lives of everyone he touched. From the first moment I met him to the last time I saw him, he exuded this sparkling quality with unwavering ease.

By all reasonable accounts he should not have been a happy man, certainly not when we first met. Xiao Yao was then eighty-two years old. He had lost all the privileges, status, and authority associated with his former rank as a senior monk. He was working at an undesirable job seven days a week under meager conditions with no hope of advancement. He had lost contact with his former colleagues and disciples, and had no family or living relatives.

How did he maintain his boundless, positive well-being?

Xiao Yao used to say that we are all like beggars begging for scraps with a golden begging bowl—meaning that each one of us can access a priceless treasure that lies within reach of our fingertips. We simply don't realize it. The treasure my master was referring to is *happiness*.

We've all tasted happiness, that magical sense of well-being that arises when we come into harmonious alignment with the universe for no apparent reason. At these times we seek nothing, desire nothing, expect nothing, and want nothing. We are perfectly poised in the present moment. The mind is still. The heart is open. The body is calm. Life flows.

This state of contentment may last a minute, an hour, or a day, but then something jars us and the feeling flutters away like a little bird startled by a footstep. For most of us, happiness is a beautiful but fragile condition over which we have no control.

When we lose our happiness, we devise all sorts of strategies to recover it. We fill our begging bowls with more money, more fame, more pleasure, and more worldly success, only to find ourselves moving further away from our goal of being happy. But it is never too late to discover the authentic happiness that lies hidden within.

Picture yourself sitting in front of a treasure chest with a big padlock. From the outside, it looks like a wooden box with a rusty lock, the kind you might see in a pirate movie.

You try to pry it open, but the box is sturdy and the lock is stubborn, and even with a lot of effort you can't make progress. If you only possessed the right key, you would easily open it and gain access to invaluable wealth.

In fact, this vision describes the human condition. Inside you lies a priceless treasure. I was fortunate. Xiao Yao gave me the master key to unlock my spiritual wealth. He called this key the Four Golden Wheels. When you access the Four Golden Wheels, you are blessed with spiritual abundance.

These words sound nice, but what exactly do they mean in practical terms? What is spiritual wealth?

Imagine two distinct job offers coming in at the same time. Both sound equally good. Which one should you accept? You argue in favor of one offer convincingly, and then, the next minute, you argue in favor of the other with equal conviction. You could ask a friend for an opinion. However, his or her perspective may be no better informed than yours. Some dilemmas can't be resolved rationally. Logic has limits. But there is a quality that arises in human consciousness that allows us to manage muddled situations such as this one: wisdom. If you are able to mobilize your capacity for wisdom, you'll be naturally guided to the right choice without knowing exactly why. Over a lifetime, wisdom translates into the difference between a series of blessings and a string of bad choices that lead to regret. How much value should we place on wisdom? We can't; wisdom is a priceless treasure that lies within.

Now turn your attention to the most sensitive spot of your body—your heart. This organ pumps blood all day long and nourishes every cell with life-giving oxygen. But the heart does more than feed the flesh. Recall a tender moment filled with love. Where did you sense that experience? Not in your head. Not in your foot. Somewhere in the middle of your chest, in the area around your heart. Love and the heart are intimately connected. And what happens to a heart unable to express love? Imagine

someone you dearly care for walking up to you and saying, "I love you." But instead of repeating those words, your chest tightens and your heart contracts. You can't express the warmth you feel inside. Such a heart shatters easily, like glass, or hardens and numbs like unfeeling stone. Both of those conditions are symptoms of an impoverished heart.

How would you rate the strength of your heart? A weak heart is only able to generate the feeling of love under controlled and reassuring conditions. The rest of the time that heart feels pain or ends up hurting others. A stronger heart can feel love more often, even under some adversity. But a champion heart is able to generate the feeling of love unconditionally all the time. It shines endlessly like the sun above the clouds. Imagine the contribution a stronger heart would make to your life. Love is the second priceless treasure that lies within.

The third priceless treasure is vitality. Think back to a time when your vitality was low and you couldn't muster the power to do much. When the body feels weighted down, life begins to feel like a burden. Daily challenges become arduous and oppressive, and even opportunities become tiresome ordeals. We prefer to sit on a couch, watch television, and eat junk food to temporarily boost our energy level. A body unable to muster vitality is as much fun to operate as a car with a flat tire being pushed up a hill. A body brimming with vigor, however, conjures up a different image. Picture a wild stallion galloping exuberantly along the seashore. Imagine yourself as that stallion, overflowing with irrepressible passion as you explore the wonders of life.

Now picture two versions of yourself. In one, you are perpetually confused, unable to love, and chronically unmotivated. In the other, you are eminently wise, loving, and brimming with vitality. Realistically, your current condition lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Wise at times and confused at other times, capable of loving

some people some of the time, and vital under certain conditions. Wherever you stand in this spectrum, wouldn't it be nice to begin a journey from your lesser self to your greater self? Wouldn't it be nice to become spiritually wealthier?

As it turns out, there is a vast ocean of energy teeming within your body, and with the right key, this potential energy can be liberated and used to enrich your life with more wisdom, love, and vitality—a lot more than you might even imagine.

Xiao Yao's core teachings consist of a series of awakenings, empowerments, and exercises designed to liberate the hidden potential of your true self. I refer to this collection of Qigong practices as the master key. The material I present in this book is literally the key to higher wisdom, deeper love, and buoyant vitality. When these three qualities are developed and integrated into a seamless whole, you will experience true happiness. Happiness is the fourth priceless treasure that lies within.

Many years ago, Xiao Yao entrusted me with the key to an invaluable spiritual treasure, and in this book, I intend to pass that key on to you.

The book is divided into four parts:

Part 1—Journey from Xiangtan tells the story of my apprenticeship with Xiao Yao, my time at the university as both a student and teacher, and my emergence as a Qigong master in China and abroad ([chapters 1](#) through 5).

Xiao Yao was an incredible man with amazing powers, and we shared many thrilling adventures. Many of the events I describe in the early chapters might sound surreal because they defy the laws of physics. However, I witnessed all these events with my own eyes, and I can't deny my experience. For a long time I refrained from sharing these stories publicly, but I eventually discovered that people who heard them became profoundly inspired to study Qigong. Therefore, I decided to include them, for I trust these stories

will expand your vision of your own human potential and inspire your practice.

Part 2—Awakening the Four Golden Wheels introduces four *energy centers* that are located deep inside the body and make up the backbone of the human energy system. These energy centers form a network my master called the *Four Golden Wheels*. These Four Golden Wheels must be “awakened” before you can tap into the vast energy reserves they contain.

After presenting some basic Qigong skills ([chapters 6 and 7](#)), I guide you through a series of self-empowerment techniques that will awaken the Four Golden Wheels just as a spark plug ignites an engine ([chapters 8 through 10](#)). Awakening, empowering, and then integrating the Four Golden Wheels is the key to achieving real, sustainable happiness and spiritual well-being.

In the final two chapters we explore another important piece of the puzzle that contributes to real happiness: realizing our “true nature.” We answer this slippery question: *Who am I, really?* And I present a technique to help you experience your “real” identity by offering you a taste of *enlightenment* ([chapter 11](#)). Finally, we build a far-reaching, inspiring vision of how you, too, can become a Qigong master by grounding the Four Golden Wheels in your “real” identity ([chapter 12](#)).

Part 3—Exercising the Four Golden Wheels introduces the Essential Practices of Elixir Light Qigong: a series of four exercises designed to help you boost and refine the Qi stored in the Four Golden Wheels. After practicing these exercises, you will accumulate a surplus of energy reserves that you can draw on as needed throughout the day and channel to further your goals and dreams.

Each of the four Essential Practices develops the Four Golden Wheels in conjunction with some other aspect of yourself: in Three Treasures Standing Meditation you exercise the Four Golden Wheels and your *willpower* by

holding a series of static postures ([chapter 13](#)); in the Four Golden Wheels Exercise you exercise the Four Golden Wheels and your *physical body* through a series of gentle movements ([chapter 14](#)); in Lotus Meditation you exercise the Four Golden Wheels and your *heart* to develop deep compassion ([chapter 15](#)); and in Connecting Universe you exercise the Four Golden Wheels and your *whole energy field* to dissolve any negativity it holds ([chapter 16](#)).

Part 4—My Qigong Life ties together all the ideas developed in the previous sections. I begin by presenting concise practice guidelines to support your Qigong practice ([chapter 17](#)), answering questions such as *How long should I practice every day?* and *Which exercises should I do, and in what order?* Then we explore the stimulating topics of relationship and sexual intimacy through the Qigong lens ([chapter 18](#)): *How do I sustain happiness in a relationship? How can I revitalize intimacy?* By activating the Four Golden Wheels in the context of relationships and sexual intimacy, we can invigorate our love life with ecstatic happiness. I will show you how.

Finally, we explore the connection between the Four Golden Wheels and our destiny ([chapter 19](#)). *How can the practice of Qigong help make my life truly meaningful? What role am I here to play in the cosmic scheme?* Grasping the significance of your place in the universe through the Qigong framework will inspire you to actualize your highest potential and contribute to making this a better world.

How should you read this book? I suggest that you read it in sequential order beginning with Part 1 and continue all the way through to the end of Part 4. Just skim through the exercises on the first pass without spending too much time on any of them.

The Master Key includes nine follow-along videos that are spread throughout the exercises. All this digital material can be found at the following link: SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises. These videos form a

sampling of the four-DVD and five-CD *The Master Key* companion sets that complement the book.

Once you have finished reading the book and have established a holistic understanding of the core principles of Qigong, you will be primed to practice the exercises on a deeper level.

I look forward to our adventure together.

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Journey from Xiangtan

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The Mysterious Mr. Tan

The Legendary Monk Xiao Yao

Sometime around the year 1889, a baby boy was born to a poor family in a small, long-forgotten village in southern China. The facts surrounding his early years remain vague. Both his parents died while he was still a child, and the orphaned boy was entrusted to a duty-bound relative who couldn't afford another mouth to feed. The boy's future looked bleak. After some deliberation, the relative decided to present the boy to the abbot of Jiuyi Temple, a Buddhist monastery several days' walk away. He packed a few belongings for the child and ventured warily with him into the forest. Despite gangs of bandits stalking the woodlands, the pair trekked to the base of Snowy Peak Mountain safely and began their arduous ascent to the monastery.

The monastery was built high up near the summit, where it seemed to float among the clouds and snowy peaks. The serenity of the compound appealed to individuals seeking refuge from the whirling chaos of life, and the spiritual aura of the temple it housed attracted souls looking for spiritual enlightenment and timeless wisdom. Although Jiuyi Temple was a small monastery that accommodated only a few dozen monks, it was venerated by the local villagers as a sanctuary that produced remarkable sages with extraordinary powers. Locals often hiked the treacherous

five-hour trail that led to the monastery to receive a blessing or a healing.

The man and the boy now followed that trail, weaving through lush foliage and snaking up a series of vertiginous outcrops that overlooked the lowlands below. The view was both dizzying and dazzling. Finally, they arrived at the main gate. The monastery radiated an atmosphere of mystery and power. The dormitories and the dining hall formed the walled perimeter of the quadrangle. The pine trees growing in the inner courtyard softened the bricks and stones and exuded a pleasant fragrance that blended harmoniously with the sweet mountain air. The focal point of the monastery was the temple that stood in the middle of the courtyard—an elevated building made of sturdy timber with a curved roof covered by jade-green tiles.

Inside the temple was a twenty-foot-tall gold-lacquered Buddha seated cross-legged on a lotus flower, smiling peacefully past the spiraling wisps of incense that shrouded him and gazing dispassionately at the vaporous skies that flowed like a celestial river beyond the distant treetops.

The two weary travelers crossed the main gate reverently, and the man asked to speak with the abbot. He explained the orphan's dire situation to the abbot, who agreed to take charge of the little boy. The man bid the child farewell and quickly returned to his village.

Over time, the boy adapted to his new home. The older monks became his parents and the younger monks his older brothers. He was a sprightly child with an easygoing disposition, and he was given the nickname *Xiao Yao*, which means "free flowing." He learned the martial arts, healing arts, and meditation. He prayed, studied, and trained hard. When he was older, he visited other monasteries to learn special skills from other masters. For several years he lived in a cave, meditating for months without interruption. Xiao Yao mastered the most advanced practices and attained the highest levels of enlightenment.

Many years passed. Xiao Yao's teachers died, as did the older monks who raised him. He climbed up the hierarchy and gradually became one of the senior monks at Jiuyi Temple. He was highly respected by his peers for his wisdom and revered by the villagers for his healing powers. The local mountaineers often repeated stories they heard about Xiao Yao, and his reputation became legendary.

One popular story was about an incident that took place in 1948. A cruel bandit and his gang hid out in the forest, attacking travelers and robbing farmers. On one occasion the bandit raped a young girl, and terror spread. The local authorities were too weak to subdue them, so a group of villagers sent a representative to Jiuyi Temple to plead for help. Xiao Yao was dispatched to handle the matter. No one knows for sure what happened, as Xiao Yao went into the forest alone, but the gang disbanded and some of its former members became his students.

Another story about Xiao Yao was told to me by an old man who claimed the incident was witnessed by many people. One day a farmer was tilling his field when his bull suffered a nervous breakdown. It bucked madly, kicked away the farmer, rampaged through the village, and gored several people. The villagers wanted to kill the bull, but the farmer's family depended on it for their survival, so he pleaded that they refrain. The villagers agreed only after he told them he would go to Jiuyi Temple to ask for help.

Xiao Yao returned to the village with the farmer. The bull was grazing quietly in a field as a group of men watched from a safe distance. No one had dared to approach the beast. Xiao Yao calmly walked toward it. As he neared, the bull reared its huge head and snorted. With lightning speed, Xiao Yao slapped his palm on the bull's forehead before it could charge him. The animal froze. It looked dazed. Its knees buckled and it thumped to the ground.

The villagers cautiously gathered around the fallen bull. It was moaning, and gobs of frothing saliva dribbled from its

mouth. The farmer began to panic, believing that his bull was dying. Xiao Yao reassured him that the bull would be fine. He knelt down and massaged the area around the bull's forehead, and the bull regained consciousness. The monk instructed the farmer to let the bull rest for two days before harnessing him.

As news of this incident and others spread throughout the county and beyond, Xiao Yao's reputation became legendary. Streams of people ventured up Snowy Peak Mountain year-round seeking his healings, blessings, and counsel.

The Boiler Room Attendant

On May 16, 1966, the Cultural Revolution was launched in China. Within a few years new policies called for the shutdown of religious institutions, and local authorities notified the monks at Jiuyi Temple that they needed to vacate the monastery so it could be converted into an administrative center. The temple was boarded up and the Golden Buddha was padlocked inside. The monks put on civilian clothes and returned to their former homes. Xiao Yao, however, had no family, so there was no village awaiting his return. Now nearly eighty years old, he had no place to go. He spent a stretch of time living in the mountains as a hermit and then decided to leave Snowy Peak Mountain. He wandered hundreds of miles east along the bank of the Xiang River until he reached Xiangtan.

Xiangtan was an industrial city with a large steel production plant that employed tens of thousands of workers. The factory had been built during the 1950s with the help of Soviet engineers. A luxury resort the locals called Yi Suo had been constructed to house the foreigners who managed the factory. After the Soviet engineers departed, Yi Suo hosted Chinese government officials. Flower gardens and sweetly scented fruit trees lined the

walkways. There were a swimming pool and a restaurant that served gourmet meals. The compound was surrounded by an imposing tall brick wall that shielded it from curious onlookers.

Xiao Yao applied for a job at Yi Suo and was offered the least desirable position: boiler room attendant. A boiler room attendant is always on call. He lives in the boiler room and feeds the boilers three times a day, every day. His work is solitary, ongoing, and thankless, and the pay is very low. But despite these shortcomings, Xiao Yao accepted the job and moved in right away. He slept on a flimsy mattress in the corner opposite three fiery ovens. He cooked his own food and shoveled coal diligently an hour before each mealtime. The employees at Yi Suo were unaware of his background. They knew him simply as “Mr. Tan,” the affable, kindhearted boiler room attendant who mostly kept to himself.

My family lived across the street from Yi Suo on the first floor of a modest three-floor brick walk-up. My father was an onsite construction manager for the factory, and my mother worked as a cook in the factory restaurant. I was the youngest of four children. In 1972, around the time of my eighth birthday, I began to suffer from acute chest pain. My mother took me to the hospital, where the doctor prescribed some medicine, but the pain grew worse. She brought me back to the doctor, who increased the dosage and suggested I stay home and rest for an indefinite amount of time. Although the notion of skipping school thrilled me, the reality of staying home all day alone was distressing. After the first few days my restlessness became unbearable, so I snuck out of the house while my mother was at work.

Our building was located near the edge of town, so I ventured into the countryside. It was early spring. I munched unripe wild berries growing in the bushes. They tasted sour, but I relished them. I was fascinated by bugs and watched worker ants labor for hours. After a few days of

these solitary adventures, I grew bored and decided to sneak into Yi Suo to see the fruit trees and flowers. I scaled a back section of the wall and jumped. As I landed, a sharp pain shot through my heart. I ignored it. The compound was so beautiful compared to the drab streets of Xiangtan that it seemed otherworldly. I explored the grounds carefully, avoiding adults.

The following day I returned, venturing even farther in. One building in particular caught my interest. It was made of red brick with thick red elbow pipes jutting out from its sides like metal arms. It looked like a big red bug. The door was cracked open, so I poked my head inside. A man dressed in a navy-blue uniform was standing in front of a boiler. I could see a roaring fire through its thick glass plate. The boiler room attendant looked at me and smiled.

“Do you want to watch the fire?” he asked.

I could have run away, but he had a friendly face and spoke in a soft, reassuring voice. He did not look like a typical boiler room attendant. His hands were clean and his clothes were not stained black.

“Do you like fire?” he inquired.

I nodded.

“Don’t be frightened. Come in and have a look.”

I hesitated.

“I promise not to tell anyone.”

I entered the boiler room cautiously.

“What is your name?”

“Jihui Peng,” I answered.

“I am Mr. Tan,” he said in a strong provincial accent, and then asked, “How old are you?”

“Eight.”

“It’s almost lunchtime. Why don’t you sit down and watch me feed the boilers?”

He slipped on a pair of thick canvas gloves, opened the heavy plate-glass door, and began to shovel coal into the burner. The fire surged. He continued for a while and then

sat down beside me. We both watched silently as the boiler chewed its lunch.

“Why aren’t you in school?” he asked, finally breaking the silence.

“I’m sick, and the doctor told my mom I should stay home,” I told him.

“What’s wrong?”

“My heart hurts.”

Mr. Tan looked at me for a long while as I scrutinized him. Up close, he looked even friendlier. He had thick eyebrows and big, fleshy ears. His hair was cropped short and black. He looked my father’s age, around forty-five. After a while he stood up and I rose with him.

“Feel free to come back anytime you like,” he said.

My face lit up. “Really? Thanks, Mr. Tan.”

I eagerly returned the following day. Watching the fire with Mr. Tan was more fun than watching ants alone. But I had to time my visit carefully. My mom returned from the dining hall to feed me during her lunch break, so I waited until she left and then went out the back way unseen. I brought two sweet buns from lunch as a gift for my new friend.

“These are for you,” I said, giving them both to him.

“These buns are delicious with spicy pickles.” He appeared genuinely delighted. “Would you like to share one with me?”

“Yes, please.” I loved spicy pickles.

Mr. Tan stood and walked over to a small cupboard. He opened the lid to a ceramic jar he used to ferment radishes and scooped some onto each bun. We chewed them heartily.

The next time I saw Mr. Tan, he said, “Today I have a surprise for you.”

He pulled out two sweet potatoes from his shirt pocket.

“Wow—they’re my favorite!” I responded.

“Shall we roast them in the boiler?”

“Yes!”

Mr. Tan washed the potatoes and placed them under the raging heat emitted by the furnace. While they were roasting, he asked, “Do you like to hear stories about the Monkey King?”

“I love stories about the Monkey King!” I exclaimed.

“Well then, do you know how the Monkey King was born?” Mr. Tan’s eyes widened.

“No.”

“The Monkey didn’t have a father and mother like you do.”

“He didn’t?”

“Oh, no. There was an ancient stone resting on the slopes of a faraway mountain that was covered with flowers and fruits. This stone stuck out and was huge—bigger than all of Xiangtan.” Mr. Tan widened his arms to demonstrate.

“Wow.”

“One day the stone exploded—BOOM!” He startled me, then calmly added, “When the dust settled, there was the Monkey King. But this was no ordinary monkey. He had special powers. Do you want to hear about them?”

“Yes,” I said, chewing a hot mouthful of sweet potato.

“The Monkey King was very, very strong, and he could lift heavy objects like cars and buses as if they were empty cardboard boxes. He could leap from one place to another and travel across all of China in the blink of an eye.”

Mr. Tan hopped around the boiler room like a leaping monkey as I chuckled.

“But his greatest power was this—the Monkey King could become anything he wanted to. He could become a teensy-weensy ant.” Mr. Tan knelt down on the ground and imitated the insect. I giggled at his pantomiming.

“He could become a tree.” Mr. Tan stood up straight and held his arms out at weird angles so they looked like branches.

“And he could even become a chicken.” Mr. Tan puffed his chest out, puckered his lips, folded his arms into wings, and bobbed his head.” This time I laughed heartily. He was a very animated storyteller.

As the days passed, I spent as much time with Mr. Tan as I could, and each time I visited he amused me with the Monkey King’s adventures.

About a month after we first met, Mr. Tan asked a curious question as we watched the fire and ate our potatoes together. “Do you want to learn the martial arts, Jihui?” he asked.

“Oh yes! I dream about it,” I answered.

“I can teach you.”

I stopped chewing.

“You know martial arts?”

“I do. And I’ll teach you, but only if you agree to these two conditions. First, you must get here every morning by five o’clock and practice for two hours. Second, you have to promise to keep your training a secret. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Good. We’ll begin tomorrow morning.”

I left the boiler room brimming with excitement. I ran back home imagining myself fighting and defeating everyone I passed. I was so thrilled that I failed to notice that my chest pain was completely gone.

That night I had trouble falling asleep; I wanted morning to come. Finally I dozed off, and when I awoke it was five minutes to five. I dressed quickly and quietly crept out of the house. I flew across the street, leaped over the fence, and made it right on time.

Mr. Tan was waiting for me and led me to a small wooded area behind the boiler room. “Your first lesson is Horse Stance,” he said, then demonstrated the posture. His feet were two shoulder widths apart, his knees were bent at a ninety-degree angle, and his spine was straight. He made it look easy.

"Now you do it," he instructed.

I assumed the posture. Instantly my legs tensed, and after only a short while my thighs began to burn.

"One minute has passed," he said. "Today you'll hold the position for ten minutes."

I began sweating. My legs started shaking.

"Focus on your Lower Dantian," he said, pointing to the area located below my navel. I did. The pain eased a bit.

"Five minutes."

My legs were ablaze.

"Eight minutes."

My backside sagged and he kicked it, saying, "Don't cheat."

My whole body was shaking.

"Nine minutes."

My teeth started to clatter.

"Three ... two ... one. Stop!"

I collapsed to the ground. My lungs felt as though they were about to explode. It took me a while to recover.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Martial arts training is a long, hard journey. If you want, you can stop right now."

"No," I protested.

"Today we practiced Horse Stance for ten minutes. Tomorrow I will increase the time. Are you sure you want to continue?"

"Yes, Shifu Tan." To emphasize my determination I called him by the traditional title used to address a master.

"Good." he seemed pleased. "Horse Stance training is the foundation of the martial arts. Whether you punch or kick, you need a solid base. A strong root gives you power and mobility. And now I will teach you the first three moves of Tiger Fist Form, an exercise that will develop your grip strength."

I spent the rest of the morning passionately practicing those three moves.

The following day I returned to the boiler room with mixed feelings, dreading Horse Stance and excited about Tiger Fist Form. Holding the position was unbearable, and as promised, Mr. Tan increased the duration by one minute. Over the next few mornings my enthusiasm waned steadily. I dreaded the short trip to the boiler room and I no longer ran there. I was losing heart, and in the back of my mind I began to wonder whether Mr. Tan was really a martial arts master or just a cruel prankster.

Then one morning Shifu Tan changed the regular routine and asked me to follow him inside the boiler room. There was an axe leaning against the wall, and he told me to pick it up. Then he took off his shirt.

"Swing the axe with all your strength and hit me right here," he said, pointing to his chest.

At first I thought he was kidding, but he looked at me seriously. I didn't know what to do.

"Don't worry. You won't hurt me," he assured me.

I lifted the axe in the air and squeezed the handle.

"Hit me hard," he instructed.

I waited for him to change his mind, but he didn't. Finally, I swung down hard. The blade hit him squarely in the chest. I felt as though I had struck a hard object, not soft flesh. The axe was wedged into his breastbone. He stood calmly but I was terrified. I quickly pried the axe loose to minimize any damage. But there was no blood. Only a white mark remained, disappearing after a few seconds, leaving no trace of the impact.

"Do it again," he said.

I lifted the axe incredulously, and this time I swung harder. The results were the same.

"Go ahead, again, as hard as you can."

Without fear, I swung the blade again with all my power.

"Do it one last time."

I did. Afterward, he put his shirt back on.

"Come with me," he said.

I followed him outside, and he led me to a sandalwood tree in the garden behind the boiler room. He pointed to the trunk. There were four blunt axe marks on the bark. Fresh sap was dripping down.

"Practice with sincere wholeheartedness, and miracles will happen," he said.

After that day I practiced Horse Stance with renewed enthusiasm. Shifu Tan gradually increased the duration to twenty grueling minutes. He placed two bowls of water on my thighs, and he lit an incense stick under my bottom to keep my body from moving out of position. I learned to endure the agonizing pain.

About three weeks later I arrived as usual for my morning practice and assumed the Horse Stance position. After ten minutes I experienced a pleasant sensation building around the area on my midriff that Shifu Tan had asked me to focus on, the Lower Dantian. The feeling spread down my legs and negated the burning sensation. My body grew lighter and lighter. I felt as though I were riding effortlessly on an invisible horse. The tingling sensation in my Lower Dantian intensified, and I slipped into a trance.

When I emerged from it, the sun was shining high up in the sky, and Shifu Tan was standing in front of me.

"Jihui, you've been standing in Horse Stance for four hours," he said, genuinely pleased.

From that day on I could stand in Horse Stance for long periods of time without tiring. The pleasant sensation now spread throughout my body each time. I enjoyed holding the posture for an hour or longer. The part of my daily routine I had hated most had become my favorite.

Around this time my mother grew suspicious.

"Where do you disappear to so early every morning?" she asked.

"I go jogging and exercise," I answered, remembering my promise to Shifu Tan about keeping the training a secret.

"What about your—?"

"Mother, I feel fine now. My heart doesn't hurt anymore."

She didn't *quite* believe me.

The following day I mentioned the conversation to Shifu Tan.

"Ask your parents to visit me tonight at the boiler room. And come with them."

After dinner my parents curiously followed me to Yi Suo. We entered through the main gate. I led them to the boiler room and knocked on the door.

Shifu Tan opened it.

"Please come in," he said warmly.

My parents entered. "Jihui, you wait outside," he instructed.

My father and mother spent two hours with Shifu Tan. When the door opened again, they were all smiling.

"Jihui, keep training with Shifu Tan, and make sure you don't slack off!" my father exhorted. Then they bowed reverently to him.

Two weeks later Shifu Tan formally initiated me as his disciple. I dedicated tea to Heaven and Earth, knelt down, and swore my loyalty to him as the fiery boilers watched. On that day my teacher became my master.

At a Crossroads

My Adventures with Shifu Tan

The fruit trees at Yi Suo were ripe, and the flower gardens were in full bloom. I had been practicing daily for three months now.

"Today I will test your internal strength," Shifu Tan announced.

I stood in Horse Stance. He grabbed a sledgehammer and swung it hard, aiming for my Lower Dantian. My belly bounced it off like a rubber tire.

"Your guardian Qi is strong," he said, swinging again. "Normal punches won't hurt you anymore."

Summer break ended and the fall term began. I returned to school eager to see my classmates. Shifu Tan demanded that I give my schoolwork the same level of commitment I gave my martial arts practice. He inspired me to excel, and I surprised my parents with high grades. None of my friends were aware of my training. I led a double life; I woke up before dawn, scurried over to the boiler room with my schoolbag, and practiced martial arts until I heard the ring of the first school bell. I then had five minutes before the second bell rang and class began. The school was a three-minute run from Yi Suo, so I sprinted there with my schoolbag bouncing behind me and sat down at my desk with a minute to spare. When the school day ended, I

reversed my steps, and within five minutes I was back in the garden behind the boiler room practicing martial arts.

Over time my training intensified. I completed Tiger Fist and learned more advanced fighting sets. I sparred with Shifu Tan regularly and he was content with my progress. My arms and legs became more resilient and much stronger. I experienced explosive power flowing through my body whenever I practiced. Each time I mastered one exercise, Shifu Tan taught me another that was more challenging. I became proficient at three-, two-, and one-finger push-ups and did sets of fifty without tiring.

Shifu Tan could do all the drills he taught me with graceful ease. When he demonstrated handstand pushups, he rooted his hands to the ground and his inverted body bobbed up and down effortlessly. He explained the proper breathing method as he performed a dozen repetitions without straining. I fumbled at first. But my master's presence motivated me to train hard, and eventually I mastered it.

Three years passed in this fashion.

"Let your parents know you'll be sleeping over in the boiler room tonight," Shifu Tan informed me one morning after practice.

That evening my master and I ate an unusually early dinner.

When I was finished Shifu Tan said, "Time for bed."

I was surprised. I had anticipated some exciting late-night activity.

"Where shall I sleep?" I asked.

"Over there," he answered, pointing at a rope. One end was tied to a window bar and the other end was tied to a pipe halfway across the room.

"That rope is my *bed*?" I said in disbelief.

"Jihui, you've mastered basic rooting and balancing skills while standing up and awake. Tonight you'll learn to develop

those skills while lying down and asleep.”

“But Shifu, I can’t even lie down on a rope when I’m awake. How will I sleep on it?”

“I will show you how.” Shifu Tan climbed on the rope as if it were a mattress and folded his arms behind his head. One of his feet balanced on the rope and the other was crossed over his knee.

“Swing the rope,” he instructed.

I pushed the rope back and forth like a hammock. He looked very comfortable swinging, and half a minute later he sprung off.

“It’s your turn. Focus on your Lower Dantian and relax,” he said.

I sat on the rope, leaned back, lifted my legs in the air, and instantly plopped to the floor.

“Try again,” Shifu Tan insisted.

I concentrated harder, but had the same results.

An hour later I still hadn’t made any headway. I was frustrated and exhausted. I looked helplessly at Shifu Tan.

“Now that you’ve tried a hundred times, I’ll teach you the secret. Simply visualize your center of gravity dropping halfway between the rope and the floor. See yourself balancing in the air.”

I positioned myself carefully on the rope.

“Bring your attention to the Lower Dantian and sink your Qi there. Feel your weight slide under your body.”

I lifted my legs in the air slowly and envisioned my body weight dropping. I managed to hang on for a few seconds before falling off the rope again.

“That’s much better,” he encouraged.

“Let me try again,” I said optimistically.

I climbed back on the rope. My second attempt lasted longer, and within ten minutes I was lying on the rope swinging back and forth, hands behind my head with one leg crossed over the other.

“Shifu, I made it!” I exclaimed triumphantly.

“Good,” he acknowledged, then gave me a spoon. “Hold on to this and go to sleep.”

By now I was tired, so it didn’t take me long to fall asleep. But the spoon slid from my fingers and when it clanked to the ground I woke up—still balancing on the rope!

Shifu Tan picked up the spoon and handed it back to me.

“This time chant *song jing zi ran* as you fall asleep. Open up to *peace, tranquility, and acceptance* and you will remain aware and balanced even in restful sleep.”

I woke up the next morning still holding the spoon. I continued to practice rope sleeping regularly until it became as easy as sleeping on a bed. When Shifu Tan was confident that I had mastered the skill, we slept on tree branches. At first I slept on thick boughs only a few feet off the ground. But gradually we climbed higher and slept on slimmer limbs. We spent many warm summer nights twenty feet above the ground slumbering under the stars.

One night we set out for the countryside.

“Tonight we won’t be sleeping in a tree,” Shifu Tan said.

“Where will we sleep, then?” I asked.

“We’ll be spending the night in a graveyard.”

I shuddered.

“Every human being has a spiritual essence,” my master explained, “and that energy hovers around a body that has recently died.”

I knotted up. “You mean their ghost?”

“In the transition between life and death, powerful energies are released. We are going to meditate on that energy. The spirits of the dead are no different from the spirits of the living, and there is nothing to fear,” he answered calmly.

We entered the graveyard. The silence was unnerving.

Shifu Tan sat cross-legged over a freshly dug grave. I sat beside him. The ground felt soft and warm, like a cushion.

“I have chosen to bring you here in the springtime when the Earth’s energy rises most strongly,” he explained. “Earth Qi mixed with the spiritual essence of the recently dead creates a powerful elixir. The energy around us is potent. Tonight’s meditation will be memorable. Jihui, when you close your eyes, focus on the Lower Dantian until you see a light glowing there. Then allow that light to float through the core of your body straight up to your third eye. When it arrives there, you will feel your midbrow light up like a screen. Keep looking at it and you may see some friendly spirits.”

I closed my eyes and brought my attention to my Lower Dantian as instructed.

Shifu Tan continued, “You might feel the sensation of a hand touching you. If that happens, don’t be alarmed. That’s a sign that a spirit is communicating with you. Breathe deeply into your Lower Dantian and allow the spirit’s energy to flow there. No matter what happens, don’t open your eyes. If you panic chant *song jing zi ran* and shine the light of your heart on the darkness in your mind.”

After meditating in inner darkness for a while, I saw a light glowing in my Lower Dantian and it floated up to my third eye. My forehead expanded energetically and then it brightened. I could “feel” someone looking at me. The sensation startled me, and my heart was racing. A face came into clear view. It was an old woman. We just looked at each other. She didn’t say anything, and after a few moments she vanished. Then more faces appeared, some younger and some older, but each of them seemed friendly enough, so I relaxed until suddenly a ghoulish, negative presence disturbed my pleasant, peaceful meditation. The negative energy latched on to my lower back and began to crawl up my spine like a slimy reptile.

“*Song jing zi ran, song jing zi ran, song jing zi ran,*” I chanted.

“Keep chanting,” Shifu Tan whispered. “Don’t be afraid. Keep chanting.”

I focused the light of my heart on that dark energy and it melted away. We meditated until dawn without any further unpleasant incidents.

My time with Shifu Tan wasn’t always spent doing grueling exercises, daunting acrobatics, or spine-chilling feats. The playful side he had shown me when we first met resurfaced whenever he wasn’t instructing me. On our off hours my stern teacher became an amusing clown. He liked to entertain me with colorful facial expressions, and, to my delight, he made me laugh a lot.

On one occasion my master visited a close friend who had a five-year-old son, and I tagged along. Shifu Tan picked up one of the boy’s tiny shirts that was lying around and asked, “Can I borrow your shirt?” The little boy nodded yes.

Shifu Tan slid his hands into the narrow sleeves and wriggled his arms until they also slid in. He wriggled his shoulders, and his body seemed to deform as he buttoned up the shirt. His head and legs appeared to be their normal size, but his upper body looked as if it had shrunk in half. The boy, his father, and I all watched in awe. Shifu Tan made some comical faces and waved his disproportionate arms. He looked like a puppet. We all laughed.

“How did you do that, Shifu?” I asked after we left.

“The connective tissue that sheaths your whole body is called fascia,” he explained, “and through special practice you can learn to control your fascia and dislocate your joints at will. I dislocated my shoulders and passed my arms through the sleeves.”

My master rarely displayed his Qigong abilities in public, but he made an exception one day when we visited the zoo and his mischievous side came out.

It was hot and humid. The lions were lying around their cage like big, lazy house cats. One of the visitors was yelling

at them to get up and start acting like lions.

"Watch this," Shifu Tan whispered to me.

He extended his index and middle fingers and curled his other fingers together to form a gesture called Sword Finger. Then he discreetly projected energy from his two extended fingers toward the backside of the biggest lion. About twenty seconds later the lion leaped off the ground with a loud roar and began running around in circles chasing his own tail. A crowd of people gathered around the cage. The lion continued to act wildly. I giggled. A few minutes later Shifu Tan discreetly waved his hand back and forth, sending energy toward the lion's third eye, and the lion calmed. It yawned, lay down, and was asleep within seconds.

Then we walked over to the monkey pit and saw twenty chattering monkeys running around.

"Should we bring a little order to the monkey cage?" Shifu Tan asked.

"Okay," I agreed.

Shifu Tan pointed his fingers at the largest, loudest monkey. All of a sudden it stopped, stood still, and looked puzzled. Then my master directed the monkey to one side of the pit. Shifu Tan waved his hand again, and soon another monkey joined the first one. Then, one by one, all the monkeys lined up quietly against the wall.

"On the count of three let's wake them all up," he said.

We counted down together. He waved his hands, and the monkeys snapped out of their trance. All at once the whole bunch screeched and jumped up and down simultaneously. We had a good laugh.

My master always amazed me with his Qigong skills, but his most extraordinary demonstration took place on July 16, 1975. People traditionally gather every year on that date at the Xiang River Bridge in my hometown to celebrate summer and swim across the half-mile-wide river. Two of my master's older disciples came to visit him that day. I had

never met them before and I never saw them again afterward. Shifu Tan was overjoyed to see them, just as they were to see him. It was a blisteringly hot day, and the three men shielded themselves from the sun with red paper parasols. We all walked past the crowd cheering on the throng of swimmers and strolled farther down the bank, away from all the commotion. I lingered a few paces behind my master and his disciples.

After continuing for about twenty minutes, we were finally alone near the river's edge.

Shifu Tan turned to me and said, "It's lunchtime and we're hungry, so we're going to cross here. You go back, walk over the Xiang River Bridge, and meet us at that noodle house on the other side."

"Yes, Shifu," I answered obediently.

I wondered how they planned to cross the river. There were no boats around. The area was deserted. I wondered if they would swim across, like the others. They were wearing short blue pants and white shirts. I watched curiously as they took off their cotton shoes and slipped them into their pant waists. Shifu Tan headed for the water, flanked by his disciples. They stepped ankle deep into the water and waded farther out. They kept on walking, but they didn't sink. The water reached just below my master's knees and just above the disciples' knees.

The three men were *walking on water!*

I stared incredulously until they were halfway across. They were still chatting and spinning their parasols. Then I sprinted back to the bridge, ran across, and rejoined them. They were sipping tea, waiting for me. Shifu Tan ordered noodles for all of us. The combination of the delicious, fresh noodles and the mind-blowing feat I had just witnessed made this my most memorable meal ever.

From the Martial Arts to the Healing Arts

When I was thirteen an incident took place that forever altered the course of my training as a martial artist. It began when I met my best friend, Jianqing, on the street and noticed his face was badly bruised.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Zhang Gong beat me up," he replied.

"Why?"

"Yesterday I wore the soldier's cap that my uncle gave me as a gift, and Zhang Gong grabbed it from me. I tried to get it back and he attacked me, as did his whole gang."

In those days a soldier's cap was a valuable fashion item for a teenager. As my friend recalled the altercation, his blackened, swollen eyes moistened and I became enraged.

"Where did this happen?"

"On the street corner where they're always hanging out."

I marched there in a fit of rage to confront Zhang Gong, who was there with three of his hooligan friends. They were each three years older and at least one head taller than I, but that didn't stop me. I stepped right into the middle of their circle.

"You stole Jianqing's cap yesterday and I want it back!" I barked.

The biggest thug in the group taunted me. "Or else what?" he asked, winking at the others.

My martial arts instincts took over. Without warning I smashed him in the chest with a devastating punch. He flew backward. After a moment of stunned silence, the rest of the gang members jumped me. I moved with blinding speed and struck one of them to the ground. Another pulled out a knife and sliced my lower back. I smashed his ribs with a vicious strike and punched his face. He fell to the ground unconscious. Zhang Gong jumped on me, but before he could hit me I snapped and broke his arm, then continued to pummel him mercilessly while he lay helpless on the ground. Within seconds the fight was over. Each gang member was either disabled or unconscious.

I quickly ran away to hide in another part of our neighborhood. As I calmed down, fear grabbed me. I began to wonder if I had killed Zhang Gong. My short-lived feeling of triumph suddenly turned into bitter anxiety that stalked me for the rest of the day.

That evening Zhang Gong's parents came to our building and banged on our door. My parents let them in. His mother was livid. She told my parents that her son was lying in a hospital bed, and she threatened to have me thrown in jail. My father berated me in front of Zhang Gong's parents while my mother cried. They made me apologize.

The following day I visited Zhang Gong in the hospital with my mother. We brought him dried lychees and apples. His face was badly disfigured and his right arm was in a cast. He was in pain and unusually timid. He didn't look like an arrogant bully, but like a weak and cowardly boy. To my surprise, I felt heartfelt sympathy, and I apologized to him.

Later that afternoon my master greeted me with a cold, unfriendly stare. My mother had paid him a visit earlier.

"You lost control over your emotions," he said sharply.

"I'm sorry," I replied.

"I'm *very* disappointed in you."

I could handle my mom's disapproval, but my master's reproach was unbearable.

"Today your lesson will be the washboard," he said.

Shifu Tan leaned his wooden washboard against the wall at a forty-five degree angle and made me kneel on it. After five minutes my knees ached badly. He made me face the wall for two punishing hours.

Not long after the fight, Shifu Tan had an unusually serious, straightforward conversation with me.

"Jihui, you are standing at a crossroads, and you must choose only one way forward. You can continue training as a martial artist and fight in competitions to establish your reputation. At the end of this road you'll become an accomplished fighter, and you'll be able to open your own

martial arts school someday. But down the other path lies a different destiny. I can train you to become a Qigong *healer*. This journey requires developing your healing abilities, refining your inner vision, and greatly empowering your Qi. Though it might not seem apparent, the training for the second path is far more rigorous and demanding than the first. Take your time and decide which path you want to follow."

Over the years I had witnessed Shifu Tan heal many people with Qigong. His reputation as a healer had quietly spread around our neighborhood. Strangers often knocked on his door at odd hours, and Shifu Tan never turned anyone away. Sometimes he even let me watch him treat a patient.

Just a few weeks before I fought with Zhang Gong, a woman had limped into the boiler room on crutches asking for help.

"A steel beam fell and crushed my toes," she winced. "The doctors gave me painkillers but they no longer work. I'm in constant agony. I was told you are a healer."

"Show me your foot," Shifu Tan said.

He massaged her leg and directed his Qi into the wound. He blended some herbs, mixed them with medicinal liquor, and sprayed the concoction on her foot. Then he bandaged it.

"Come back in a week," he instructed.

A week later the woman returned. Her pain had diminished considerably. He repeated the same procedure. The following week she knocked on the door one last time and walked in without her crutches.

"My foot doesn't hurt anymore," she said, beaming.

My master examined the foot. It looked almost normal.

The woman burst into tears. "Thank you."

Her gratitude touched me, and each time I recalled her appreciation I became more interested in following the path of healing.

I gave Xiao Yao my answer on the spot. “Shifu, I want to become a Qigong healer.”

“Good.” He seemed pleased with my choice.

The transition from the martial arts to the healing arts unfolded gradually. I continued to practice the same martial art forms Shifu Tan taught me as well as the same meditations and breathing techniques, but he stopped teaching me new forms. Instead my master asked me to join him in the boiler room whenever someone came in for a treatment. At first I merely watched him work while he explained the techniques he was using, and eventually I began to assist him by pressing various energy points during a healing session.

A month before my fifteenth birthday, Shifu Tan announced, “Today I will be giving you a special empowerment called *Guan Ding*. This experience is the first of several empowerments intended to awaken your healing powers.”

I sat down on the floor in the boiler room. Shifu Tan touched my third eye with his index finger. A powerful vibration jolted from his fingertip into my head. It felt like an electric current that flowed steadily from his arm straight into my brain. As the intensity of the energy increased, the electrical impulse began to flow down my neck and chest into my arms, my torso, and down my legs. Every energy channel inside my body was aglow. I was growing lighter and brighter until I felt myself dissolving. An invisible hand suddenly seemed to lift me higher and higher. I lost awareness of the outer world. I was like a cloud of sweet bliss riding across a vast, illuminated inner sky. Then even that sensation melted away. The cloud dissipated and I merged into the blissful sky. There was love everywhere. Nothing else, just love.

When I opened my eyes, Shifu Tan was there. “Jihui, I have planted a spiritual seed in you. Over time it will sink deep roots and grow stronger. When you are older there will

be a second, more powerful empowerment, a practice called *Biguan*. I will let you know when the time arrives. For now, just continue to meditate as before.”

The Guan Ding empowerment transformed me. I felt blissful currents of Qi flowing through me all the time. I basked in the sweet afterglow of my newfound happiness until a few months later when Shifu Tan broke some bitter news that rattled me to the core.

The Rainbow Tree

“I received a letter last week informing me that Jiuyi Temple has reopened,” Shifu Tan said. “I have to return.”

The news stunned me. Although the Cultural Revolution had recently ended and people everywhere were celebrating the social changes, I never imagined that the newfound freedoms would separate me from my master.

“Ten years have passed since I left,” he continued, “and the boiler room has become my second home, but as a senior monk it is my duty to go back and rebuild. It is not your destiny to follow me to the monastery and become a monk. I know you would come if I asked you to, but I want you to stay in Xiangtan. All my disciples are uneducated mountaineers and monks, and I would like you to pursue a university degree. China is going to go through many changes. The world is transforming quickly. Doors will open for you and your destiny lies through them. So it is essential for you to stay here, study diligently, and strive to pass the university entrance exam.”

I heard Shifu Tan’s words, but they didn’t register. I had spent time with him every day for the last seven years. He was like a second father to me. The boiler room was our sacred temple. I couldn’t envision my life without him.

“While I am gone you will meditate regularly and keep practicing the techniques I’ve taught you. During winter

breaks and summer vacations you will rejoin me at the monastery, and I will continue to teach you.”

“Yes, Shifu,” I said. My voice was hollow and flat.

“In the monastery I will be known by my monk’s name, *Xiao Yao*, but I will still be your Shifu. I realize that many things will change for both of us, but in the end it will all work out fine.”

On the way back home that day, I cried.

A month later my entire family accompanied Xiao Yao to the train station. I spent all of the little money I had saved on a gift, a diary. I inscribed the front page: *To My Beloved Master. Have a good journey, Jihui.*

My sister and mother knitted him a brown wool sweater, and they gave him a basket of food for the trip.

Xiao Yao’s eyes moistened. The conductor announced the train’s departure. My master boarded. The whistle blew. He waved good-bye from the window, and moments later the train was gone.

A few days later I returned to the boiler room and saw the new boiler room attendant shoveling coal into the burners. That’s when it *really* hit me. My master was gone. After that I hardly ever returned to Yi Suo.

After my master left I became more involved at school. I joined the track team and discovered that I excelled as a hurdler. I was relatively short for the sport, but my martial arts training compensated for my size. I also focused more energy on my studies. That year I took English as my second language. The teacher was an inspiring man named Li Yuntao. He was passionate about the subject and enchanted us with classical stories like *Hamlet* and *The Prince and the Pauper*. I decided that if I were ever accepted to a university, I would major in English literature.

Three days after the semester ended, I set off on my first visit to Jiuyi Temple. I climbed aboard the same train Xiao Yao had taken. I carried a small canvas backpack containing two pairs of underwear, a T-shirt, a toothbrush and

toothpaste, a hand towel, and a bag of dried lychees to offer my master as a gift. The train ride took a full eight hours and then I traveled by bus for two more hours and got off at a makeshift stop near a remote village. I asked a local farmer for directions to the monastery. He pointed the way.

In the forest I met another farmer, who asked me where I was headed.

"I'm going to Jiuyi Temple to visit my Shifu," I answered.

"Who is your Shifu?" he asked.

"The monk Xiao Yao."

"*You* are a disciple of Xiao Yao?"

"Yes."

"Then please allow me to invite you to have lunch with my family. We are poor, but it would be an honor to host you in our home."

I accepted. Lunch consisted of rice mixed with sweet potato bits. One of the farmer's relatives was an old mountaineer who shared many endearing stories about my master. While listening to him I realized that Xiao Yao had touched many people's lives before he became a boiler room attendant. These kind people made me appreciate his humility even more. We drank tea together, and then I thanked them for their hospitality and continued my trek to Jiuyi Temple.

I hiked for several hours along the steep path. Parts were covered by a ceiling of thick foliage, and others snaked along the bare, narrow edge of the mountain. I paused a few times to admire the valley below.

When I finally saw the main gate of Jiuyi Temple, I ran toward it and entered the courtyard. Neglect and bad weather had taken a toll on the monastery. The grounds were in need of maintenance, and the structures were in dire need of repair.

A young monk greeted me with his right hand in the traditional prayer position against his chest. "*E mi tuo fo*—Buddha bless you," he said.

I wasn't familiar with the religious formalities.

"Uh, hi. *E mi tuo fo*. I am Jihui, and I'm looking for Xiao Yao," I replied.

"Oh yes, I know who you are. He told us you'd be coming. Follow me. I'll take you to him."

My master was in the dining hall. His head was shaven and he wore a chocolate-colored robe. I nearly walked right past him.

"*E mi tuo fo*. Jihui, did you have a good journey?" he asked me.

His new look startled me. It took me a few moments to regain my bearings.

"Yes, Shifu," I answered.

"Good. Let me show you around."

Xiao Yao gave me a brief tour of the temple and introduced me to everyone. There were about a dozen monks living on the premises. Most of them were new to monastic life. Only a handful of the older monks had returned. I met the abbot in charge of administration, who was a veteran monk named Liu Bo. The monastery was understaffed, and everyone was overloaded with work. Xiao Yao was in charge of reconstruction as well as training the new monks.

Next, Xiao Yao showed me the main hall that housed the Golden Buddha. We stood on the veranda and looked out. The far view of the mountains was spectacular. The near view of the courtyard was less inspiring. Piles of bricks and stacked lumber were strewn throughout the temple grounds.

"As you can see, the monastery is a mess," my master explained. "We are busy with major repairs that must be completed before winter arrives."

He ushered me inside the temple. The dilapidated walls desperately needed patching and a fresh coat of paint, but the space still radiated a high spiritual vibration. The open-air room exuded the musty scent of sandalwood incense,

which mixed pleasantly with the scents of summer in bloom. The Golden Buddha sat peacefully on a lotus flower and appeared unperturbed by his cracked skin of faded-gold paint.

He was flanked on either side by two life-sized standing Buddha statues. Beyond him dozens of smaller Golden Buddhas were illuminated by seas of red candles on two long tables that ran alongside the walls.

A silky red curtain hung down from the ceiling, framing the Golden Buddha and his retinue. Xiao Yao led me behind the drapery and quietly showed me the beautiful, radiant, kind-faced, golden statue of Guan Yin, the goddess of compassion. She was twice my height and stood graciously on a stack of lotus flowers, facing the back of the temple.

We returned outside, and Xiao Yao said, "Jihui, you'll be staying with me. I have to get back to work now. Settle down and walk around the grounds if you'd like. I will see you later."

Then he asked a young monk to show me to his room.

Xiao Yao's room was set into the perimeter wall of the monastery just across the courtyard from the main temple. The quarters were neither small nor large. There were two narrow beds on opposite ends of the room shielded by mosquito nets. On the far wall was a small window and a wooden desk with a kerosene lamp and a few candles on it. Two chairs were tucked away in the corner. I placed my backpack down on one of them.

"Our daily routine is simple and it never changes," the monk explained before he left. "We pray and chant three times a day, we work two shifts, and we eat once, at lunchtime."

I followed the daily routine and the next day, after morning prayers, Xiao Yao led me outside the temple grounds while it was still slightly dark. We walked for twenty minutes through the early morning mist in dreamy silence. The path narrowed as we walked along the edge of the

mountain overlooking a deep ravine. Then the path widened and the Earth became grassy. We stopped in front of a pine tree that had put down roots at the very edge of a steep cliff. Half its branches overhung the rock and extended into the void. From here the neighboring mountain peaks, which were suspended like celestial islands in the swirling, curling morning mist, were an awesome sight to behold.

"I practice Qigong here almost every morning," Xiao Yao said. "The mountain Qi is powerful and it is peaceful and quiet."

We practiced a set called Four Golden Wheels Exercise and meditated under the tree, facing the majestic sky.

Two otherworldly hours passed and my master said, "Jihui, take a look."

By now the sun had risen and its heat had chased away the morning mist. The sky was blue and clear. Xiao Yao was pointing above the pine tree at a double rainbow that seemed to bridge Heaven and Earth.

"These rainbows appear here almost every morning," he said, his face reflecting the golden sunlight.

We practiced Qigong by the "Rainbow Tree" daily. After morning practice my master usually went back to work and engaged in various activities. Sometimes I helped the monks with construction. At other times Xiao Yao instructed me to read old manuscripts that were stored in a large wooden chest in a small reading room. Some of them were hundreds of years old. I was amazed to discover that many described the same practices that Xiao Yao had taught me. I read them with care, realizing that Xiao Yao and his masters had read the same scrolls when they were my age.

Whenever a villager came for a healing, my master would call for me. I would set aside whatever I was doing and assist him with the treatment in a room near the main temple, just as I had done in the boiler room.

And when I wasn't meditating, working, reading, or assisting Xiao Yao, I explored the sleepy mountain trails and

swam in the gurgling streams. The summer passed at a leisurely pace, and I grew attached to the pleasant simplicity of monastic life. When it was time for me to return home, I was sad to leave peaceful Jiuyi Temple for the lively streets of Xiangtan.

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One Hundred Days of Darkness and Light

Biguan in the Dark Chamber

The following summer I returned to Jiuyi Temple expecting to enjoy another idyllic vacation. However, three days after my arrival my master informed me, “Tomorrow you’ll start Biguan practice. This empowerment practice consists of a one-hundred-day fast in a dark stone chamber. Biguan is extremely demanding, but the spiritual transformation it brings about is unparalleled.”

The announcement thrilled me. All day long my energy level was unusually high, and it took me a long time to fall asleep that night. The next day began like all the others. Xiao Yao and I practiced by the Rainbow Tree. After lunch I went to the temple to meditate beside the Golden Buddha, but I couldn’t concentrate because worrisome thoughts began to surface. *One hundred days without food? One hundred days in the dark? Am I ready for this challenge?* As I continued to think about Biguan, my excitement increased—but so did my anxiety.

A monk tapped me on the shoulder. “Shifu is waiting for you in his room.”

I walked across the courtyard, knocked on my master’s door, and entered.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

Xiao Yao stood up and grabbed the kerosene lamp sitting on his desk along with some matches and a stick of incense. "Then let's go."

I followed Xiao Yao to an inconspicuous door hidden all the way in the back of the temple that I hadn't noticed before. Xiao Yao lit the kerosene lamp. He opened the door, and I followed him into a narrow corridor slightly wider than the width of our shoulders and slightly taller than the tops of our heads. The lamplight cast a warm glow on the cold stones. The walkway spiraled downward, and I trailed behind him deep into the underground. The sound of our shoes sliding against the uneven stone floor broke the heavy silence. Eventually the floor flattened and we reached another door. My master pushed on the handle. It creaked open and we passed through. I shut it behind us.

We were standing in a small rectangular foyer.

Xiao Yao pointed to a wooden bucket resting on the floor.

"This is your toilet," he said. Beyond the foyer there was another door. He opened it and I followed him in. "And this is your room."

Xiao Yao's lamp illuminated the space. My new "home" was a stone chamber built directly under the Golden Buddha and Guan Yin. It was about fifteen feet wide and twenty-five feet long. Large granite slabs covered the walls, ceiling, and floor. I stepped inside. To my left was a two-foot-tall ceramic water jug partially covered by a wooden lid. A ladle made from half a dried squash rested on top of the lid. Farther down, a narrow, three-foot-long wooden table leaned against the wall. A flat-bottomed porcelain pan sat on top of it. The pan was white with a blue geometric design, and it was filled to the top with grains of rice.

Directly across from the table was a small cot with a mattress made out of dried straw and covered by a thin sheet of cotton. A gray woolen blanket lay folded on the bed. On the floor beside the bed was a round yellow meditation cushion.

"Your eight years of practice have prepared you for this day." Xiao Yao's soft voice filled the chamber as his shadow covered one of the walls. "I am confident that you will complete Biguan successfully and discover paradise."

My master used the kerosene lamp to light a stick of incense that he planted in the rice in the porcelain pan.

"I will visit you daily and each time I will light one stick of incense," he explained.

Swirls of fragrant smoke curled toward the ceiling, and the pleasant smell of sandalwood spread throughout the chamber. "Between my visits you will meditate and practice the exercises I have taught you. Do you have any questions?"

"No, Shifu," I responded.

"For the first twenty days of Biguan practice you will get three mountain dates each day. Savor them slowly and chew with wholehearted mindfulness." Xiao Yao reached into the folds of his robe, retrieved the fruits, and handed them to me. "Chew slowly, slowly, slowly," he repeated.

"Yes, Shifu."

"You may drink as much water as you like. Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow."

He left the room and the stone chamber plunged into near darkness. The tip of the incense stick was still burning and it cast a dusky orange glow. I watched it grow shorter. Soon the amber tip dimmed and faded away. The room turned completely black. I made my way to the cot and sat calmly in the dark until a sobering thought finally shook me. *This is really happening!*

I stood up and walked over to the wall, bumping into the table along the way. I used my hands to guide myself along the wall back to the door. I went outside and felt my way to the second door, beyond which lay the spiral staircase that

led to the outside world. I put my ear to the door, but I couldn't hear anything.

To regain my sense of normalcy I used the toilet. Then I returned to my room and explored it again, tracing my way by feeling the walls with my hands. I lay down on the mattress for a few minutes. It was comfortable. Then I got up and walked around the room for a third time.

I returned to the bed and remembered the dates. I popped one into my mouth and wolfed it down. *Mmm, that was good.* I played with the pit for a little while, placed it on the tabletop, and I reached for another, but stopped myself before biting down on it.

"Chew slowly, slowly, slowly." I remembered Xiao Yao's words and decided to save it for later. I got up and had a drink of water. It tasted sweet and fresh. The air was also fresh. *There must be a ventilation shaft somewhere.* I tried to find it but couldn't, and after a while I gave up.

I took a nap. When I woke up, I was disoriented. *How long have I been here? An hour? Two? Maybe more? Is it dark outside?* I had no way of knowing. I was already losing my sense of time. But since I wasn't tired, I got out of bed and began to practice Qigong.

As promised, Xiao Yao returned to visit me the next day. I heard the outer door open and close. Then the door to my room opened and closed. He entered, this time with no lamp, holding only a lit stick of incense.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes, Shifu," I replied.

"Is there anything you would like to ask me?"

"No, Shifu."

He probed my head with his fingers to check my energy level, and then he empowered me with his Qi by pressing on my Midbrow Point. The buzzing energy flowed into me like an electric current. Then he empowered a few of my other energy points. By the time he was done working on me, the incense stick was almost completely burned out.

Xiao Yao pulled out three dates from under the folds of his robe and handed them to me.

"Keep on practicing," he instructed.

"Yes, Shifu."

"I'll see you tomorrow," he added, and walked to the door.

"Good-bye, Shifu."

The door shut behind him, and after the incense stick was extinguished, I was plunged into pure darkness again.

We repeated the same routine every day, but each time Xiao Yao visited he empowered different energy points in me. Once he placed his hands on my shoulder blades for a long time. Another time he empowered two energy points on the soles of my feet. On a different occasion, Xiao Yao pressed hard on two very sensitive points along the upper ridge of my eye sockets for a long time with his thumbs. I almost cried from the intense pain. But when he released the pressure the inside of my head brightened like the daytime sky.

I suffered occasional pangs of loneliness during the first week, especially right after Xiao Yao left. But those feelings quickly subsided, and after a while I didn't feel them at all. Surprisingly I didn't feel hungry after the third day, not even once. I discovered that fasting alone in the dark without any tantalizing distractions was quite easy. My master's Qi, the dates, and my Qigong practice nourished me sufficiently.

As the first week melted into the second, my sensory awareness began to unravel. I became a point of consciousness floating through the darkness, materializing a body whenever I needed to move, materializing a psyche whenever I experienced a feeling, and materializing a mind whenever I produced a thought.

On one occasion I was lying in bed holding one of my precious dates. *It smells so savory ...* I probed the fruit with my fingers. *It feels so smooth ...* I sunk my teeth into the flesh and slowly sliced off a small chunk. *It tastes delicious*

... My mouth became a pool of sweet saliva. I swallowed and took another bite. When I finished eating the fruit, I played with the date pit in my mouth, chasing it around with my tongue like a cat romping around with a ball of yarn.

Then I rested with the date pit still in my mouth, and suddenly I had a vision. I saw the date I had just eaten bunched with other dates on the branch that spawned it. My sense of time began to flow backward and I envisioned the sunlight, rainwater, and minerals that created the fruit returning to the sky and the ground as the date shrank away and dissolved.

Then I saw the tree that produced the date begin to shrink until it became the pit of the date that originated it. The backward flow of time sped up, and I saw countless date pits becoming date trees that, in turn, became date pits until I saw the primordial date—the first date that ever existed—disintegrate and return its elemental energy into the void. Then there was absolutely nothing.

In a flash I realized that what had happened to the date in the vision also applied to every other living thing that ever existed, including *me*. Ultimately, *every* living being is a thread stitching through a different part of the tapestry of the universe, but originating from the same mysterious, fathomless source. I instantly understood with lucid clarity that I shared the most fundamental aspect of my being with everything else alive: *all life is one*.

After this realization, my experience of the dark chamber changed in a very surreal way. The room became a three-dimensional stage on which vivid visions manifested constantly, one after another. Multicolored, otherworldly, swirling skies displaced the solid, dark ceiling. The stone walls crumbled and I found myself in a lush evergreen forest carpeted with ferns and wildflowers. Then that scene would vanish and another one would appear. Next I'd be in a stunning golden meadow by a gurgling stream, gazing up at geometric patterns parading across the sky like neon-

colored falling stars. These visions filled me with gleeful joy, and soon I completely forgot about the world above ground, the one dressed up in duller colors and coarser textures.

At about the same time these visions began, Xiao Yao announced, "Jihui, twenty days have passed. You have completed the first stage of the practice. From this point onward you won't be eating any more dates, but you may continue to drink as much water as you want."

A few days later he informed me, "Today I am going to empower your Central Meridian."

I sat down on the yellow meditation cushion, and Xiao Yao stood behind me. The incense stick cast its orange glow over both of us. As my master touched the top of my head, I closed my eyes. Almost instantly I felt a very powerful current of energy shoot into the core of my brain and continue right through the central axis of my body, all the way down to the base of my pelvis. I shook as though the ground under me were quaking.

"Focus on your Lower Dantian," Xiao Yao instructed.

The force intensified, and the current of energy expanded like a powerful, gushing waterfall of light roaring right through me.

"Breathe deeply," he said.

Xiao Yao placed a finger on the midpoint between my eyebrows and put his other palm on my back directly behind my navel. He shot another bolt of Qi into my spine. That current flowed upward to my neck and then a warm, tingling feeling spread throughout my face. My nose, lips, tongue, ears, and eyes were electrified. Dazzling light filled my head, radiated back down toward my spine, and then cascaded down each vertebra to my kidneys, which became two luminous little suns.

Xiao Yao empowered me again. This time his energy flowed in deeper. It penetrated my bone marrow and filled every bone in my body with extraordinary bliss. As I inhaled,

a groundswell of indescribable love washed over me. As I exhaled, I was swept far, far away by euphoric ecstasy.

“Keep meditating,” Xiao Yao whispered.

That was all I could do. That was all I wanted to do. My entire being was consumed by the experience, which was drawing me further in. A fireball shot up from the base of my spine to the top of my head and beyond. Brilliant light flooded my whole being. The luminosity was blinding. It was as though the sun had risen inside the dark chamber.

A blue light began to vibrate at the top of my head. It settled into my Upper Dantian, the area at the center of my head. The light expanded and spread indescribable joy as I “sipped” a little oxygen. Breathing became intoxicating and the pace of my breath slowed down to a trickle.

The blue light flowed down into my Middle Dantian, the area at the center of my chest. My heart opened up like a delicate, million-petaled flower. I would have screamed, but I was hardly breathing. My only escape from the overwhelming bliss was to slow down my breathing even more. But even so, the wave of ecstasy continued to carry me further and further in, and I completely melted into the sea of light.

The next time I saw Xiao Yao, he said, “Jihui, two days have passed since the empowerment. You have been sitting motionless and in deep meditation that whole time.”

The experience had felt timeless, and it took a while for my sense of self to return. When it did, I observed that I had undergone yet another transformation. My psychic sensitivity had greatly expanded, and I could “feel” the presence of all the Qigong masters who had meditated in the dark chamber before me. I could perceive their thoughts and feelings imprinted in the stones. The walls began to speak to me. They imparted the collective wisdom of the masters. I listened and learned from them. They looked over me as I practiced. They became my teachers.

At this stage I left my body and journeyed beyond the dark chamber virtually every time I sat down to meditate. I soared high above the monastery like an eagle, and from there I flew wherever the whimsical winds carried me.

Once they led me down the Xiang River, and I visited my hometown. I flew over Yi Suo and the boiler room, my apartment building, my high school, and the stadium where I ran hurdle races.

Another time I hovered high above a different town. Although I had never seen it before, it was vaguely familiar, and I flew down to take a closer look. I landed near a stone bridge covered by a wooden roof near a small river. Women in wide-brimmed bamboo hats scrubbed clothes and linen by hand against flat stones. The wheat in the nearby fields was turning yellow. It was autumn. I entered the town through the main gate.

The streets were narrow, and the buildings were constructed in a style that was popular a thousand years ago. I walked along a bustling street lined with stalls. Merchants peddled cackling chickens and colorful fruit. I stopped by a little noodle shop and peeked in. It smelled good. A few men with white turbans on their heads sat on low stools. They slurped noodles and chatted in a strange dialect, but I could understand them perfectly.

Then I heard some commotion and I turned around. A palanquin shouldered by four strong, wiry men headed down the street. They carried a young, dignified nobleman. Pedestrians moved to the side of the road and bowed their heads. I looked closely at his face. Though we looked utterly unlike, I instinctively knew that he was *me*.

The townspeople, the streets, the bridge, and the river all suddenly vanished and I was back in the dark chamber seated on my cushion. I stretched my limbs, walked to the water jug, dipped the ladle into the jug, and drank. I returned to the cushion and settled down again. The dark

chamber vanished, and I was soon flying high above the monastery again, departing on another adventure.

At this stage of my Biguan practice, I spent at least half my waking hours exploring mystical realms. I encountered strange, nonhuman dimensions and met all kinds of intelligent beings. The rest of my waking hours were spent in deep, blissful meditation nourishing my Qi. Sometimes a whole day slipped by in one sitting that felt like only a few minutes. Xiao Yao's visits passed in quick succession.

More than fifty days had passed when my master said, "You are ready to take the next step. I am going to teach you an advanced meditation called Bu Jing Guan Gong. This is a dangerous practice that shouldn't be performed until all your energy channels are fully open and your Qi is highly refined. You have reached that stage. From now on when you meditate, gather into yourself all the filth, evils, negativity, and hideous darkness in the world. Become a container for everything that is ugly, revolting, and loathsome.

"Draw into your soul all the woes suffered in the hearts of all suffering beings. Become a magnet for grief, depression, anguish, sorrow, and all the darkest shadows hiding within. Invite rage, terror, panic, lust, and cruelty into your meditation. Fill your soul with the vilest blackness. Keep on inviting all this malevolence relentlessly. There are no limits to the vices you should invoke. And whatever arises, continue. The practice won't be complete until you move through all the fear you encounter. You *must* overcome whatever challenges darkness throws your way. Transform your heart into a sword of purity and slay any fear you experience. And whatever you do, don't retreat."

This meditation was unlike any other my master had ever taught me, and as soon as I began to practice it, I sensed an ominous shift. The blissful light I had experienced when I meditated previously began to fade. At first I experienced a gray, murky energy forming around me like a gloomy cloud.

Then the cloud darkened. The light and bliss vanished and instead dreary, troubling emotions surfaced. I tried to insulate myself from the growing negativity, but it overwhelmed me, and soon the chamber became completely black again.

On one occasion in that state, I sensed another presence in the room. I opened my eyes, and what I saw startled me. No more than three feet away, right in front of me, was a skeleton. I didn't know what to do, so we simply stared at each other. The skeleton was completely still. I moved slightly and it also moved slightly. Its bones were translucent. I could see straight through them to the bone marrow inside. As I inhaled, I noticed a pair of lungs appear under its expanding ribcage. When I exhaled, the spongy sacks deflated. After taking another breath, I realized that the lungs were mirroring my exact breathing pattern.

Those are my lungs!

The skeleton I was observing was my own. I was no longer afraid. My inner sight had been awakened. I looked at "my" head. The cranium became translucent. I examined the folds of my brain. Then I looked through my eye sockets to the back of my skull. I scanned my heart. It was beating fast. I was excited. My stomach was empty. I saw the scar on my lower back from the knife cut I received when I fought Zhang Gong and his gang. I spent the next few days exploring the most fascinating world I had encountered so far—my own body.

A few days after experimenting with my newfound psychic ability, I returned to the practice of Bu Jing Guan Gong. Over a period of several days I continuously invoked the ills of the world with renewed enthusiasm, and the thick, gloomy darkness returned quickly. The walls became silent, and the heaviness around me grew increasingly oppressive.

Suddenly a chill invaded the room. I ignored the cold at first, but the sensation gradually became intolerable. The iciness penetrated through all the layers of my body. The

frosty sting penetrated my skin and chilled my blood. My teeth chattered. The chill sank into my internal organs. *I am going to freeze to death*, I thought. Then I recalled my master's words, "*Don't retreat!*" I tried to keep my resolve, but I panicked and opened my eyes. Within seconds the cold sensation stopped.

I began practicing again. And this time I made a vow: *I'd rather die than open my eyes*. The cold sensation returned quickly and assaulted me mercilessly. I felt as though my whole body was submerged under freezing, arctic water. I shook uncontrollably. *I'm going to die ...* I nearly panicked again. *Then let me die ...*

I withstood the relentless pain for an indefinite time. My resolve was steadfast and unwavering. The torture became worse. There was nothing for me to do but press on. After surviving the most bitter moment of hellish anguish, I felt a tingle of warmth. A pulsation of glorious heat began to build between my kidneys and radiate out.

Next a fireball surged from the base of my spine. It shot up from my tailbone along my spine into my brain and then all the way up to the top of my head. That energy spread warmth and pleasure wherever it went. *Mmmm ...* Another fireball shot up. My internal organs began to defrost. Every warm cell in my body began to vibrate blissfully. The ecstasy continued to build to an inconceivable level of rapture. I remained in that state for a long, long time.

After my energy settled, I began to practice Bu Jing Guan Gong once again. The ominous darkness returned as I focused harder than ever, eager to gather more negativity. Soon another uncomfortable sensation manifested: itchiness. I felt as though an army of ants had invaded the dark chamber with marching orders to parade all over my skin. I touched my face and scalp for an instant just to make sure there were no insects. There weren't.

I allowed the itchiness to spread into my mouth, down my throat, and into my internal organs. The itchiness

crawled into my nose and up my sinuses into my brain. Every part of my body was extremely itchy. The prickly sensation was maddening, but I didn't scratch myself. The experience was even more intolerable than the cold, but I controlled myself and plowed through the agony.

Soon the sensation subsided and the same fireball surged up from the base of my spine into my brain. I was hurled into an ecstatic state, but this time my body felt more deeply purified and the energy washing through me was even more refined.

This same pattern repeated itself several times, only on each occasion I suffered a different kind of energetic "torture" before experiencing blue light and bliss. The next affliction was heat. I thought I was going to burn alive. After that I couldn't breathe and became convinced that I would suffocate to death. I braved both challenges and was rewarded on each occasion with more blue light and even more exquisite, long-lasting bliss.

Soon it became harder for me to dredge up any negativity. After a while there was no darkness left for me to invoke. I continued to practice Bu Jing Guan Gong, but since there was no more darkness to be found, I remained steadily anchored in the blissful light. I waited patiently for the next wave of torment to arrive, but it never came. Instead an utterly ineffable event took place.

Perfect Peace

I was meditating cross-legged on the yellow cushion. Suddenly I had the sensation that I was in an ascending elevator, and I rose higher and higher and higher ... There was no top floor, and the higher I soared, the brighter it became. I felt like a tiny flame hurtling toward the sun. The brilliance spread through me and intensified. I merged completely with this boundless ocean of blazing light until I was extinguished.

My mind ceased to function. Nothing stirred my consciousness. There were no thoughts, no feelings, no movements, no shapes, no sounds, no textures, no desires, no fear, no divisions, and no edges. There was absolutely nothing, nothing, nothing. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do. All activity ceased, yet this formless radiance brimmed with its own fullness and completeness.

As I became this vast, spacious openness, an indescribable stillness set in. It was a restfulness that transcended all the bliss and ecstasy I had experienced in all my meditations combined. And from this self-radiant serenity emerged one exalted quality: *perfect peace*.

"Jihui ..." An incoherent sound rippled through the tranquility ...

"Jihui ..." The voice reverberated through the unwavering silence ...

"Jihui." The sound coalesced meaning. My master was reeling me back in.

I opened my eyes and suddenly the stone chamber materialized in the midst of the brilliant luminosity. The physical darkness and the spiritual light coincided.

"*E mi tuo fo*—Buddha bless you," Xiao Yao said.

I was lying on the mattress; my master was seated on the floor beside me. A long time passed before I spoke.

"Shifu ..." I uttered softly.

"I've been here at your side for the last eight days."

"Eight days?"

"I found you slumped over on the floor. I called out your name. You did not respond. I checked your breathing. You had no discernible breath. I checked your pulse. You had no discernible pulse. I picked you up and put you down on the mattress."

"No breath? No pulse?"

"This experience is called *xiao si er da huo*—Small Death, Big Life."

"Was I dead?"

“Yes and no. It was a controlled death. I remained at your side to make sure you did not cross over for good.”

“The light is so beautiful ...”

“In Buddhism we call it *Kong*, the void. The Daoists call it *Wuji*, uncreated infinity. This realm is ever-present, but it is only revealed when a soul is purified and all mental activity ceases. It is the condition the Buddha realized while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. It is nirvana.”

“... so peaceful.”

“It is your true nature. Perfection is who you really are.”

“Somehow I feel completely different than I did before.”

“Much karma has been lifted.”

“Shifu, you sound tired.”

“During the Small Death your Qi flow can become stagnant. The presence of an experienced master is critical. I watched over you day and night to make sure that your meridians remained strong. But don’t worry,” he reassured me, “I can recover my Qi quickly.”

We sat silently in the darkness. The room radiated an aura of pure love and compassion. After he left, I remained on the mattress. Even though the room was physically dark, I could still perceive the brilliant inner light shining throughout. It didn’t matter whether my eyes were open or closed. The dark chamber was bathed in clear white light. I couldn’t see the actual contours of the chamber with my physical eyes, but I could sense the walls and even the position of the furniture.

The stone room felt like a dreamy apparition floating in brilliant emptiness. The peaceful spaciousness was still present, only now it permeated the walls, my body, and even my thoughts. The finite world of form was arising in formless infinity, and despite being holed up in a small, dingy space, I experienced complete freedom.

I was thirsty. I stood up. My body felt incredibly energized. My Lower Dantian was as warm as a stove and bursting with Qi. I was supercharged with energy. I felt like

jumping around, and I leaped across the room to the water jug. I took a sip. The experience triggered an explosion of sensual delight. Immeasurable force moved through my limbs, and I spontaneously began to roll around on the floor. I leaped to my feet and ran around the room, bouncing off the far wall as I slapped the ceiling with my palm. I darted back and forth like a rubber ball. I kicked my legs up in the air and walked around the room doing a two-finger handstand. I was light as a feather and possessed the strength of a tiger. These spontaneous, explosive body movements continued for hours.

“Shifu,” I remarked the next day, “I’m feeling a new, strange sensation.”

“What are you feeling?” he asked.

“Energy buzzing from my fingers. The Qi is very potent. If I put my hands in prayer position, I feel a cloud of energy forming above my head, and then energy shoots up from my fingertips into the cloud like bolts of lightning.”

“The Small Death has awakened your inner power, Jihui. You have developed the ability to discharge the same electric Qi I used to empower you. You must be very careful with this energy. It is very powerful and precious. You must not abuse it, especially now. You are still young. It takes time to master this power. I will train you. Experiment on yourself, but promise me that you won’t use it on anyone for the next ten years.”

“I promise.”

After three more visits Xiao Yao announced, “Eighty days have passed. You have completed the second phase of Biguan. You must prepare for the journey back into the physical world. The final phase begins tomorrow.”

The next day my master brought me a bowl of thin rice milk sweetened with honey. I touched the liquid with my tongue. It unleashed a tidal wave of sensual pleasure. I spent hours relishing just a few drops. When I took another

sip, I cried with happiness. It took me the entire day to drink the full bowl.

Each time Xiao Yao visited, he brought me another bowl. The rice milk became thicker until it had the consistency of porridge. Then one day he brought me a peach. It made me delirious. The following week he brought me cucumbers, then fried lettuce hearts, bok choy, and finally leafy greens sautéed in ginger.

Every time he came, Xiao Yao also brought an additional incense stick to get my eyes accustomed to the light. I liked staring at the glowing embers. He also began spending more time with me in the dark chamber. Occasionally he did energy work on me, but mostly we just talked about trivial matters. We were both very happy.

On each of the last three days of Biguan, he brought me a steamed sweet potato, which I relished. The last day Xiao Yao brought a kerosene lamp. He placed it on the tabletop and gave me a peach.

"This is your last day in the dark chamber. Eat the peach and meditate. I'll be back for you in a few hours."

My master returned holding another lamp.

"*Gong de yaun man*—the task is fulfilled," he said, handing me the lamp, and then added, "This time we leave together."

I took one last look at the dark chamber and closed the door behind me. I followed my master upstairs. As he opened the door, the first sounds I heard were the monks chanting in the temple. They were reciting the Great Compassion Mantra. The night sky was clear and the stars glistened. We sat at the feet of the Golden Buddha and joined them in prayer. After we were finished, I followed my master back to his room and lay down on the bed. Within minutes I was sound asleep.

Follower of the Truth

When I awoke, the sun was already up and the room was awash with light. The small window softened the impact of the dazzling brightness, which was nonetheless an awesome sight. It looked as though someone had repainted the world during my stay underground. Even the drab colors inside the room were exceedingly vibrant.

Xiao Yao's bed was already empty, and I was overcome with the urge to go for a walk. The fresh air was drenched with the musky scents of summer. My nose reveled in the medley of smells. The sight of a small flower brought dizzying delight. Its delicate fragrance melted my heart. As I ventured farther, I couldn't help touching every tree trunk I passed.

I bent down, scooped up a handful of soil, and scrunched it in my fingers. I saw worker ants scurrying on the ground. I blessed them. The breeze caressed my body, and I stood back up and admired the sky. The outer world was exceedingly beautiful. Overwhelmed by the glory of nature, I screamed out in ecstasy. The sky screamed back. When I heard the echo, I swelled with deep love for the world and my heart shattered into countless shards of adoring gratitude. Then a surge of energy shot through me, and I ran up and down steep mountain trails and along the gurgling creeks until lunchtime.

When I saw Xiao Yao in the dining hall, I was speechless. In his presence my heart became an ocean of love. As usual, I ate my lunch in silence. Temple food was simple and bland, but my first meal out of the dark chamber was a wild culinary adventure. The flavors were magnified a hundredfold. I could even distinguish the different tastes between two grains of rice. As I chewed, I closed my eyes and returned to the clear white light. I was so happy that I could have stayed at Jiuyi Temple for the rest of my life, but my summer holiday was about to end.

Xiao Yao was extremely busy; apart from our morning practice by the Rainbow Tree, I barely got to spend time

with him. But the night before I left, he set aside some time and we had a serious conversation.

“Tomorrow you return to *fan shi*—ordinary society,” he stated. “Worldly life is not like monastic life. The monks up here have it easy. Our life is simple. We know our routines in advance, and there are few surprises. Secular life is much more challenging. There are plenty of attractions and distractions to pull you in many directions. Obligations and responsibilities will drag you one way, then the other. Leading a spiritual life in the secular world requires great strength of character. There is a saying: the lesser sage lives in the mountains while the greater sage lives in the city.”

He looked at me with deep compassion. “Strive to be good.”

“Yes, Shifu,” I replied.

“You have awakened extraordinary powers this summer, Jihui, but you have only begun your journey as a healer. Behind the sky there is another sky. There is much more for you to learn. Don’t imagine that you are special or better than anyone else. Despite your abilities, you are an ordinary human being. Keep your heart open. Practice compassion whenever you can. Practice modesty. *Jie jiao jie zao*—avoid arrogance, impatience, and coarseness. Be kind and loving all the time to everyone.”

“Yes, Shifu.”

“When you return, focus your energies on school work. The next two years will be demanding. You must make every effort to get into a good university. Only a small percentage of students who apply are admitted, but I am confident that if you devote yourself to your studies you will succeed.”

“I will study diligently, Shifu.”

“With a university education and your Qigong training, many doors will open and you will make a mark on the world. Your destiny is bright. Wherever you end up, always remember that you are *xiu dao zhe*—a follower of the truth.”

The next morning we practiced by the Rainbow Tree, chanted in the main temple, and ate lunch together. Then I packed my bag and he accompanied me to the main gate.

"Buddha bless you, Jihui," Xiao Yao said.

My legs froze. I didn't want to leave him.

"Okay, go on now. Good-bye. See you next winter break."

"Good-bye, Shifu," I said affectionately, and left.

Walking down the mountain, I cheered up again and began to sing. Along the way I met two mountaineers. They were carpenters. Each one was carrying two wooden doors on his shoulders, and they were heading to the market to sell them. We walked together for the rest of the way. I bid them farewell at the bus station. I boarded the bus and then the train.

The view thickened with cars, buildings, and factories. I arrived at the Xiangtan railway station and walked home. My mother and father greeted me warmly. They prepared a delicious feast that included all my favorite dishes. We talked for a little while and then I went to my room. I lay in bed wide awake, staring at the ceiling. The thoughts now occupying my mind were those of a teenager contemplating the upcoming school year. But they evaporated as the ceiling fell away, and I dissolved into the peaceful light.

University Days

Becoming Robert Peng

The school term began. I focused on my academic studies and completed my sophomore year with top grades. I also trained hard for the track team and ended up winning the regional hurdling championship. Xiao Yao's presence was with me each time I took a test or ran a race, and I partially attributed my success in both endeavors to him. During winter break and the following summer break I returned to Jiuyi Temple to further my spiritual and healing training.

My junior year was a repeat of the previous one. I did well academically, won the regional hurdling championship again, and continued to visit Xiao Yao during my breaks. The following year, after I graduated from high school, I did not visit the temple. Instead I stayed home, studied, and took the national entrance exam in July. Then I applied to various universities.

In mid-August I received an acceptance letter from the admissions department of Zhongnan University in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province.

I wrote Xiao Yao immediately:

Dear Shifu,
Good news! I was accepted to the four-year
program at the Foreign Languages Department at

Zhongnan University in Changsha. I'll be majoring in American and English Literature.

—Jihui

On registration day my father accompanied me to Changsha, which was a one-hour bus trip from Xiangtan. We were given directions to my room and found it easily. Three bunk beds were evenly spaced across the room.

I chose the top bed nestled in the far corner, which I figured would give me a little more privacy. Six small hardwood desks lined the wall between the beds. My father made my bed and set up a mosquito net while I unpacked my suitcase.

"Study well, Jihui, and come home whenever you miss your mother's cooking," my father said tenderly before he left.

My roommates were from all over China. We each talked Mandarin with different accents, but we shared a common love of the English language, the subject we were all majoring in. We ate dinner together and prepared ourselves for our first class the following morning.

All the English classes were held in the Foreign Languages Department, a white three-story building on a small hill in a quiet section of campus.

"Good morning and welcome," our professor said the first day. "My name is Professor Zhou. Since you are all English majors, I won't ask you to introduce yourselves by your Chinese names, but instead I'll begin by giving you your first homework assignment. Each of you must come up with an English first name by tomorrow morning. Take some time to think about it—it'll be your name for the next four years."

I was so enthralled by the excitement of that first day that I forgot to come up with a name. So on the second day of class when Professor Zhou asked the first student his English name, I broke into a cold sweat. I was the third student he called on.

“And what is your name?” he said, pointing at me.

“Robert.” The name popped out spontaneously.

The name stuck.

My daily routine developed quickly. After class I’d eat lunch with my friends, go back to my room for a short nap, and then go off to a secluded park behind the Foreign Languages Department to practice Qigong. There was a grassy area there where couples would sneak away to steal a few hours of private time. In the early nineteen eighties Chinese society was still very conservative—even holding hands in public was considered improper behavior. I looked for an inconspicuous patch of grass and meditated while a few couples snuggled under the protective cover of trees and bushes.

A short time after the semester began Coach Chen, the head of the track team, was notified that the two-time hurdling champion from Xiangtan was enrolled as a freshman. He dispatched one of the team members to my dorm room to welcome me.

The team member knocked and entered, declaring, “I’m looking for Jihui Peng.”

“Hi,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

He was two heads taller than me.

“Are you *joking*?”

“No, why?”

“Never mind—I must be mistaken. I’m looking for a Xiangtan hurdling champion by the last name of Peng.”

“Well, you’re talking to him.”

“But that’s not possible,” he insisted. “You’re too short to be a hurdler.”

The boy reported back to Coach Chen and I was invited to pay him a visit. When we met, he had the same reaction.

“No offense, but it’s hard to believe that you are who you say you are,” he said with his brow scrunched. “There’s only one way to settle this. I want to see you run.”

I joined a few members of the team on the track. We raced and jumped hurdles. I came in third, beating the tall fellow who had come to my room.

“Unbelievable!” Coach Chen exclaimed as he extended his hand. “Jihui, welcome to the track team.”

Despite becoming close friends with the members of the track team and spending much of my free time with my classmates, I still managed to keep my Qigong practice a secret the first year of school, with one exception. After practicing in the secluded park one afternoon, I saw a brick lying on the walkway. I was buzzing with Qi and couldn’t resist. I didn’t see anyone around, so I picked up the brick and chopped it in half like a block of tofu.

“You know Qigong?” A voice said from behind me.

I turned around and recognized Dr. Zhu, one of the heads of the university’s medical department. I nearly panicked.

“Umm ...” I stammered.

“Answer me, young man.”

“I’ve studied a little.”

“Well, that was remarkable.” He noticed my consternation. “Don’t worry. I’m a big fan of Qigong. I believe traditional Chinese medicine has much to teach Western health care. Do you do energy healing?”

“I have some training.” Despite his enthusiasm, I remained cautious.

“That’s exciting. You must come visit me. I’d like to hear more about your training, and don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone what I saw. Not everyone shares my high regard for Qigong, you know.”

“Yes, sir. I know.”

The aura of intolerance that began during the Cultural Revolution still permeated most of society, despite the greater freedoms that were beginning to creep into our daily lives. I desperately wanted to keep my practice of Qigong a secret for fear of being socially ostracized, or even expelled.

Fortunately Dr. Zhu kept his word, and we became friends. But despite my best efforts to keep my Qigong training private, news of my healing abilities spread during my junior year when I was faced with a moral dilemma that required me to divulge my secret to Coach Chen. The star of the track team was a dashing sprinter named Cheng Feng. He was a talented athlete with a bright future when halfway through the fall semester he developed an infection in his big toe. At first he ignored it and continued to compete with the infection, but his condition worsened. The toe turned black and oozed a vile-smelling fluid. The pain became intolerable and Cheng Feng went to the infirmary. The university doctor gave him antibiotics, which didn't help. Coach Chen accompanied him to the hospital to consult with an expert.

"We're worried the infection will spread to your blood," the doctor warned. "I strongly suggest we amputate the toe."

Cheng Feng was devastated. And when Coach Cheng shared the news with the team, he was on the verge of tears.

"I think I may be able to help," I told the coach privately.

"How?" he asked.

"I have some Qigong training."

Coach Chen was a modern man with a scientific outlook. He did not hold traditional Chinese healing methods in high regard. Under any other circumstance, he would have laughed in my face, but he was also a practical man. "I guess there's nothing to lose at this point," he said.

Cheng Feng agreed.

I removed the bandage from around his foot. The infected toe looked horrible.

I directed white-colored Qi directly into it for fifteen minutes. The following day Cheng Feng looked slightly less pale. The noxious discharge had stopped. Two days later I

treated him again as Coach Chen looked on. The next day the toe was turning pinkish.

"It's looking much, much better," Coach Chen said, sounding surprised.

"It doesn't hurt as much," Cheng Feng added.

After the third treatment I could sense energetically that the vicious Qi had been neutralized. Within another week the toe healed completely. Word began to spread about my healing abilities, but instead of treating me as an outcast, people became curious and expressed a sincere interest in learning more about Qigong.

When the semester ended, I returned home for a few days and then traveled to Jiuyi Temple as I did every winter break. I arrived on a cold day during the first week of January 1985. The hike up to the temple was not easy. The trail was muddy at the base and icy higher up. The trees were bare and the gusty wind stung. Once at the temple I found Xiao Yao in his room.

"Hello, Shifu," I said, handing him a bag of dried lychees.

He greeted me with a tender smile, "Buddha bless you."

I updated him about my school work and told him about Cheng Feng.

"You did well." He placed a handful of sunflower seeds and peanuts mixed with dates in my palm. "Here, have a snack."

Xiao Yao spent the rest of the day and nearly every moment of the whole vacation with me, which was unusual. In the morning we practiced by the Rainbow Tree, and the rest of the time he reviewed everything he had ever taught me. My master didn't teach me any new practices, which was also surprising. In the evenings we spoke for hours, reminiscing about the past and discussing personal matters. He was relating to me more like a doting parent than a Qigong master.

He often brought me back heaps of food that visiting pilgrims donated to the temple.

"Eat, eat," he insisted.

At dusk the day before I left, he suggested, "Let's go practice by the Rainbow Tree."

We had never before practiced by the Rainbow Tree in the afternoon. As we arrived the sun was beginning to set. When we were done, we walked back to the monastery in the dark through the snow. After chanting in the main hall we returned to my master's room. He seemed unusually reserved.

"Jihui, this year there might be some turbulence in your life. Don't let any interruptions distract you from your studies. Continue to practice Qigong and study. Be strong." Xiao Yao looked at me with loving, tender eyes.

We went to sleep early and got up before dawn. In the morning chill we went to the kitchen. Xiao Yao wrapped three warm sweet buns and placed them gently in my satchel. We walked to the main gate together, side by side.

"Good-bye, Shifu," I said.

It was very cold.

"Good-bye, Jihui."

Midway through the spring semester, I went to check my mail between classes. There was a telegram for me. I opened it. The message was curt: *Shifu passed away*.

There was no signature, but the return address was Shaping County where the monastery was located. The bell rang. Class was about to begin. I obediently returned to my seat in a fog and didn't hear a word the teacher said. Class ended. I went to the student administrator's office, still dazed.

"I'd like permission to leave campus," I said.

"Why?" the man behind the desk asked.

"My uncle died."

"Your uncle? We don't give students leave unless an immediate family member passes away."

"We were very close."

He sized me up as he considered what to do.

"He was like my father," I added sadly.

"Oh, all right." He handed me a permission slip. "Here you go, but you must be back in a week."

I ran to my room, packed some clothes, and rushed to the train station. I hadn't bothered to check the schedule, so I waited eight hours for the next train and eight hours more for the bus. I refused to accept the news and half expected to see Xiao Yao running around the monastery when I got there.

I didn't arrive at Jiuyi Temple until the following evening. I was ushered to Liu Bo's room. The abbot was surprised to see me.

"Come in," Liu Bo said.

"Is it true?" I asked.

"How did you find out?"

I showed him the telegram.

"We didn't send this to you, but I think I know who did. It must have been Niuazi, one of your Shifu's older disciples. He was here a few days ago."

Niuazi was very poor, and the postal service charged for telegrams by the word. That would explain why he hadn't signed the message.

"Xiao Yao spoke to me two weeks ago. He told me he was going to 'leave' soon. He wasn't sick, but he said his time had come. He didn't look it, but he was ninety-five years old. He asked me to keep the news of his death from you until you returned this summer. He didn't want to disrupt your studies."

As Liu Bo spoke, I remained silent.

"He talked to me about you for a long while that day," Liu Bo added. "*Xiang ni lei*—he missed you very much."

My eyes swelled with tears.

Liu Bo continued. "The next morning after we spoke, one of the young monks entered his room. Your master was sitting on his bed ... He still looked like he was in deep

meditation. Buddha bless him. We haven't buried him yet. Would you like to see him?"

"Yes," I replied.

Xiao Yao's body was resting inside a ceramic jar the size of a barrel in an open-air room called the Soul Palace, awaiting his burial date. The stars twinkled above. A statue of the Buddha stood near the wall, and red and yellow banners inscribed with prayers were hung all around. Incense smoke wafted up toward the sky. I lifted the wooden rim of the jar. Xiao Yao was inside, seated in lotus position. His eyes were closed, and he was smiling. His skin looked normal. There was no foul smell. He looked alive, and for a moment I believed that he was going to open his eyes.

I knelt down before the jar with my forehead on the floor.

"*Shifu, yi lu hao zou*—Master, I wish you a good journey," I said.

I bowed and repeated the ritual prayer thirty-six times. When I was finished I sat in front of the jar for a long time. It was still dark when I returned to his room. I burst into tears. I cried for as long as my exhausted body could weather the grief. Then I fell into sweet slumber and had many lucid dreams in which Xiao Yao visited and comforted me.

When I woke up I returned to the Soul Palace. I bowed another thirty-six times. All the monks joined me in the room and we chanted the Great Compassion Mantra. I spent all morning beside my master's body. All day long I ferried back and forth between the Rainbow Tree and the Soul Palace. The next morning I informed Liu Bo that I had to return to the university. I bid my beloved master farewell one final time, and left Jiuyi Temple.

On the train ride back to Changsha, the reality of Xiao Yao's passing really set in. I had always relied on my master for guidance. Although I was only twenty-one, I realized that from then on I would have to rely on my own inner guidance and be my own master.

Later that year my mother passed away, and soon afterward, my grandfather died. It had been almost a year since Xiao Yao's cryptic warning about my impending hardships. And despite my efforts to be strong, I lacked enthusiasm and faltered academically during my senior year.

During the last semester I became more social to distract myself from my grief. I formed a salon with two other friends. We discussed the cultural, political, and economic changes sweeping across China. We organized debates about social transformation. Our salon grew, and we created a journal called *Road to the New Horizon* that was well received and inspired other salons to form on campus. I wrote an article for the first issue about the influence of Laozi, the founder of Daoism, on Chinese culture, and another piece about Xiao Yao for the second issue. Then the school year ended.

Teaching English and Teaching Qigong

Graduation day drew near. All the seniors were scheduled to meet with representatives of the Student Distribution Committee, the group responsible for job placement. My advisor, Assistant Dean Huang, was an administrator in the Foreign Languages Department.

I knocked on his door.

"Come in," he said.

Dean Huang was seated behind his desk. He scrutinized me through a distinctive pair of horn-rimmed glasses. He had lived abroad for two years, and the experience had imbued his style with an air of international sophistication.

"Sit down, Robert."

I did.

"Have you considered your professional future?" he asked.

"I have," I answered.

“And ... ?”

“I’d like to work for a foreign trade company.”

“I see. Well, let me be direct with you. At this time we don’t have a quota for employment in a foreign trade company. Do you have any other ideas?”

“Not really.”

He leafed through my file.

“Overall, your grades are pretty good. You placed third last summer at the regional track meet, your behavior is exemplary, and,” he looked me straight in the eye, “I really appreciate what you guys did with *Road to the New Horizon*. I’d like you to consider staying on at the university. We need English teachers and I think you’d make an excellent one. What do you think?”

I had never really thought about becoming an English teacher at the university, but the idea of staying on and becoming a member of the faculty appealed to me immediately.

“All right.” I accepted the position on the spot.

“Then let me be the first to welcome you to the Foreign Languages Department.”

The class of nineteen eighty-six graduated. The campus thinned out, and I stayed on. I moved to the faculty dorm and spent that summer at the university preparing for the fall semester.

One evening while I was working, there was a knock at my door.

“Come in,” I said.

It was Dr. Zhu.

“I hear you’re going to stay on and teach English. Congratulations!” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Look, I’m here to discuss a sensitive matter. Do you have time to talk?”

“Sure. What’s wrong?”

"I have a good friend. His name is Mr. Liu. He's one of the top administrators. You've probably heard of him. Anyway, he has crippling lower-back pain. The doctors have tried to help, but he's still suffering. He's been lying in bed for more than a week. Can you give him a Qigong healing?"

"Sure."

"But we'll have to keep your visit quiet. He doesn't want anyone to find out about it," Dr. Zhu explained.

"I understand," I replied.

Dr. Zhu called his friend to inform him that we were on our way over. We walked to Mr. Liu's home and found him in his room, flat on his back in bed.

"Hello," Mr. Liu said coldly. I realized instantly that he had agreed to indulge his friend's whim and see me only out of desperation.

"Hello, Mr. Liu," I said.

I diagnosed his condition, and after I figured out the problem, I treated him and empowered a few energy points. While I worked, Mr. Liu kept making annoying, condescending comments.

"Are you afraid of pain?" I asked him when I was done.

"No." The question puzzled him.

"Good, then you won't mind putting up with some," I warned him, then added, "I'll need a beer bottle. Do you have one lying around?"

"A what?" he blurted out in a sour voice.

"A beer bottle."

He rebuked me with a surly expression and then finally said, "Yes. You'll find one in the fridge downstairs."

I returned to Mr. Liu's bedroom holding a chilled bottle by the neck.

"Please raise your right leg, Mr. Liu," I instructed.

He looked at me in disbelief.

"Oh, all right," he complained while he positioned himself on the edge of his bed, grunting and straining as he slowly lifted his leg.

When his leg was perpendicular to the floor, I grabbed his foot and smashed the base of the beer bottle against his heel three times—*bang, bang, bang!*

“Ahhhhh!” he shrieked, turning pale.

“Stand up,” I snapped before he had a chance to get angry and yell at me.

“What?”

“Stand up and walk, Mr. Liu,” I insisted.

“You’re not serious, young man?” he asked rhetorically.

I raised my voice to ensure him I was. “*Get out of bed.*”

Mr. Liu eased himself off the edge of the mattress and slowly stood up.

“Now walk,” I instructed.

“Walk?”

“Yes, walk.”

He took a cautious step. His face lit up, and he smiled.

“Hey, I can walk!”

Mr. Liu paced back and forth alongside his bed a few times.

“Dr. Zhu, look. I can walk!”

Dr. Zhu, who had been watching the whole time, seemed relieved.

“Young man, you wait here,” Mr. Liu said to me cheerfully.

He left the room for a few moments and came back with a bowl full of Mandarin oranges.

“Please take these as a token of my appreciation. They are very sweet.”

I thanked him and left with Dr. Zhu.

“What on earth did you do to him?” Dr. Zhu asked in astonishment as we walked back to campus.

“The doctors couldn’t help him because the source of his pain was not physical. Mr. Liu had a stubborn energy block and a lot of damp Qi in his lower back. I removed the blockage and I empowered him to revitalize his weary body. The beer bottle helped ground his Qi, but it also served a second function. The shock of the pounding helped clear his

mind of doubt. Without the acute pain, it would have taken longer for him to ‘believe’ that he could walk,” I explained.

After witnessing Mr. Liu’s successful healing, Dr. Zhu began to discreetly send me more of his friends and colleagues for treatments. A small group of notable university professors became my first patients.

Nonetheless, the significance of this development was overshadowed by the growing apprehension I was feeling about the coming semester. My first teaching assignment as a university assistant lecturer was for an English class for science students. I toiled for weeks putting together a lesson plan. I prepared sixty pages of notes just for the first day of class.

The night before my debut, I was extremely nervous, and when class began I couldn’t even focus on my notes. The students were just a few years younger than I was. As I stood in front of them, I felt the weight of fifty pairs of eyes staring at me. I introduced myself, following the “script” I had prepared. I was stiff and spoke mechanically. My breath was shallow and my voice felt weak.

Then I took a few deep breaths and addressed them as a caring friend rather than an authoritative teacher. I made some humorous remarks and the atmosphere loosened up. I settled into an easygoing teaching style, and the students relaxed. We had fun and our time together was productive. To my surprise, after class was over, I realized that I hadn’t referred to my notes even once. After I taught a few more classes, my confidence grew. That semester my students taught me an important lesson: I *loved* teaching.

In 1989, three years after I began teaching, I met Wuhui, a sports instructor at the university. Just a few years older than I, he was also an advanced Qigong practitioner and healer. During the Cultural Revolution he had learned similar practices to the ones Xiao Yao had taught me. We shared a common personal history and worldview, and we soon became good friends.

During this time Qigong was becoming more accepted in China, and Wuhui and I were inspired by this change. We formed a Qigong club and began teaching some close friends and doing private healings. Mr. Liu gave us permission to use an empty dormitory room as our Qigong “clinic.”

Later that year I finally revealed my “true” Qigong identity publicly by entering the year-end talent show sponsored by the Foreign Languages Department. More than two hundred people were in the audience, including my colleagues and students. Almost none of them knew I practiced Qigong.

The emcee introduced me: “Please welcome Robert Peng and some members of his Qigong club. Tonight they will demonstrate their special abilities.”

As I stepped out on stage with a few of my students, murmurs ran through the crowd. I began by snapping a chopstick into two pieces by pressing the pointed end against the base of my throat. The audience gasped. Then I brought one of my Qigong students up on stage and placed a long, sharp spear tip against the same spot on his throat. The room quieted. While holding the handle, I pushed the spear into him. He held his ground and it bent like a bow. I pushed harder. *Crack!* The wooden handle snapped in half. The audience gasped, but once they realized he wasn’t hurt, they let out a roar of applause.

We followed up with a few more demonstrations. Finally I asked for a volunteer from the audience to take down the large round clock hanging up on the wall. I held it between my hands while facing the audience and then asked them to count down from ten to one.

They began, “Ten, nine, eight, seven ...” and as they reached “one” I strongly projected my Qi into the clock and made the second hand stop. Their applause continued for a long time. Afterward a swarm of people surrounded me to shake my hand and ask questions.

That evening Dean Huang burst through my door without knocking.

“Robert, that was amazing!” He grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously. “I didn’t realize that my department was a lair for crouching tigers and hidden dragons.”

“Thank you, Dean Huang,” I said.

“You don’t understand—my whole life I’ve dreamed about learning Qigong, but I could never find a teacher. Please accept me as your student.”

“I’m happy to teach you, but Qigong requires an ongoing commitment.”

“I’ll do anything I have to do.”

“All right then, you’re welcome to join our practice group.”

Dean Huang became one of my most enthusiastic Qigong students. He practiced daily for two hours. The following year the Qigong club entered the talent show again and Dean Huang’s stellar performance stole the show.

My World Opens Up

Hainan Island

After each of the Qigong demonstrations, my popularity on campus surged higher, and an increasing number of students signed up for Wuhui's and my Qigong classes and healings. Mr. Liu was also indirectly responsible for spreading our reputation as healers beyond the university. He had an influential friend who was involved with the local television station. Her situation was desperate, and he asked me to help her. The woman sent a car to my dormitory, and Wuhui and I were driven to her apartment.

Mr. Liu's friend was an attractive woman in her early forties who had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a big lump on her left breast, and her physicians had already scheduled surgery to remove the breast. Ironically, she displayed the same disapproving haughtiness Mr. Liu did when we first met, but behind the arrogance was extreme fear.

Wuhui and I treated her together a total of three times.

Less than a month later, she drove to the university and knocked on my door.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"How are you feeling?" I asked once she was inside my office.

"The lump has gradually shrunk. This morning I checked again. I looked everywhere. It's completely gone!" she

exclaimed.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely sure. I check it every day. I check it ten times a day!”

“That’s wonderful news.”

“Robert,” she said, holding my hand warmly, “thank you.”

After her healing more people from beyond campus began to come to Wuhui and me for Qigong treatments, and the number of students signing up for Qigong training continued to increase. We were spending more time practicing Qigong and healing patients than teaching our university classes. However, not everyone approved of our activities. During one of our Qigong classes there was a knock at the door. The president of the university came in with a group of security guards.

“We received an anonymous complaint that you’re involved in dangerous activities,” he said. “I insist that you stop immediately. I won’t allow anyone to get injured on my watch.”

We argued with him and explained that despite some of the dramatic feats performed for demonstration purposes, Qigong was safe. Finally, he relented and allowed us to continue, but the incident made Wuhui and me realize that the university campus was still not an ideal place for us to practice Qigong openly.

“The next time someone files a complaint, they could make us stop teaching,” I remarked.

Wuhui made a radical suggestion, “We should quit our jobs and move to Hainan Island. We can open up a healing clinic there safely and charge for our services.”

He was right. If we truly wanted to teach Qigong, Hainan Island was the best place to go. Back in 1988 Deng Xiaoping, the leader of China, had declared Hainan Island a “Special Economic Development Zone.” Government restrictions were loosened and millions of free-spirited

Chinese flocked to the island in search of wealth and glory. Wuhui's suggestion fired up my imagination, but I also questioned its practicality.

"Look," he said, trying to convince me, "we won't be accepted as professional Qigong healers here anytime soon. There's still too much resistance. We're young and talented. This is the time to make our move."

"Wuhui, you're absolutely right," I told my friend after thinking about it. "They won't accept us here. Not for a long time. Let's do it!"

So that summer of 1992, Wuhui and I set out on an exploratory trip to Hainan Island. We boarded a train for Zhanjiang at the southeastern tip of China. When we arrived at the Zhanjiang railway station, dark gray clouds churned above as fat raindrops fell from the sky.

"We're expecting a typhoon," one of the locals warned us, "and they say it's gonna be a *bad* one."

Wuhui and I decided to continue our journey despite the foul weather. We boarded a bus and headed for the seaport to catch the ferry to Hainan Island. The sky howled as the bus rolled toward the port. The heavy, battering rain slowed us down, and the bus arrived just as a ferry was leaving. I had never seen the sea before, or a typhoon. The waves swelled as high as two-story houses and battered against the cement dock, creating a fine mist of saltwater droplets that surrounded the port.

"Sorry, boys," the ferry ticket clerk said, "that was the last ferry."

"When will the next one leave?" I asked.

"Two, maybe three days."

"Three days!" Wuhui cried out. "What are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Find a place to stay right away. Once the typhoon gets going, coconuts fly through the air like cannonballs."

The winds picked up. The streets emptied. We found a small hotel with a vacant room. It was a mess. It hadn't

been cleaned after the previous guest left—even the sheets were still soiled. The owner charged us an exorbitant rate for its shelter. We spent the whole day and all night inside as the rain raged outside. But we couldn't afford another day and the owner wouldn't lower the rate, so Wuhui and I had to leave in the morning. When we stepped outside, the wind pushed us around like rag dolls.

"We can't stay here!" Wuhui screamed. "We'll be killed."

"The worse it gets the bigger our success will be!" I screamed back.

We managed to secure a ride that took us farther inland. The storm wasn't as violent once we got away from the shoreline. We found an empty school building and got permission to camp out in one of the classrooms until the weather calmed.

On the third day we went back to the seaport and boarded a ferry to cross the deep blue waters of the South China Sea to reach Hainan. Once on the island, we stayed with a friend I knew from the university who lived there. He showed us around the tropical paradise, which was carpeted with lush vegetation and bordered by white sandy beaches with pearly cliffs. Everyone he introduced us to was optimistic, open-minded, and driven by high hopes.

"The seafood is delicious and the fruit is sweet," Wuhui said with a grin. "I love this place."

"Me too. Even the air tastes sweet," I replied.

We returned to the university a week before the start of fall semester with the intention of resigning our teaching positions. But as soon as I got back, I began to doubt the move. At the time I was involved with a second-year student named Ling Ying. She was beautiful, charming, and kind, and we were very compatible. We spoke hypothetically about her joining me on Hainan Island after her graduation in two years, but I realized that a separation might challenge our relationship.

"I did it—I resigned," Wuhui proudly announced shortly after we got back.

I turned inward for guidance, and the message I received from my meditation was clear: *Follow your destiny to Hainan Island.*

I broke the news to Ling Ying.

"I'm going to do it," I said, welling up with emotion.

Her eyes moistened but she stifled her tears.

"It's important for you to follow your heart," she said tenderly. "I'll support whatever you decide to do. And if you do go, I'll visit during winter break and get to spend my first warm winter beside you."

Next I made my decision official by reporting it to Dean Huang.

"This is a huge move, Robert. Are you certain you want to do this?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"Before making a final decision, hear me out. You're in an enviable position. In a few more years you'll be promoted to associate professor. I don't have to tell you what that means: a bright, risk-free future. Although some people at the university still frown on Qigong, you can still continue to practice and teach it discreetly and have the best of both worlds. But if you quit now, you're on your own. You might strike it big, or you might fall flat on your face. You'd be paying a high price for an uncertain future. So let me ask you again—are you sure?"

I knew Dean Huang was looking out for my best interest, but something larger than my own personal well-being was at stake. I was responding to the call of destiny. I knew with certainty that my days as an English teacher were behind me. It was time to openly assume my role in the world as a Qigong master.

"Thank you, my friend, but I'm sure. I've made up my mind. Whatever happens, I'll be fine," I told him.

"In that case, Robert, I wish you good luck."

He shook my hand sincerely.

Two weeks later Wuhui and I were back on Hainan Island. We moved into adjoining apartments and immediately opened up a small Qigong clinic. One of the first people we treated was an old friend of mine from the university who had studied French. After graduating he had lived in Zambia for two years. There he had contracted a virus and lost all his hair, including his eyebrows. He now wore an odd-looking hairpiece. He worked as an interpreter for the foreign affairs department of the city government and often had to travel and meet with high-level officials and foreign dignitaries.

“Robert, I’m very self-conscious about the way I look,” he confided. “My doctors prescribed hormones to make my hair grow. I’m taking them now and my hair is growing back, but only in patches. And if I stop taking them the hair growth will also stop. But I’m worried about these drugs. They’re toxic, and I’ve been warned that they can cause organ damage. Can you help me?” he asked.

Wuhui and I worked on him several times, and I taught him a Qigong practice to help him boost his Qi. Within three months his hair was growing naturally. He threw out his hairpiece and the hormone pills.

My friend worked closely with the mayor of Haikou, the capital of Hainan Island. The mayor had been in a bad accident and was experiencing debilitating pain in both his elbows. He came to our clinic at my friend’s request. We treated him three times, and within ten days he was fully recovered. The mayor was a powerful man and very well connected with the most influential business and political leaders of Hainan Island. He directed many of his friends to our clinic, including the national security advisor’s wife, who suffered from a heart condition. She was so impressed with the results of our work that she flew Wuhui and me to Beijing, where we treated top government officials.

After we established our clinic, Wuhui and I decided to teach Qigong classes again. We spent days creating a detailed five-page flyer that included our biographies, lineage, the Qigong practices we taught, and our class schedule and prices. We posted the flyers throughout the campus of a local university. At our first class only one person showed up. She was a graduate of our university who recognized my name, and we taught her for free.

A week later a Shaolin monk posted his own flyers all over campus. They read, *Shaolin monk. Free Qigong demonstration. Friday night at the auditorium. 7:30 p.m.* The words were handwritten on bright white paper in thick red brushstrokes. Three hundred people attended. The event was a huge success. We learned an important marketing lesson from this Shaolin monk.

The next time we promoted our Qigong classes, we followed his lead. We made large posters advertising our free demonstration and posted them all over campus. A thousand people came and three hundred of them signed up for classes.

Through a series of introductions, we then met one of the most influential government officials of the island, Chi Fulin, who directed CHIRD, the China Hainan Institute for Reform and Development. The institute solicited foreign investments and forged strategic partnerships between Western companies and the Chinese government. Chi Fulin organized conferences attended by world leaders and multinational CEOs.

“On the first evening of our conferences we usually entertain our guests with a show that includes traditional Chinese singing and folk dancing,” he explained. “I hear that your Qigong demonstrations are exciting and that you speak English well. I’d like you to spice up our show tonight with a Qigong segment. Why not give it a shot and see how the guests react?”

Wuhui and I did a demonstration that evening similar to the one I had performed at the talent show. None of the dignitaries had ever seen a Qigong performance before. Afterward, an enthusiastic crowd formed all around us. We shook dozens of hands and received open invitations to visit many foreign countries. Chi Fulin was pleased with the warm response and asked us to become a regular part of the program.

“Robert, some of our guests are inquiring about your Qigong treatments. Would you be open to helping them?” Chi Fulin asked a few weeks later.

“Sure,” I replied.

“Good. I’ll arrange to set up a VIP treatment room at CHIRD reserved just for this purpose.”

We treated a few important guests who reported back enthusiastically to Chi Fulin. Following that positive feedback, we continued to heal a steady stream of guests.

In July of 1993, after one of our Qigong demonstrations, I was introduced to Bob Hawke, the former prime minister of Australia, by Ruan Chongwu, the governor of Hainan Island.

“That was an extraordinary show of power,” Hawke said. He had thick silver hair and a formidable presence.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“My good friend Governor Ruan informs me that you’re a miracle worker. Well, I’ve got a nagging back injury from golf.”

“Robert, would you be kind enough to give the prime minister a treatment tonight?” Chi Fulin inquired.

“Sure, Mr. Chi,” I replied.

I worked on the prime minister, and when I was done he was sound asleep on the treatment table. I left him there and went back home. Early the next morning I received a telephone call from Chi Fulin’s secretary. I was invited to join the prime minister, Governor Ruan, and Chi Fulin for breakfast at the institute. Knowing it would be a formal event, I wore a suit and tie. Ten of us sat at a round table.

Prime Minister Hawke was the last person to arrive and sat down between Governor Ruan and Chi Fulin. I was seated directly across from him. He and Governor Ruan talked business the entire time. Hawke didn't even acknowledge me until the very end.

But before breakfast ended he turned to the governor and said, "Mr. Ruan, above everything else, the best thing that happened to me on this trip was meeting this guy." Then he pointed at me. "I feel great. I've never experienced anything like Qigong before. I'm a convert."

Everything seemed to be going so well, but at about this time I received some sad news from Ling Ying. We had been apart for nearly a year at this point, and the stream of letters that had been frequent for the first nine months began to slow down, then trickled to a near halt. I flew back to the university. Her attitude had changed. Our long-distance relationship was causing her too much pain. She was a second-year student, and the prospect of two additional years apart was too much pressure for her to bear. Teary-eyed, she broke up with me: "Sadly, we won't get the chance to spend a warm winter together."

Prime Minister Hawke returned to CHIRD later that year. The institute hosted his sixty-fourth-birthday celebration, and I gave him another treatment. When I finished, he stood up and held my hand in both of his.

"Robert, I have three children. My eldest daughter, Sue, has had chronic fatigue syndrome for nine years, and she can barely get out of bed in the wintertime. Do you think you can help her?" he asked.

"I can try," I replied.

In March 1994 Sue Hawke flew to Hainan Island. She stayed on the island for seven weeks. During this time she received Qigong treatments regularly from Wuhui and me as well as several of our top students. I also taught her some practices designed to boost her internal power. The combination of the healings and the exercises quickly

improved Sue's condition, and by the time she returned to Sydney she was fully recovered. The story received widespread media coverage in Australia. People were stunned by her profound transformation. She looked ten years younger and radiated healthy energy. Prime Minister Hawke returned to CHIRD in May. He invited me to dinner along with Governor Ruan and Chi Fulin. This time, I was the last person to arrive at the table. When I did, Hawke stood up and shook my hand vigorously.

"You can't even imagine how much I appreciate what you've done for my daughter. Anything you need—*anything at all*—I'll do my best to help you. And you must also share your Qigong with the rest of the world."

The prime minister put his arm around my shoulder, turned to the governor and Chi Fulin, and said, "He's my man."

Be Xiao Yao

"Come visit anytime, Robert," Sue Hawke said. She was on the phone calling from Australia. "You can stay with my husband and me. The Qi here is great. I'm certain that you will love Sydney and that Australians will love you and your work. And if you decide that you'd like to settle down here, I can help."

Although I was pleased with my life on Hainan Island, I soon became increasingly drawn to the idea of living in a westernized country like Australia where I could speak English freely and learn more about the world. Xiao Yao's vision of my destiny was global in scope, and despite my success on mainland China as a teacher and healer, I sensed that my future extended beyond the borders of my homeland. This feeling grew increasingly stronger, and three years after Sue's phone call, I finally accepted her open invitation.

By that time Wuhui was happily settled down on Hainan Island with a wife and son. Since he was not interested in exploring the world beyond China, I flew to Sydney with another Qigong healer named Zhao on a three-month trial basis to determine how we would fare in a foreign country.

Sue greeted us at the airport and drove us to her home, where we stayed for the remainder of the trip. Prime Minister Hawke organized a welcome party for us at his own seaside house, and I made many new friends overnight. I was struck by the good-natured warmth and openness of the Australians.

Zhao and I opened up a small clinic in a secluded wing of Sue's home. We were pleased by the high demand for our treatments and delighted by the respect our patients showed for our ancient healing art.

"I have a surprise for you," Sue told us one day. She drove us to Sydney Harbor, and we went to a little port where a bobbing seaplane awaited us. It looked like an oversized toy. I had never been so close to a small plane before, and to see one that floated on water thrilled me.

"Are we really going to fly in it?" I asked.

"Climb aboard," Sue smiled.

As we rose in the air, I stared out the window. From above, the multipronged Sydney Harbor looked like outstretched fingers stroking the blue water. We flew along the coast for half an hour and then the seaplane spiraled down, landing smoothly in a small, secluded bay nestled against lush mountains. The exotic colors of the setting summer sun danced upon the greenery. We got off the plane and I breathed in the fragrant sea breeze.

In the serene quietude of the late afternoon, we followed Sue to a restaurant that was cradled by thick vegetation on one side and rippling water on the other. We sat at an outdoor table on the porch and ordered fresh seafood. While we were dining, a laughing kookaburra bird landed on a wooden post a few feet away from me. We looked at each

other, and he let out a cackling chirp that made us all laugh. He came closer to me. I extended my arm and he bounced off the railing and onto my finger. With the bird roving along my hand, surrounded by the lush trees and flowers, I felt like a little boy playing in a fairyland.

In China birds fear humans because they usually hunt them for food, so it's impossible to get close to a bird unless it is caged. Growing up, I commonly experienced a solid wall separating the animal world from the human world. But as this wild bird bounced around on my arm, that wall melted away and both worlds united. This feeling of oneness was as profound and liberating as any spiritual realization I had ever had.

Sue's kindness, the good-heartedness of the Australians, and the natural beauty of the land made me seriously consider moving to Sydney, but it was that funny little bird who finally convinced me to stay.

Zhao and I rented our own apartment and continued to work out of Sue's house.

Shortly after we settled in, Sue organized our first Qigong class.

"Lots of people registered," she told me excitedly.

"How many?" I asked.

"Forty signed up."

I nearly laughed. When I taught in China, a class of three hundred people was considered small. A class of only forty was unimaginable. Even so, my first English Qigong workshop was a significant accomplishment. The students resonated with my teaching style, and I learned to appreciate the personal space that opened up when I interacted with a smaller group of people. The success of the class gave Sue, Zhao, and me confidence that we could popularize Qigong in Australia.

Within a year of our arrival, several articles about Zhao and me had appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and in the *Sun Herald*. Our popularity bloomed overnight, and we

became extremely busy healing people in Sydney and teaching students around the country.

One day in 2000 I received a phone call from Sue on my day off.

"There's an American filmmaker here anxious to see you," she said.

"Do I know her?" I asked.

"No. She found out about you only today and she is leaving tomorrow. She is pleading to meet with you."

Although I didn't feel like working that day, my intuition prompted me to agree. "All right. I'll be there in forty minutes."

When I arrived, the woman was gone.

"Where did she go?" I wondered.

"I don't know," Sue replied, "but she said she would be right back."

Five minutes later a striking woman with a short crop of golden hair walked into the house holding a gigantic bouquet of assorted flowers.

"Master Peng, I am grateful you agreed to see me," she said.

I was taken aback by her spirited enthusiasm and the floating garden she was holding. When we sat down in my office, she told me her story.

"My name is Blake Foster, and I live in New York City," she started. "I was supposed to leave earlier today, but the traffic to the airport was unusually heavy and I missed my plane. There were no other flights I could take. The delay frustrated me because I am recovering from ovarian cancer and I'm still in a lot of pain. After returning to my hotel, I went to a restaurant, and while I was waiting for the food to arrive, I noticed a photocopy of an old newspaper article on the next table. It didn't seem to belong to anyone, so I picked it up. It was about you. By the time I finished reading the article, I finally understood why I had missed the plane. I was supposed to meet you!"

Blake radiated an angelic mix of vulnerability and courage that appealed to me, and we formed an instant energetic connection. As I treated her that day, I felt a cold, stubborn energy block in her lower abdomen. Since she was supposed to leave the following day I “zapped” the blockage extensively until I felt it break and dissolve. The energy discharge was intense and somewhat painful, but she maintained a steady calm. When I finished she was grateful, despite feeling sore and tired.

Blake excitedly called the next day. “Robert, the pain is almost gone, and I’ve decided to extend my stay a few days to get another treatment.”

Three days later I worked on her again.

“Would you consider visiting my husband and me in New York someday?” she asked after the treatment.

“If you organize the trip for me, I’ll come,” I replied.

A few months later Blake called from abroad.

“Robert, we would like to host you in our home,” she said. “I’ve told many friends about you. They would love to meet you and experience your energy. If you stay with us, you can use a room in our house to do Qigong healings.”

I accepted Blake’s invitation and arrived in America during Easter weekend of 2001 for a two-week visit. On the cab ride from JFK to Manhattan, I was overcome by the feeling that this trip was going to alter my life in a significant way. As the outline of New York City appeared in the distance, I felt as though I was on a sacred mission.

I arrived at Blake’s Upper East Side townhouse, and she introduced me to her husband, Craig, a tall, handsome plastic surgeon with a stately demeanor.

“Good to meet you, Robert,” he said in a courteous but reserved manner. “Blake speaks very highly of you.” There was a tinge of uneasy tension in his voice. I understood that while Blake leaned more toward the spiritual and mysterious side of life, Craig was a man of science who felt more comfortable standing on solid, factual ground.

Blake introduced me to many of her friends, including artists, actors, businessmen, doctors, politicians, and other healers. Almost everyone wanted to experience a treatment, and over the course of my stay I worked on scores of New Yorkers from all over the world. The diversity surprised me. I treated individuals of different religions from India, the Dominican Republic, England, Italy, Romania, Papua New Guinea, Turkey, France, and Bermuda, as well as people from all over the United States. I was struck by the positive reaction they each had to my treatments, including Craig, who eventually warmed up to me after he experienced a Qigong healing.

On the drive back to the airport, I reflected on my experience. New York City was the most dynamic and cosmopolitan environment I had ever encountered, and each person I met was eager to hear more about my life and learn more about Qigong. I reasoned that if New York City was a microcosm of the entire planet, then the world was ready for Qigong.

I returned to Sydney a changed man. I loved Sydney, and my life in Australia was fulfilling, but a part of me now longed to explore the unparalleled diversity and opportunities in America.

I returned to New York the following year, and this time I stayed with Blake and Craig for three months. My connection to the city deepened, and the next year I returned again, this time for four months. Initially I thought I could straddle both countries and just juggle two sets of patients, friends, and students. I planned to travel back and forth every few months, but the sensible truth set in after my third visit. For both practical and financial reasons, I would have to decide between residing in Sydney or New York City permanently.

I recalled Xiao Yao's premonition about my role in helping spread Qigong internationally, and I surrendered my ambivalence, allowing the flow of destiny to guide me

onward. I then bid my Australian friends farewell, and in February 2004, I became a New Yorker. I lived with the Fosters for several months until I settled down in my own apartment and rented a room on East 91st Street to use as a clinic.

In October I returned to Xiangtan to visit my family for the first time in five years. On my way back to New York, I spent a few days in Beijing with an old friend named Luo. She picked me up at the airport, and on the ride into the city she started acting strange. I sensed that she had something pressing to tell me.

Finally she spoke up. "How are you doing in New York, Robert?"

"I'm doing well, Luo," I replied.

"Are you seeing anyone?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Not really."

"That's good, because I want you to meet someone."

"Really, who?"

"Her name is Dongmei. She works for an American company and is fluent in English. I know her from my tennis club. She's a really good player, and I think the two of you would get along well." She cleared her throat. "Would you like to meet her for dinner tonight?"

"Sure, why not?" I replied.

I had loved tennis ever since I was a little boy. There was just one tennis court in all of Xiangtan, and watching the players volley back and forth there was always a thrilling show. Until I moved to Australia the closest I ever came to playing tennis was owning my own tennis ball. But in Sydney I had taken a few enjoyable lessons and learned the basics. Tennis players had always held a special place in my heart, so the fact that Dongmei was a tennis player made me want to meet her.

Dongmei joined us at a small, quaint restaurant. She greeted me with eyes that sparkled from behind her glasses. "Nihao," she said in greeting, and sat down.

"Where are you from" she asked in a friendly voice.

"I grew up in Xiangtan."

"Where is that?"

"Hunan Province."

"How about you?" I asked.

I grew up in Baotou, way up north."

We chatted about our backgrounds and families with natural ease. I enjoyed Dongmei's bright presence and her animated openness, and I especially delighted in her warm sense of humor, which came out when she placed her order.

"I don't want to frighten you, but I like spicy food."

"I like spicy food too," I replied.

"Very spicy!"

"No worries," I countered, *"me too!"*

"Then I'd like some mapo tofu, extra spicy," she told the waiter.

The dish came, and three pairs of chopsticks scooped it up from the revolving tray. Dongmei ate calmly.

"It's unusual for a northerner like you to eat a hot dish like this without sweating," I said.

Do you *really* think this dish is spicy?" she asked and teasingly raised her eyebrows. She made me smile.

As the evening progressed, I grew increasingly attracted to Dongmei.

"Would you like to play tennis sometime?" she asked as we were parting ways.

"Yes, I would," I replied.

We met the following day and she showed me mercy on the tennis court. We had a wonderful time together and decided to meet up again before I left the following day. The next encounter deepened our connection, and on the flight back to New York I kept thinking about her. As the distance between us grew, I felt my longing for her deepen. I returned home and unpacked my luggage. I lay in bed battling jet lag, but I couldn't fall asleep. I was still thinking about Dongmei.

I called her the next day, and her voice put a smile back on my face. We spoke daily after my return, spending several hours on the phone each time. Three months later I returned to Beijing and proposed to her. She accepted. We traveled to her hometown to get married, and within three months she had resigned from her position and joined me in New York City. With Dongmei in my life, I felt like a boat in a safe harbor surrounded by calm water. The busy, noisy city full of people rushing around became more peaceful, and New York began to feel more and more like home.

Since Dongmei and I lived near the Fosters' townhouse, we visited them often and I spent more and more time with Craig. He taught me how to ski, fish, and play golf. He was delighted to learn that Qigong could improve his golf game, but his appreciation of Qigong increased most dramatically after I used my healing abilities to help his daughter conceive.

She had sought guidance for years from fertility experts, but they were unable to help her. I worked on her only one time. When I held my hand over her womb, I felt stagnant, cold energy trapped inside. This condition is one of the leading causes of infertility in industrialized countries where ice cold drinks, frozen foods, and air conditioning are prevalent. I removed the cold Qi and empowered her womb with warm, healing energy to support her reproductive functions. Then I "empowered" her husband by giving him a Qi boost and harmonized the flow of energy between them. One month later she called to report the good news. Her doctor pinpointed the date of conception to within one week of her treatment.

Craig was deeply grateful, and he began to introduce me to other physicians, one of whom was a sprightly woman with bubbly blue eyes.

"Robert, I'd like you to meet Dr. Florence Comite. She is an associate clinical professor at Yale University who

specializes in preventive medicine and age-management medicine,” Craig said.

“Hello, Robert,” Dr. Comite said. “I would like to experience what you do.” Her words reflected sincere humility.

After her first Qigong treatment, Dr. Comite—or Florence as she asked me to call her—became fascinated by my Qigong abilities. Being a genuine scientist with a strong pioneering spirit, she committed herself to the study of Qigong. She wanted to awaken Qi flow in her own body and experience firsthand the merits of this ancient healing art. From her own experience she soon became convinced of the health benefits of Qigong, and she referred many of her patients to me.

About a year after I met Florence, she called me up with an interesting proposal.

“Robert,” she started, “I’m part of a committee that is organizing the first annual Yale Integrative Medicine Scientific Symposium. This event will be attended by professors and medical students interested in alternative forms of medicine. Would you consider doing a presentation on Qigong?”

“I’d love to,” I replied.

When the day arrived, I drove to Yale with Florence and Dongmei. About a hundred people attended the symposium, and I was one of several presenters slated to do a one-hour workshop after the keynote speech.

When the main presentation ended, the participants broke up into smaller groups and headed to one of several rooms where the workshops were being held. My room quickly became overcrowded and we had to switch to a larger one. Then that room filled beyond capacity and we had to switch rooms a second time. When we were finally ready to begin, twenty minutes had passed. I made a few introductory remarks about the history of Qigong and then briefly described my childhood, including the training I

received in the boiler room and my incubation inside the dark chamber at the monastery. Then I presented a PowerPoint slide show that laid out the basic principles underlying the science of Qigong. In the last few minutes I proposed to do a demonstration of Qi power.

I asked to borrow a dollar bill from someone in the audience. Several hands went up, and I randomly selected a volunteer, who came to the front of the room and handed me a crisp one-dollar bill. I selected another volunteer and showed them both an ordinary plastic chopstick, the kind available at most Chinese restaurants. I asked them to each grasp one end of the chopstick. Then I stood between them and empowered the dollar bill with Qi by running my hand over it. I grasped one end of the bill, then raised and lowered it twice, tapping the chopstick lightly with the narrow edge of the bill each time. The third time I brought my hand down quickly in a slashing motion and sliced cleanly through the chopstick with the dollar bill.

There was a stunned moment of silence followed by enthusiastic applause. When the presentation ended, I was surrounded by students and professors bursting with questions. I was delighted with the outpouring of interest about Qigong from members of one of the top medical institutions in the world.

After my experience at Yale, I reflected back on my life, noting that my destiny has always unfolded in a pattern of circles that extended progressively farther out into the world. From the boiler room at Yi Suo, to Jiuyi Temple, to Zhongnan University, to Hainan Island, to Sydney, to New York City, to Yale University. Each circle was a station where I underwent a personal transformation that prepared me for my next stage of development. It then dawned on me that the next circle in the series should be to write a book about my life and Qigong. This is the book that you are holding.

This work marks another turning point in my personal evolution, and hopefully yours. I wrote it because I

recognized that in order to crystallize Xiao Yao's vision of Qigong going global, I needed to both share my story publicly and make the knowledge I received from my beloved master accessible to anyone who was interested.

Having taught Qigong to over a hundred and fifty thousand people across many cultures and countries, I have learned to appreciate the diversity of perspectives each practitioner embodies. Yet despite these differences, there lies an essential spiritual core that unifies us all. The practices described in the rest of this book aim to awaken and develop that aspect of our common humanity.

My master was a devout Buddhist monk. Like so many others of my generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution in China, I didn't identify with any particular faith. In all the years I studied with Xiao Yao, he never overlaid any religious beliefs or dogma on his Qigong teachings, and neither do I. Everyone can benefit from the practice of Qigong regardless of race, gender, or religious belief.

If you are a person of faith, the Qigong practices in the chapters ahead will enrich your religious expression with wisdom, love, and vitality. And if you are a staunch atheist, the practices will enrich your humanism with more wisdom, love, and vitality. Qigong improves our performance in any domain of human activity much as an operating system upgrade improves the performance of any program installed on a computer.

However, there is one important prerequisite to practicing Qigong: being able to smile and enjoy yourself. Having fun doing the exercises is the key to progress. And adopting an easygoing style is the secret to spiritual success. Incidentally, "easygoing" is the meaning of my master's name, Xiao Yao, so when practicing Qigong, be *xiao yao*.

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Awakening Qi Power

The Spiritual Journey

Each of the great spiritual traditions of the ancient world recognized the existence of a fundamental Life Force that permeates the universe and sustains all life, and whose cultivation is intimately connected to a person's spiritual development. The existence of this universal energy was accepted cross-culturally and formed the basis of every major spiritual worldview. The Egyptian priests called this energy *Ka*, the Indian rishis named it *Prana*, the Bible's prophets referred to it as *Ruah*, the Greek philosophers knew it as *Pneuma*, the early Christians alluded to it as *Spiritus*, and the sages of China called it Qi.

But for some baffling reason, the modern world has almost completely forgotten about it. This energy is even more subtle than the invisible air we breathe, and maybe that's part of the reason why it has slipped out of our awareness. Or perhaps it disappeared from the radar screen of modern knowledge due to its close association with religion.

If the wisest sages of the pre-modern world were to suddenly materialize in contemporary society and spend a few days examining our achievements, they would most certainly marvel at our technological advances—our cars, cell phones, and computers—but they would be equally

perplexed by our blatant ignorance about our own Life Force.

What makes the modern scientific omission of Life Force so incredible is that you don't need any sophisticated equipment or advanced training to experience it. Within a matter of seconds you can activate Life Force in your own hands, and within minutes you can learn to pulse waves of this energy between your palms or even with another person. Experimenting with Life Force is easy and fun to do, and a little taste of it usually stimulates people's curiosity to venture further into exploring its mysterious properties.

Speaking from personal experience, I can attest to the extreme potency of this energy. By leveraging its power through breathing, visualization, and meditation exercises, I developed the ability to go into deep, blissful trances that transported me into otherworldly dimensions, and I awakened remarkable spiritual abilities, such as the power to perceive human energy fields, the psychic sensitivity to identify energy blockages that cause disease, and the capacity to remove those blockages energetically.

Many other kinds of spiritual powers can be developed by harnessing Life Force, including the psychic ability to "read" the past, the capacity to influence the future through prayers and blessings, and even more wild, esoteric capacities, such as Xiao Yao's ability to walk on water. But ultimately, altered states of consciousness and supernatural powers do not constitute the primary goals of spiritual development. There is one spiritual accomplishment that prevails over all the others, just as the sun outshines all the stars in the daytime sky, and that is the attainment of *happiness*.

What do I mean by happiness?

Genuine happiness is a condition of constant well-being that doesn't depend on any external cause or circumstance. For example, getting a raise may make you feel temporarily

happy. But after the initial excitement wears off, do you still feel particularly happy? Not always.

Genuine happiness doesn't need an excuse to be. It just is. Whether being promoted or fired, a genuinely happy person is able to maintain an even, steady sense of self-contentment that flows undisturbed, just like an underground freshwater mountain stream that continues to flow even as the sky clouds over and a rainstorm appears.

As a boy I was fortunate to meet my master, Xiao Yao. He guided me up the path to the summit of the most beautiful peak in the spiritual world, happiness. My master learned the way there from his master, who followed in the footsteps of his own master, and so on. Now it is your turn, if you feel inspired to allow me to guide you on this same spiritual journey.

Part 2 of this book—the section you are about to read—is entitled Awakening the Four Golden Wheels. You might be wondering what those are, so I'd like to give you a sneak peek at this next leg of our journey before we begin.

“The Four Golden Wheels” refers to an integrated network of subtle energy centers located inside the human body that are directly connected to your capacity for genuine happiness. When your wheels are awakened and packed with Life Force—or Qi, as I will refer to bioenergy from now on—your life automatically becomes a healthier, more energy-rich, enjoyable, and meaningful adventure in which you can actualize more of your dreams.

I have taught many students how to awaken and empower their Four Golden Wheels, and in this section I will show you how to do it too. I begin by teaching you some basic skills, and then I introduce a series of exercises designed to awaken and empower each of the Wheels. I refer to all these techniques as the master key to happiness, and in Part 2, I offer you this key.

In Part 3, I show you how to channel the awakened energies of the Four Golden Wheels beyond your body and

out into the world where you can use them to shape your environment more consciously, like a sculptor molding a piece of amorphous clay into a discernible form. Finally, in Part 4, we consider how to manage the energies of the Four Golden Wheels in the context of everyday life, in intimate relationships, and in the expression of your highest destiny.

The goal of this entire process is to initiate your transformation into becoming a Qigong master—a genuinely happy individual. We all possess that potential within us, and we are about to set out on an exciting, life-changing adventure to discover it. By the time you reach the final page of this book, I am confident that you will experience yourself, the people in your life, and even the entire planet in a brighter, sweeter light.

Now let's begin our exploration of Qi with a little game ...

EXERCISE 1 **Lengthening Fingers Using Qi Power**

1. Begin by matching the ridge line between your wrists, then bring your palms together in a “prayer-like” position. Notice that your fingers are the same length.



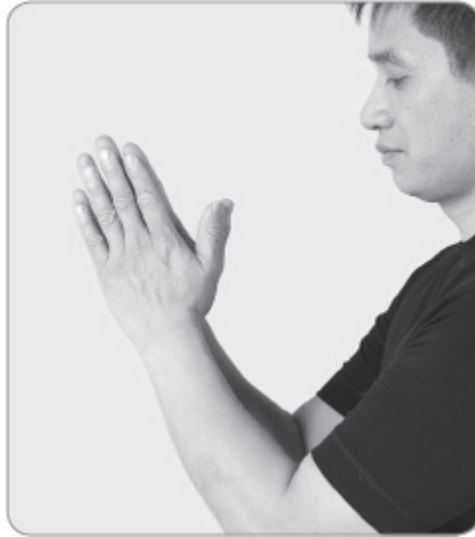
Put your hands together in a prayer-like position so that your fingers are the same length.

2. Rest your left hand comfortably on your lap. Raise your right hand up to shoulder height, keeping it straight with your fingers relaxed and pointing upward. Now close your eyes and imagine that your fingers are growing longer and longer. Think, “My fingers are growing longer, longer, longer, and *longer!*” Feel your fingers growing, growing, growing, and *growing!* Visualize your fingers stretching beyond the ceiling, above the clouds, and all the way up into outer space. Continue doing this for about thirty seconds.



Think: My fingers are growing longer, longer, and longer

3. Now open your eyes and match your palms up together again in a prayer-like position as you did in Step 1, and observe your fingers.



Match the length of your fingers again.

Do you notice that the fingers on your right hand have grown longer? Yes, indeed! Usually the fingers on the right hand will be a little longer than those on the left hand, and sometimes noticeably longer. When I do this exercise in a group, a few people always gasp in amazement.

Let's analyze the results of this exercise. You didn't shake your hand or pull your fingers with the other hand to make them longer. You just used your mind to visualize your fingers growing longer, and they did. This suggests that there must be some internal force doing the work that you can control with your mind. There is, and that internal force is your Qi.

There is a Qigong saying: where the mind goes, Qi follows. Exercise 1 is intended to let you experience that principle directly. Although most of the time we are not aware of the subtle relationship between our thoughts and our energy flow, the two are always intimately connected.

Even if your fingers didn't grow the first time, don't worry. For some it takes a little practice to get Qi flowing consciously. Simply move on to the next exercise, and try

lengthening your fingers again when you reach the end of this chapter.

In the next exercise you will experience your own Qi more tangibly by playing with “Sword Finger.”

EXERCISE 2 **Sword Finger**

1. Make a loose fist with either hand. Then extend your index finger and middle finger outward and wrap your thumb around your ring finger and little finger. Keep the index and middle fingers straight and relaxed, without tension. This hand gesture is called “Sword Finger.” Now visualize a “beam of energy” shooting out from the two extended fingers like a flashlight. That beam of energy is called the “Blade.”



Sword Finger and the Blade of energy.

Video 1—SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

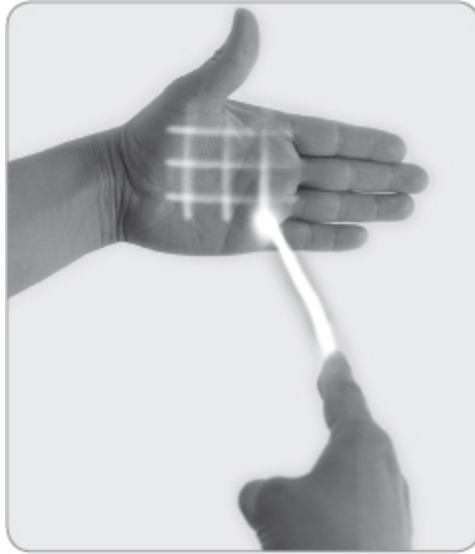
2. Aim Sword Finger toward the palm of your other hand. Visualize the tip of the Blade poking the center of the palm. Keep your palm relaxed. Bring Sword Finger a few inches closer and then move it back a few inches. Move slowly and concentrate. Feel the slight, pointed pressure on your palm as

you move in closer, and then feel the pressure release as you move away. Can you feel it? This is your Qi. Repeat the movement for thirty seconds. You can close your eyes to amplify the experience even more. Once you are comfortable feeling this Blade of Qi, you can move on to Step 3.



Poke the center of the palm with Sword Finger to feel your Qi.

3. I will now show you how to use Sword Finger to trace lines. First trace a few horizontal lines across the palm of your hand. Feel the Blade penetrating deeply and feel the sensation of movement as the energy Blade glides back and forth across your palm. You might perceive the feeling as a light breeze or heat moving across your skin. Do you feel it? This is your Qi. Now trace a few vertical lines up and down the palm of your hand. Do you feel your Qi in this direction? Good. If not, keep concentrating until you do. When you're ready, move on to Step 4.



Trace horizontal and vertical lines with Sword Finger.

4. Now let's trace circles. Use Sword Finger to slowly trace circles around the center of your palm. Feel the movement sensation of your Qi as the Blade goes around and around. Concentrate on this movement for thirty seconds. Reverse directions, and feel your Qi from this direction for another thirty seconds.



Trace circles with Sword Finger.

Now, what can we conclude so far? At the very least we can say confidently that Qi really exists, that we can control it with our minds, and we can direct it through our hand movements.

Discovering your ability to feel and circulate Qi is like stumbling upon another sensory organ. As this experience develops further, a whole new dimension of reality opens up where all kinds of new and exciting experiences can occur.

Just imagine being able to absorb the energetic essence of a fragrant rose through your palms and then circulating this Rose Qi up through your arm and into your heart, or sensing an energy blockage in another person and sending them Healing Qi through Sword Finger to dissolve it, or soaking up warm, glowing Sun Qi on your face and then sharing that energy with someone through a loving kiss. With continued practice, all of these experiences and many others can become part of your moment-to-moment reality.

Once we recognize the omnipresence of Qi, we become like a fish who finally notices that there is water everywhere. Suddenly the empty air around us abounds with countless currents of energy continually flowing within us, from us, and through us in an endless ocean of Qi.

Does the possibility of coming into a relationship with this more animated version of the universe excite you? Personally, I find it thrilling.

In the next chapter, we will play with more complex energy patterns and deepen your awareness of your own Hand Qi.

Playing with the Qi Ball

Creating a Qi Ball

In the next exercise we will learn how to create a Qi Ball between our palms.

EXERCISE 3 **Creating a Qi Ball**

1. Rub your hands together vigorously for twenty seconds. Make sure to maximize the skin contact between both palms. This is a simple yet effective way to activate your Hand Qi.

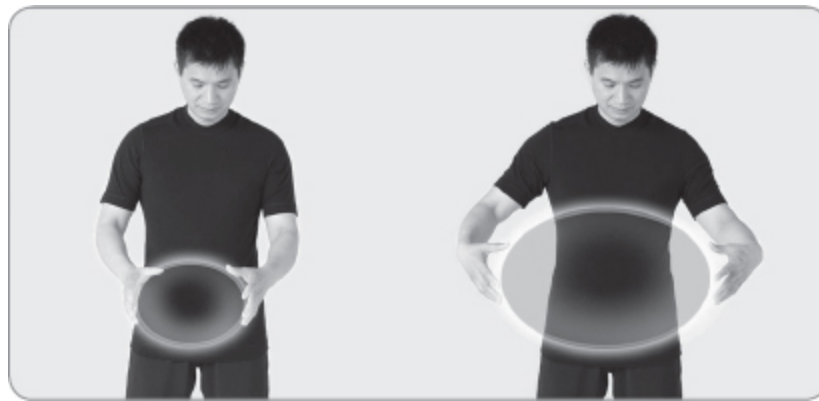


Rub your hands together vigorously.

Video 2—SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

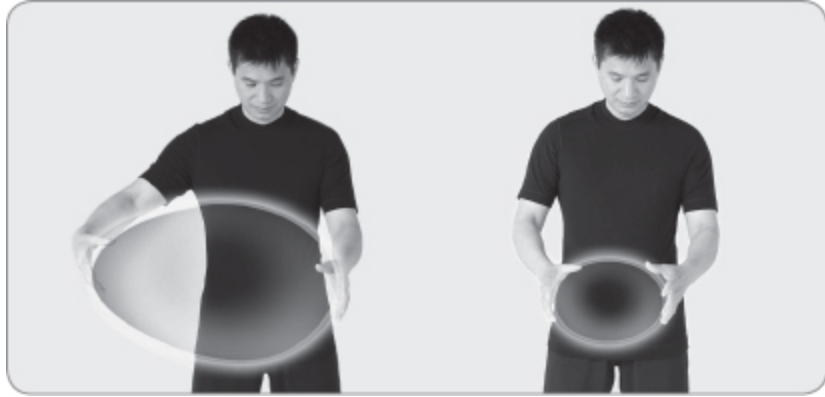
2. Hold your hands hip-width apart in front of your body with your palms facing each other. Keep your

arms and hands supple and relaxed. Be aware of the sensations both on your hands and between your hands. You might feel pins and needles, warmth, a slight pulsation, or “buzzing” energy. Bring your hands closer together until they are only a few inches apart, and then move them back out again slowly. This movement will stabilize and amplify the energy between your palms. Can you sense an energy field forming between your hands that feels like a subtle magnetic field? This pulsation is called a “Qi Field.” Continue doing this for at least twenty seconds. Stop when your hands are about an arm’s length apart.



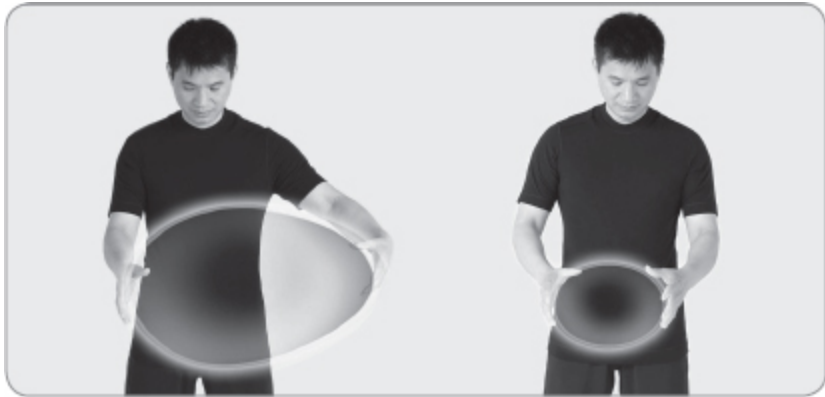
Bring your hands together and apart to create a Qi Field.

3. Now keep your right hand still and slowly move your left hand toward the center, in front of your body. Then keep your left hand still and bring your right hand slowly toward the center. Feel pressure building on both palms as the right hand comes closer to the left hand. Don’t let the hands touch—keep the palms at least a few inches apart, allowing the pressure to build. Hold this position for a few seconds.



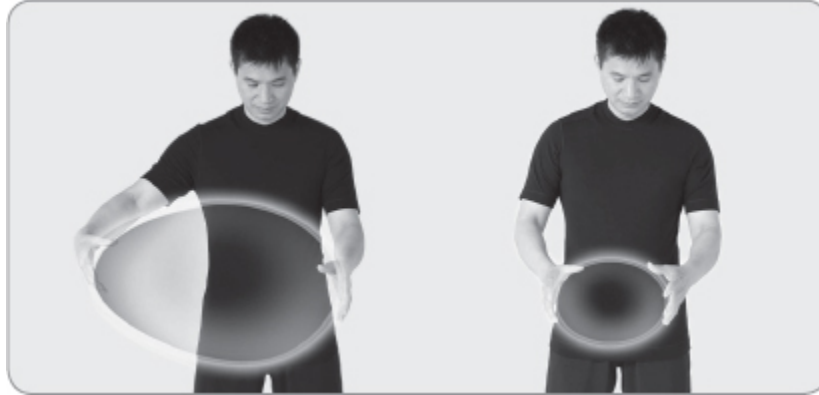
Move your left hand toward the center, then the right hand.

4. Allow the pressure to “push” your left hand an arm’s length away and feel the pressure release from your right palm. Then move it back toward the center and feel the pressure increase on your right palm again.



Move your left hand away, and then bring it back.

5. Now allow the pressure to “push” your right hand an arm’s length away and feel the pressure release on your left palm. Then move it back toward the center and feel the pressure increase on your left palm again.



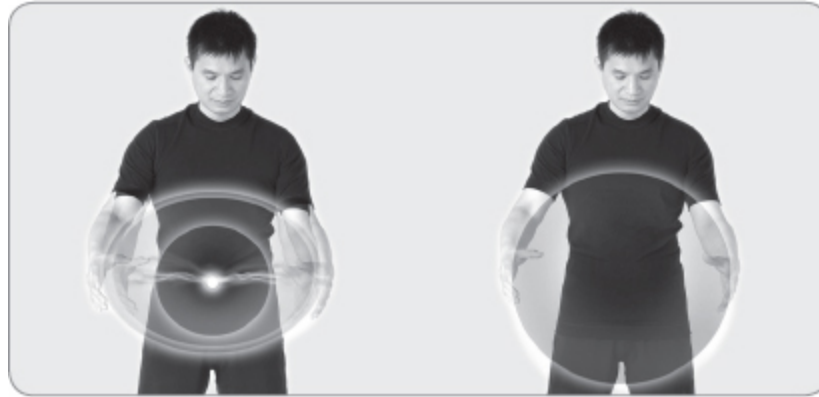
Move your right hand away, and then bring it back.

6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 at least nine times on each side. (In Qigong it is customary to repeat movements in multiples of three. This helps maintain a steady rhythm.)

To get a better sense of what this energetic sensation is supposed to feel like, imagine doing the exercise under water. The feeling of water being displaced is similar to the feeling of pressure in a Qi Field intensifying and diminishing. Do you feel it more clearly now? If not, keep practicing until you do. If you already feel the energetic sensations, then you are ready to create your first Qi Ball.

7. Move your hands hip-width apart in front of your body again, keeping them relaxed. Then imagine that they are like two jellyfish floating in the water, softly moving closer together and then drifting farther apart. Use this action to “pump” energy to the midpoint between your palms. If you wish, you may close your eyes. Repeat this step at least nine times, and as you continue the pumping action, visualize a small ball of Qi gradually inflating at the midpoint. Keep pumping until you feel the energy of the Qi Ball expanding against both of your palms

like a balloon. Feel the Qi Ball becoming firmer and firmer between your hands. Pump the Qi Ball another nine times to charge it with even more energy.



Pump energy to the midpoint and inflate it into a Qi Ball.

Congratulations—you have just created your first Qi Ball! Initially your Qi Ball may feel a bit fuzzy. That's normal. It's supposed to be a subtle energetic experience. But with practice your Qi Ball will grow stronger and feel more solid.

Now let's play with the Qi Ball.

8. Bring your hands closer together so that the Qi Ball shrinks down to the size of a softball. Then widen the distance between your palms to increase it to the size of a large beach ball. Now reverse the procedure. Observe the sensation of the Qi Ball as it expands and contracts. Feel the Qi pressure increase as the Qi Ball gets smaller and feel it decrease as the Qi Ball gets bigger. Play with the Qi Ball for at least one minute.



Have fun making the Qi Ball smaller and bigger.

If your Qi Ball still feels a bit fuzzy, try creating another one. Be patient and remember to have fun. Repeat the exercise as many times as you need to until you can actually feel it. Qigong is not a competitive sport. Here, slower is better, so relax and breathe naturally. Let the process reveal its subtleties to you, and with a little more practice, creating a Qi Ball will soon become second nature. Once you become familiar with the procedure, you can skip all the intermediate steps and create an instant Qi Ball in the blink of an eye.

Let's try this now.

9. Place your hands by the sides of your body, completely relaxed. Then quickly raise them up with your palms facing each other and create an instant Qi Ball. Pump energy into the Qi Ball to charge it. Repeat this step a few more times until you feel comfortable creating an instant Qi Ball.



Relax, and then make an instant Qi Ball.

Nourishing Qi

Soon we will begin to do some more advanced Qigong practices inside the Qi Ball, but first I need to introduce you to an important new idea. Every Qigong exercise includes two phases, an *active* phase and a *passive* phase. The active phase consists of the part that requires effort and concentration, and the passive phase is the part where you simply relax and do absolutely nothing. This passive phase is also called Nourishing Qi.

A balanced Qigong practice session requires both activity and passivity. Without one or the other, Qigong practice would feel imbalanced and incomplete. Both are equally important.

Making tea is a good metaphor for the relationship between both phases. Boiling the water and preparing the tea leaves constitute the active phase that requires effort and concentration. Then comes the passive phase, when we let the tea steep in hot water and simply wait for it to brew. Nourishing our Qi allows the energy we generate through active practice to simmer and be absorbed more deeply into our body.

Balancing the active and passive phases doesn't mean that each one should always take up 50 percent of our

practice time. Sometimes you might feel like spending more time being active and sometimes you might feel like nourishing your Qi longer. But ideally, you should nourish your Qi Energy for at least ten seconds at the end of each practice session, and, if you like your “tea” a little stronger, you can let the energies “brew” a little longer.

Here is a simple procedure I like to follow at the end of my practice sessions to nourish my Qi.

EXERCISE 4 **Nourishing Qi**

1. Stand or sit comfortably—you may even lie down if you like. Relax and close your eyes. There is beautiful light everywhere, both inside of you and outside of you. You are floating in this light. Just let the energy you cultivated flow where it wants to go. Allow it to be absorbed by your cells, internal organs, and even by your bone marrow. Let your body “feast” on the rich and nutritious Qi for at least ten seconds. Imagine that you are a sponge soaking in a warm bath and finish by repeating to yourself silently, “I am in Qi; Qi is in me.” Enjoy the experience.



Think: I am in Qi; Qi is in me.

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Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Three Dantians

Activating the Three Energy Points

Up to this point you have explored your own Hand Qi *outside* your body. But in fact, the Qi you just experienced between your palms also exists on the whole surface of your body and *inside* it. In this chapter you will discover this as you build on the earlier exercises and begin to explore the *internal* dimension of your energy body using your Hand Qi to amplify the experience.

Soon I will guide you through the seven steps of a self-empowerment method called Hologram Palm Empowerment. It is designed to awaken and empower three major energy centers that store vast amounts of Qi deep inside your body. But before you can begin that practice you need to learn how to activate the *energy points* situated on your skin directly in front of each energy center.

Think of each of these three energy points as a portal that must be activated, or opened, before you can move your awareness of Qi inside your body to an energy center. If the point is closed, the door is sealed and you won't be able to bring your awareness inside and draw on your own energy reserves effectively whenever you need to. When that happens, one becomes like a thirsty straggler in the desert standing over a cavernous pool of precious water that is buried just below his feet.

Fortunately, your days of thirsting for more energy will soon be over. With a simple technique called *activating* that I will show you next, you will learn how to activate these three important energy points and follow each one inwardly to one of the three major energy centers, like a narrow mine tunnel leading to a huge cavern with gold-covered walls.

Activating the three energy points is the first step required when doing Hologram Palm Empowerment, and since this step is so crucial to the rest of the process, we will begin by practicing it on its own. Afterward, once you can activate all three points at will, we will incorporate activating into the first step of the Hologram Palm Empowerment practice.



The Midbrow, Midchest, and Midriff points.

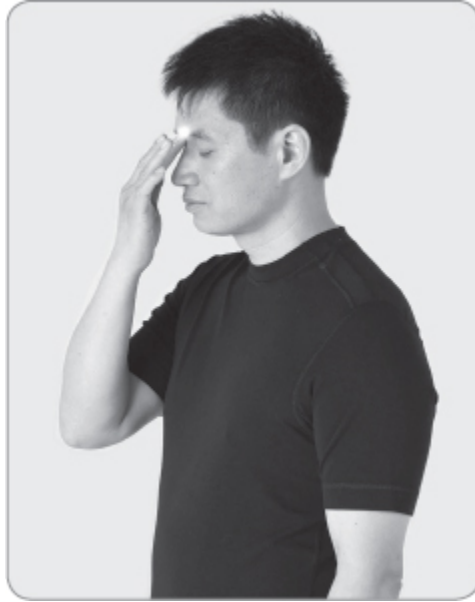
EXERCISE 5 **Activating the Midbrow, Midchest, and Midriff Points**

There are hundreds of energy points spread across the surface of the human body. Among these, three will be of particular interest to us: the Midbrow Point, the Midchest Point, and the Midriff Point.

The Midbrow Point is located between the eyebrows, right above the bridge of the nose. This point is also called the “Third Eye.” The Midchest Point is located at the center of the chest on the sternum. This point is also called the “Heart Center.” The Midriff Point is located three finger widths directly below the navel. This point is also called the “Sea of Qi.”

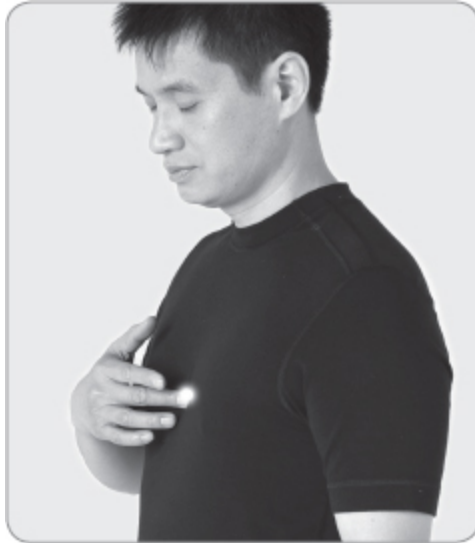
Now we are going to awaken these three energy points by activating each one.

1. Close your eyes and use your middle finger to probe the area between your eyebrows to find the Midbrow Point. This is the point that “lights up” energetically when you are inspired by a good idea. You will experience an intensification of energy as you brush up against the point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midbrow Point like the flame of one candle lighting another. Then let go of your finger, continue to concentrate on the Midbrow Point, and feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back toward the center of your head. Continue doing this for thirty seconds, and then relax.



Activate the Midbrow Point.

2. With your eyes still closed, use your middle finger to probe the area on your sternum to find the Midchest Point. It will feel more sensitive than the space around it. This is the point that “lights up” energetically when you feel love for another person. You will experience an intensification of energy as you brush up against the point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midchest Point like the flame of one candle lighting another. Then let go of your finger, continue to concentrate on the Midchest Point, and feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back toward the center of your upper torso. Continue doing this for thirty seconds, and then relax.



Activate the Midchest Point.

3. With your eyes still closed, now use your middle finger to probe the area three finger widths below your navel to find the Midriff Point. This is the point that “lights up” energetically when you feel the burning urge to take immediate action. You will experience an intensification of energy as you brush up against the point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midriff Point like the flame of one candle lighting another. Then let go of your finger, continue to concentrate on the Midriff Point, and feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back toward the center of your waist. Continue doing this for thirty seconds, and then relax.



Activate the Midriff Point.

If you were able to “move” your awareness to the three energy points inside your body, you are now ready to begin learning Hologram Palm Empowerment. If you had a hard time doing this, then take a deep breath and try again. Be xiao yao—take it easy. Keep on practicing until you are able to do it well. Give it time; it will happen. But if you’re ready now, let’s take the next big leap forward.

The Three Dantians

So what exactly are the precious energies that you store behind the Midbrow, Midchest, and Midriff points? Let’s begin to investigate these mysteries through an illuminating thought experiment.

Imagine a tiny version of yourself standing in front of the Midbrow Point, which, in this visualization, just happens to be a door that is slightly taller than you. Since the energy point is closed, the door is shut, so you ring the doorbell to activate the point. Suddenly the door opens and a bright beam of light shoots out like a spotlight. Intrigued, you enter through the door and step into a brightly lit corridor. As you venture farther in, the light glows with even more intensity.

At the end of the corridor, you step out into a large, cavernous chamber illuminated by a dazzling pool of swirling light situated right in the middle of your head. You are now standing at the edge of this pool with its “water” lapping at your feet.

You scan the inside of your head from this vantage point. Your cranium looks like a vast upside-down cauldron flaring down from your crown and covering the forehead, temples, and occipital area at the back of your head. This cauldron is like a protective helmet that guards the precious contents inside your head: the lobes of your brain and the pineal and pituitary glands lodged deep within.

Something unexpectedly beautiful catches your eye as you notice fine, misty currents of translucent energy flowing from every organic structure in your head right into the pool of light. Your head looks like a collection of “energy rivers” of various sizes streaming in from every direction, all pouring into this luminous pool.

You feel increasingly drawn to this ethereal pool, which represents the blended energetic essence of your head. Then, without warning, your miniature self dives right in.

Once you are submerged, your mind instantly becomes crystal clear and razor sharp. As you swim down deeper into the pool, inspiring ideas and illuminating visions appear to you in rapid succession. Then from seemingly nowhere, you hear a sagely voice. It whispers elegant solutions, with masterly insights, to problems that have troubled you for a long time. As this brilliant explosion of higher knowledge continues to saturate your mind, you realize that any mental activity originating from this place in consciousness empowers you with the grace of *wisdom*.

Next, your miniature self is once again standing outside your body, but this time it is standing in front of the Midchest Point, which also looks like a closed door affixed to your sternum. Your miniature self rings the doorbell. The door opens and you enter another brightly lit corridor, walk

to the end, and emerge into another cavernous chamber illuminated by another pool of light, only this one is situated inside your heart at the center of your chest.

From here you look around and notice that seen from within, your upper torso also looks like an upside-down cauldron. This one, however, extends out from the base of your neck and runs along the widening contours of your ribs all the way down to your diaphragm, which forms its rim just above your waistline.

This second cauldron houses your internal organs. You can see your spongy lungs inflating and deflating each time you breathe, your liver positioned below them on the right-hand side, and your spleen on the left. The pumping rhythm of your beating heart forms the focal point of this cauldron, which also envelops your thyroid and parathyroid glands situated higher up near your breastbone. Here too you observe each internal organ and gland exuding a stream of energy that flows directly into the swirling pool of light at the center of your chest.

Once again you dive into the dazzling pool, but this time your experience is completely different. Once submerged, you are overcome by a surge of emotional well-being that makes you feel like tenderly hugging someone. And as you swim deeper and deeper, you become increasingly filled with the urge to heal any emotional pain or anguish that is stored inside your chest.

Then from seemingly nowhere, you hear a nurturing, motherly voice whispering answers to all the questions you have ever had about any hurtful, confusing emotional issues that have wounded you. Her loving words fill you with a profound understanding of human psychology that instantly alleviates your suffering and leaves you brimming with compassion for the suffering of others. As this stirring experience continues to heal your psyche, you realize that any emotional activity that originates from this place in consciousness empowers you with the grace of *love*.

Finally, your miniature self stands outside your body again, this time in front of a closed door hinged to the Midriff Point. When it opens you excitedly walk down another brightly lit corridor and enter a third cavernous chamber. Unlike the other two, this one looks like a cauldron that is right side up. Its base is formed by the perineum at the base of your pelvis, and it flares up from there like a bowl that extends along your hips up to its rim, which is formed by your waistline.

This cauldron contains your kidneys, viscera, and sexual organs. Here too streams of energy flow from all the organs and glands and collect into a brilliant pool of energy situated in the middle of your lower abdomen.

You dive in a third time and are quickly overcome by a different experience. Once submerged, you are infused with tremendous strength and confidence that fill you with the potency to face any danger and overcome any challenge. As you swim deeper and deeper, your strength becomes increasingly charged with raw sexual power that adds dynamic charm and tireless endurance to your sense of invincibility.

Then you hear a strong, self-assured voice emerge from the depths and quash any fears or inhibitions you may have harbored in the past. Any concern or insecurity that has ever held you back from taking action is instantly smashed to bits, and you are now eager to take bold action in the face of daunting adversity. As unbounded potency continues to boost your resolve, you realize that any enterprising activity that originates from this place in consciousness empowers you with the grace of *vitality*.

Wisdom, love, and vitality—these are the three spiritual qualities that you tap into whenever you access the three reservoirs of energy inside your body. Let's examine each more closely, beginning with wisdom.

Behind the Midbrow Point, at the center of your head, lies a vast reservoir of wisdom. We all experience days when our

mind functions impeccably and we are able to cope effectively with all sorts of complications. But we all also have days when our mental powers wane and we can easily become disoriented and confused. The difference between those two mental states depends on whether our Midbrow Point is open, and on the quality of the Qi stored inside the pool of energy at the center of our head.

When Qi flow in the area around our head is healthy, our intuition functions like a GPS. We feel guided and make wise, well-timed decisions that lead us to places we could never have reached by relying on logic and reason alone. But when the Midbrow Point is blocked and the Qi flow around our head is weak, it's as if our GPS malfunctions. We lose our way and wander around clueless, like a lost child in a big shopping center. We lack a clear sense of direction. Our timing is off. We make bad choices and poor decisions. We want to get to New York City, but we end up in Philadelphia. We lack wisdom.

Behind the Midchest Point, at the center of the upper torso, lies a vast reservoir of love. We all experience days when our psyche operates smoothly and we are able to manage our emotions effectively, as well as days when even the slightest emotional issue can render us dysfunctional. The difference between those two kinds of days depends on whether our Midchest Point is open, and on the quality of the Qi stored inside the pool of energy at the center of our chest.

When Qi flow in the area around our chest is plentiful, we become as giving and nurturing as a loving mother. Our emotions communicate effortlessly that we care, and we *really* do. We understand human suffering and possess the emotional resilience to reach out compassionately and make a difference without expecting anything in return. In essence, we become a healing force.

But if the Midchest Point is blocked and the Qi flow in the area around our upper torso is weak, the pool of energy

dries up and our loving, motherly heart turns to glass. We become emotionally fragile. We break easily under pressure. We feel depressed, angry, and lonely, even when we are in the company of people who love us. Eventually we harden to protect ourselves, and that's when the heart of glass turns to stone.

Behind the Midriff Point, at the center of the abdomen, lies a vast reservoir of vitality. We all experience days when we are bursting with potency and can't wait to take action and days when we can barely muster the strength to get out of bed. The difference between those two kinds of days depends on whether our Midriff Point is open, and on the quality of the Qi stored inside the pool of energy at the center of our abdomen.

When Qi flow in the area around our abdomen is healthy, we feel like a juicy fruit. Our physical well-being skyrockets and we radiate a strong sexual magnetism. We become dynamic and vivacious, and people are drawn in by our charm. We are thrilled to make daring moves and even slay some dragons if we must.

But if the Midriff Point is blocked and the Qi flow around our abdomen is unhealthy, we become like a flat tire. We feel weak and impotent, and every undertaking feels like an uphill trek carrying a heavy load of rocks. Even menial tasks become burdensome, arduous labor. Exhausted by the basic activities that make up our day, we become unable to take any decisive actions when needed. Our self-esteem shrivels and our libido plummets. We become less attractive to ourselves and others. We slip into mediocrity and go unnoticed. Our immune system weakens, and we are more likely to get sick.

Once in a while we sometimes experience a "good" day when wisdom, love, and vitality all break through the cloud cover of our everyday personalities and wash away our confusion, heartaches, and low self-esteem. At those times, we feel like a superhuman being gliding through all the ups

and downs we encounter with uncanny clarity, a radiant heart, and overflowing liveliness. How would you like to increase the number of days characterized by magical, effortless flow? How would you like to make *every* day a *good* day?

Allow me to show you how.

Xiao Yao referred to each of the three cauldrons of the body I have just described as a Golden Wheel, and to each pool of blended energy in them as a *dantian* (pronounced *dan-tee-en*), which means “elixir field” in Chinese. We’ll be using these terms repeatedly for the rest of our time together, so please be sure to remember what they mean.

Xiao Yao used the image of a wheel to describe the energetic action that takes place inside the three cauldrons because, in actuality, healthy Qi from the internal organs and glands tends to flow in a circular motion as it circulates toward each dantian at the three energy centers of the body. He called the top cauldron the Wheel of Wisdom, and the pool of Wisdom Qi in the center the Upper Dantian. He called the middle cauldron the Wheel of Love and the pool of Love Qi in the center the Middle Dantian. And he called the lowest cauldron the Wheel of Vitality and the pool of Vitality Qi in the center the Lower Dantian.



The Golden Wheels and the Three Dantians.

You may be wondering why I haven't yet mentioned the fourth Golden Wheel, which was alluded to in the title of this second section. Trust me: I have not forgotten about it. But I am reserving that discussion for later, after you have learned to empower the Three Dantians—our immediate objective.

In the following three exercises, I will teach you a self-empowerment practice called Hologram Palm Empowerment that you will use to awaken and empower your Three Dantians. In Exercise 6 you will empower the Upper Dantian, in Exercise 7 you will empower the Middle Dantian, and in Exercise 8 you will empower the Lower Dantian.

What benefits can you expect to derive from doing Hologram Palm Empowerment? Once you master the technique, you will be able to boost the energy levels of your Three Dantians dramatically and liberate at will the Wisdom Qi, Love Qi, and Vitality Qi energies that they each hold in reserve. Ramping up your energy levels stacks the odds in favor of any day becoming a good day. And *that* is a worthwhile goal!

EXERCISE 6 **Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Upper Dantian**

In this exercise we will follow a series of seven steps to awaken and empower the Upper Dantian. These include:

- Step 1: Activating
- Step 2: Catching
- Step 3: Pumping
- Step 4: Circulating
- Step 5: Empowering
- Step 6: Restoring
- Step 7: Sealing

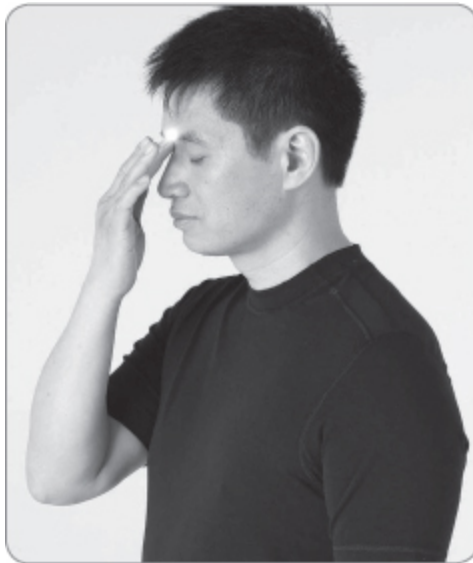
I will guide you through the process one step at a time in complete detail so you will get a clear understanding of each part of the practice. Then, in Exercises 7 and 8, we will follow the same seven steps to empower the Middle Dantian and the Lower Dantian, but with fewer details. If you need more specifics about a particular step, simply refer back to the corresponding section in Exercise 6 for those details. We are now ready to begin.

Step 1: Activating

The first step of the Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Upper Dantian consists of activating the Midbrow Point.

We practiced a similar version of this step in Exercise 5, so it should already be familiar to you.

1. Close your eyes and use your middle finger to probe the area between your eyebrows to find the Midbrow Point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midbrow Point like the flame of one candle lighting another. Feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back, illuminating the Upper Dantian in the center of your head.



Activate the Midbrow Point.

Step 2: Catching

This step consists of three related actions: *pressing*, *popping*, and *catching*. The purpose of this step is to concentrate Qi Energy from the Upper Dantian and then direct this concentrated energy to the center of a Qi Ball.

2. With your eyes still closed, place your palms on both sides of your temples and become aware of the Wheel of Wisdom within your head. Become aware of all the energetic qualities inside it: your intuition,

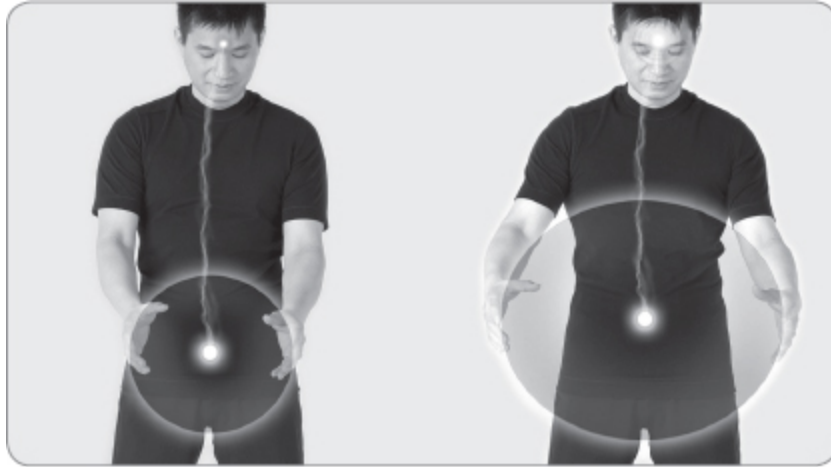
your sense of timing, and your capacity for visionary insight. Allow these energies to gather and blend at the center of your head in the Upper Dantian. Become aware of your wisdom. Inhale deeply and hold your breath as you press your head firmly and concentrate the energies into a small “shining pearl.” Then exhale while quickly letting go of your hands and create an instant Qi Ball (see Exercise 3, Step 9, if you need a refresher). As your hands release from your head, the pearl will “pop” out. Catch it in the middle of the Qi Ball. Feel the energy resonate between the Upper Dantian and the pearl, which acts as a hologram of the blended energies stored inside your head.



Pressing ... popping ... and catching.

Step 3: Pumping

You learned a similar version of this movement pattern in Exercise 3, Step 7, when you “pumped” the Qi Ball to charge it with energy. You will now use that same pumping movement pattern to charge the pearl at the center of the Qi Ball.



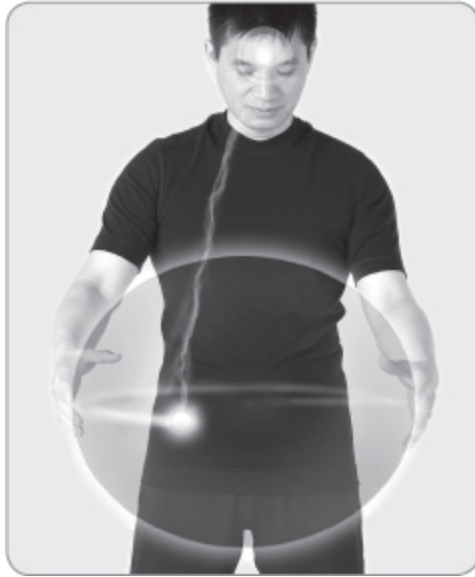
Squeeze and release to pump the pearl with more energy.

3. With your eyes still closed, squeeze and release the Qi Ball to charge the pearl with more energy. Feel the essence of your wisdom inside the Qi Ball radiate with more power as you continue to pump it. Continue to do this at least nine times.

Step 4: Circulating

The purpose of this step is to deepen the connection between the pearl, the Qi Ball, and the Upper Dantian by rolling the pearl along the entire circumference of the Qi Ball, both horizontally and vertically.

4. Start by imagining there is an “energy string” connecting the Upper Dantian in the middle of your head and the pearl. Use your intention and subtle hand movements to let the energy string guide the pearl from the center of the Qi Ball toward your left hand, and then guide the pearl horizontally along the entire circumference of the Qi Ball. As the pearl loops around, feel the movement sensation mirrored in the Upper Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in this direction, and then reverse directions and do it another nine times, or more.



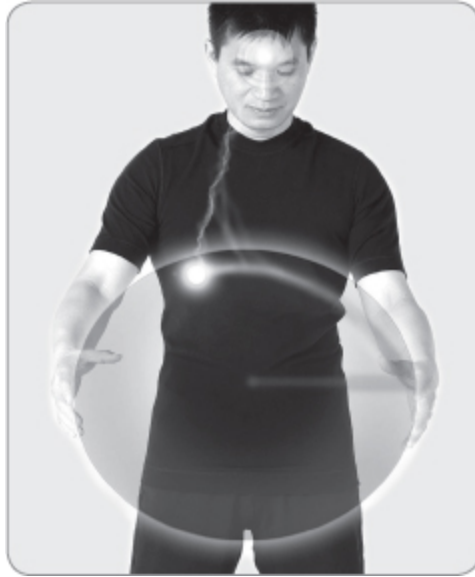
Circulate the pearl horizontally.

5. Next, guide the pearl along the circumference of the Qi Ball vertically. Remember to feel the connection between the pearl and the Upper Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in one direction, and then reverse directions and repeat this process at least another nine times.

Step 5: Empowering

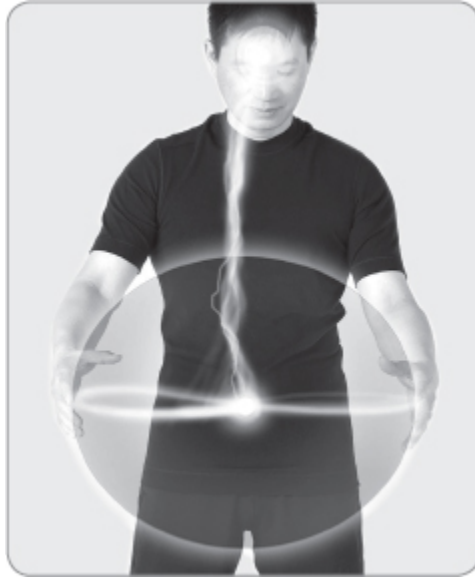
This step is the most important part of the exercise. Here you empower the Upper Dantian by circulating the pearl in a figure-eight pattern that crosses through the center of the Qi Ball.

The center of the Qi Ball is an energy-rich spot. As you guide the pearl through this point, it will absorb the energy there and instantly transfer that energy to the Upper Dantian. Each time the pearl passes through the center of the Qi Ball, you will feel your Upper Dantian boosted and empowered.



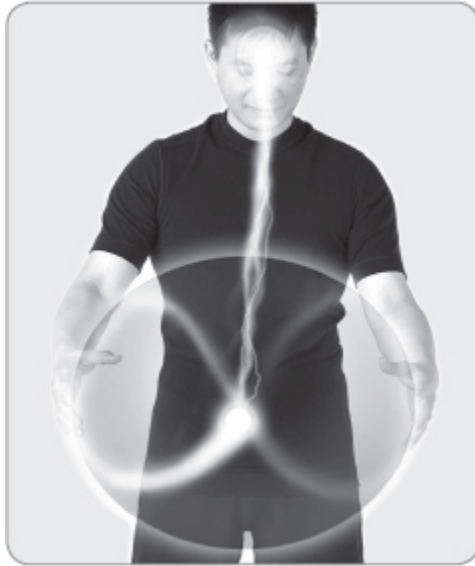
Circulate the pearl vertically.

6. With your eyes still closed, use your intention and subtle hand movements to guide the pearl to your left palm, and then guide the pearl along a horizontal figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl up to the Upper Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Upper Dantian glow brighter and your Wisdom Qi become empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each cycle, feel the energy level of the Upper Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least another nine times; then relax.



Circulate the pearl horizontally in figure-eight patterns to empower the Upper Dantian.

7. Now guide the pearl back to your left palm and circulate it in a vertical figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl up to the Upper Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Upper Dantian glow brighter. Feel your Wisdom Qi become empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each cycle, feel the energy level of the Upper Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least another nine times.



Circulate the pearl vertically in figure-eight patterns to empower the Upper Dantian.

8. When you are finished, relax and allow the pearl to circulate freely around the Qi Ball in any pattern and direction it wants. Enjoy this experience for as long as you wish.

Step 6: Restoring

This step consists of three related actions: *compressing*, *palming*, and *restoring*. The purpose of this step is to compress the Qi Ball and the pearl together and to return the Qi Energy to the Upper Dantian.

9. With your eyes still closed, guide the pearl back to the center of the Qi Ball. Compress the Qi Ball until both it and the pearl are condensed down into a super-concentrated pearl the size of a marble. Place that pearl in one of your palms and then guide it through the air, back up into the Upper Dantian in the middle of your head. Once the pearl is restored, the Upper Dantian will feel more radiant and expanded.



Compressing ... palming ... and restoring.

Step 7: Sealing

The purpose of this step is to “seal” the Upper Dantian so that you save the Qi Energy of the empowerment exercise you just did. Sealing an energy point is like corking a bottle so nothing spills out.

10. Form a Sword Finger with your raised hand.
Imagine that there is a “Yin Yang” symbol at the end of the Blade coming out of your Sword Finger. (Yin and Yang represent the primal, complementary forces that sustain balance in the universe.) Stamp that image energetically on the Midbrow Point nine times to seal the energy now stored in the Upper Dantian. When you are done, relax and nourish your Qi.



Stamp the Yin Yang symbol to seal the energy.

Some people experience a dramatic, powerful surge of energy the first time they empower the Upper Dantian, and some people barely feel anything at all. But whether you experienced an energetic tidal wave building inside your head or just caught the glimmer of a faint spark, congratulations! You still moved energy.

You may have to repeat the empowerment exercise several times before you experience a palpable awakening. Don't worry; that is natural. Each time you practice, the experience will deepen and your awareness of the energies inside your head will intensify. So be patient, enjoy the experience, and allow yourself to ripen naturally at your own pace.

Next we will repeat the same seven steps of Hologram Palm Empowerment to empower the Middle Dantian. No matter what your experience in Exercise 6 was, try it. For most people, one of the Three Dantians is more developed than the other two, and their experience of the Hologram Palm Empowerment for that particular one is usually more discernible. This could be the one for you!

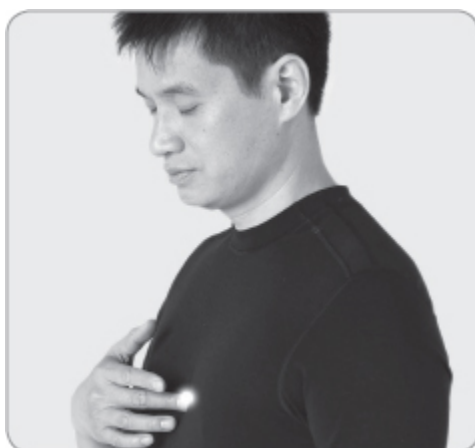
I will guide you through the process again, but as I stated before, this time it will be without commentary. If you need to clarify the purpose of a particular step, simply refer back to the corresponding section in Exercise 6. As you practice,

notice how the quality of Love Qi feels different from the quality of Wisdom Qi you've just experienced.

EXERCISE 7 **Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Middle Dantian**

Step 1: Activating

1. Close your eyes and use your middle finger to probe the center of your chest to find the Midchest Point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midchest Point like the flame of one candle lighting another. Feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back, illuminating the Middle Dantian in the center of your chest.



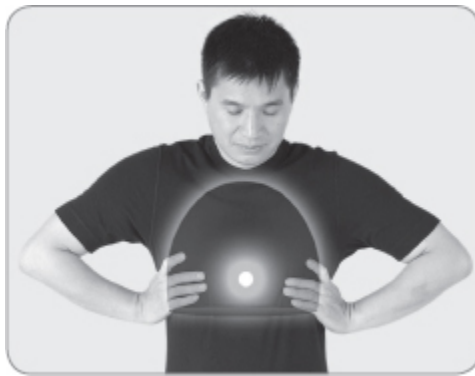
Step 1: Activating.

Video 3—SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

Step 2: Catching

2. With your eyes still closed, place your palms on both sides of your ribcage and become aware of the Wheel of Love within your chest. Become aware of all the energetic qualities inside it: your compassion, your generosity, and your kindness. Allow these energies to gather and blend at the center of your chest in the Middle Dantian. Become aware of your

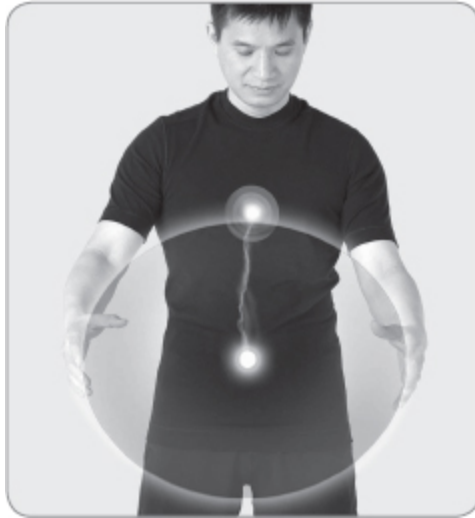
love. Inhale deeply and hold your breath as you press your ribs firmly and concentrate the energies into a small “shining pearl.” Then exhale while quickly letting go of your hands and create an instant Qi Ball (see Exercise 3, Step 9). As your hands release from your ribs, the pearl will “pop” out. Catch it in the middle of the Qi Ball. Feel the energy resonate between the Middle Dantian and the pearl, which acts as a hologram of the blended energies stored inside your chest.



Step 2: Catching.

Step 3: Pumping

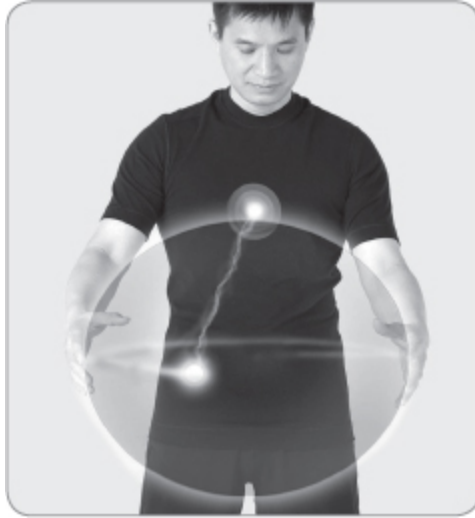
3. Squeeze and release the Qi Ball to charge the pearl with more energy. Feel the essence of your love inside the Qi Ball radiating with more power as you continue to pump it. Continue to do this at least nine times.



Step 3: Pumping.

Step 4: Circulating

4. Start by imagining there is an “energy string” connecting the Middle Dantian in the middle of your chest and the pearl. Use your intention and subtle hand movements to let the energy string guide the pearl from the center of the Qi Ball toward your left hand, and then guide the pearl horizontally along the entire circumference of the Qi Ball. As the pearl loops around, feel the movement sensation mirrored in the Middle Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in this direction, and then reverse directions and do it another nine times or more.

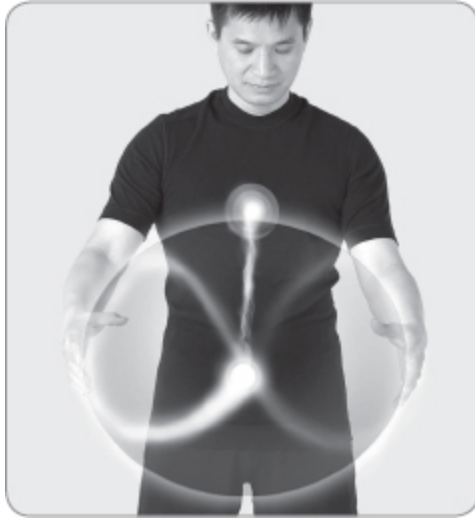


Step 4: Circulating.

5. Next, guide the pearl vertically along the circumference of the Qi Ball. Remember to feel the connection between the pearl and the Middle Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in one direction, and then reverse directions and do it again for the same number of rotations.

Step 5: Empowering

6. Now use your intention and subtle hand movements to guide the pearl to your left palm, and then guide the pearl along a horizontal figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl across to the Middle Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Middle Dantian glow brighter and your Love Qi become empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each cycle, feel the energy level of the Middle Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least another nine times.



Step 5: Empowering.

7. Now guide the pearl back to your left palm and circulate it in a vertical figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl across to the Middle Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Middle Dantian glow brighter. Feel your Love Qi become empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each cycle, feel the energy level of the Middle Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least nine times.
8. When you are finished, relax and allow the pearl to circulate freely around the Qi Ball in any pattern and direction it wants. Enjoy this experience for as long as you wish.

Step 6: Restoring

9. Guide the pearl back to the center of the Qi Ball. Compress the Qi Ball until both it and the pearl are condensed down into a super-concentrated pearl the size of a marble. Place that pearl in one of your palms and then guide it through the air, back over

toward the Middle Dantian in the middle of your chest. Once the pearl is restored, the Middle Dantian will feel more radiant and expanded.



Step 6: Restoring.

Step 7: Sealing

10. Form a Sword Finger with your raised hand. Imagine that there is a Yin Yang symbol at the end of the Blade coming out of your Sword Finger. Stamp that image energetically on the Midchest Point nine times to seal the energy now stored in the Middle Dantian. When you are done, relax and nourish your Qi.



Step 7: Sealing.

How did this empowerment go for you? Did you feel the energy of Love Qi more or less clearly than the energy of Wisdom Qi? Make a mental note—this information will become relevant later on.

We are now ready to begin Exercise 8, the Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Lower Dantian. The steps here are almost identical to the steps described in the previous two exercises, so the process should now flow even more easily for you.

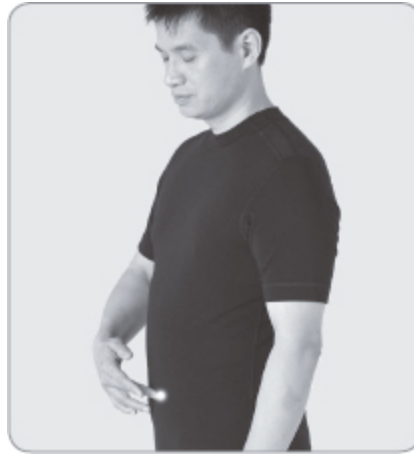
If you still need to clarify the purpose of a particular step, simply refer back to the corresponding section in Exercise 6. And as you practice, notice how the quality of Vitality Qi feels different from the qualities of Wisdom Qi and Love Qi that you have just experienced.

EXERCISE 8 **Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Lower Dantian**

Step 1: Activating

1. Close your eyes and use your middle finger to probe the area below the navel to find the Midriff Point. Feel the energy from your finger awaken the Midriff Point like the flame of one candle lighting another.

Feel the energy sensation growing brighter and moving farther back, illuminating the Lower Dantian in the center of your waist.



Step 1: Activating.

Step 2: Catching

2. With your eyes still closed, place your palms on both sides of your waist and become aware of the Wheel of Vitality within your lower torso. Become aware of all the energetic qualities inside it: your sexual essence, your charisma, your charm, and your capacity for dynamic action. Allow these energies to gather and blend at the center of your lower body in the Lower Dantian. Become aware of your vibrant vitality. Inhale deeply and hold your breath as you press your waist firmly, tighten your anus, and concentrate all the energies into a small “shining pearl.” Then exhale while quickly letting go of your hands and create an instant Qi Ball (see Exercise 3, Step 9). As your hands release from your waist, the pearl will “pop” out. Catch it in the middle of the Qi Ball. Feel the energy resonate between the Lower Dantian and the pearl, which acts as a hologram of the blended energies stored inside your waist.



Step 2: Catching.

Step 3: Pumping

3. Squeeze and release the Qi Ball to charge the pearl with more energy. Feel the essence of your vitality inside the Qi Ball radiate with more power as you continue to pump it. Continue to do this at least nine times.



Step 3: Pumping.

Step 4: Circulating

4. Start by imagining there is an “energy string” connecting the Lower Dantian in the center of your waist and the pearl. Use your intention and subtle hand movements to let the energy string guide the

pearl from the center of the Qi Ball toward your left hand, and then guide the pearl horizontally along the entire circumference of the Qi Ball. As the pearl loops around, feel the movement sensation mirrored in the Lower Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in this direction, and then reverse directions and do it another nine times, or more.



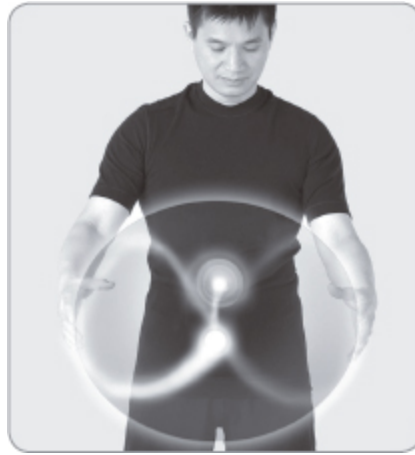
Step 4: Circulating.

5. Next, guide the pearl vertically along the circumference of the Qi Ball. Remember to feel the connection between the pearl and the Lower Dantian. Circulate the pearl at least nine times in one direction, and then reverse directions and circulate it again for the same number of rotations.

Step 5: Empowering

6. Now use your intention and subtle hand movements to guide the pearl to your left palm, and then guide the pearl along a horizontal figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl down to the Lower Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Lower Dantian glow brighter. Feel your Vitality Qi become empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each

cycle, feel the energy level of the Lower Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least another nine times.



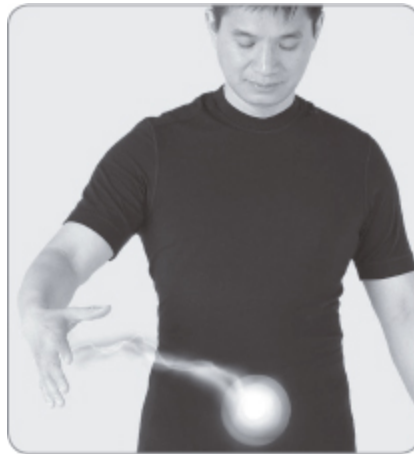
Step 5: Empowering.

7. Now guide the pearl back to your left palm and circulate it in a vertical figure-eight pattern. When the pearl crosses the center of the figure-eight pattern within the Qi Ball, feel a surge of energy shoot from the pearl down to the Lower Dantian like a flash of lightning. Feel the Lower Dantian glow brighter and your Vitality Qi becoming empowered. Repeat this at least nine times. In each cycle, feel the energy level of the Lower Dantian increase. Then reverse directions and repeat this same process at least nine times.
8. When you are finished, relax and allow the pearl to circulate freely around the Qi Ball in any pattern and direction it wants. Enjoy this experience for as long as you wish.

Step 6: Restoring

9. Guide the pearl back to the center of the Qi Ball. Compress the Qi Ball until both it and the pearl are

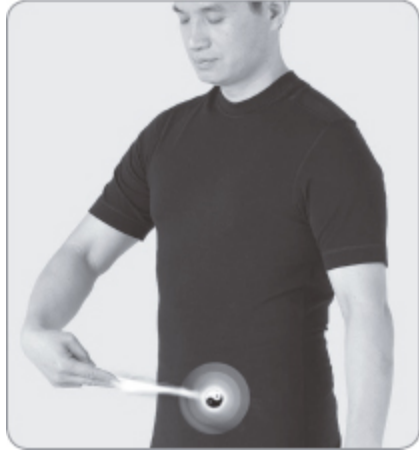
condensed down into a super-concentrated pearl the size of a marble. Place that pearl in one of your palms and then guide it through the air, back down into the Lower Dantian in the middle of your waist. Once the pearl is restored, the Lower Dantian will feel more radiant and expanded.



Step 6: Restoring.

Step 7: Sealing

10. Form a Sword Finger with your raised hand. Imagine that there is a Yin Yang symbol at the end of the Blade coming out of your Sword Finger. Stamp that image energetically on the Midriff Point nine times to seal the energy now stored in the Lower Dantian. When you are done, relax and nourish your Qi.



Step 7: Sealing.

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Balance and Integration

A Dantian Typology

After having empowered each of your Three Dantians, perhaps you noticed that one of them was easier to work with and one of them was harder to work with than the other two. Maybe by the time you completed the three empowerments, you felt the Love Qi in your Middle Dantian blazing like the sun, while the Wisdom Qi in your Upper Dantian only flickered like a candle caught in a draft. Or maybe your Lower Dantian roared like a lion while your Middle Dantian barely bleated like a lamb.

Granted, these dramatic examples are extreme and your experience was probably less pronounced than that. But most of us actually do possess a specific Dantian energy pattern based on the one Dantian that is relatively more developed than the other two, and the one that is relatively less developed. And even if the differences between your strongest and weakest Dantians are not breathtaking, any imbalance among them will still play out in your life in a significant way, especially during a time of crisis.

During the next phase of our journey, we'll develop a dantian typology by systematically exploring six different lopsided dantian combinations. We will sketch out a profile for each one of the types and examine scenarios of the imbalances that are likely to emerge in each case. But first we'll begin with a brief review of some of the positive and

negative features associated with each of the Three Dantians.

The Three Dantians	Attributes When Strong	Attributes When Weak
Upper Dantian	wise, intuitive, visionary, insightful, judicious, well advised; the power to guide	confused, disoriented, restless, unrealistic, gullible, foolish, mindless, witless, misguided
Middle Dantian	loving, compassionate, generous, fair, kind, patient; the power to love and be loved	unfulfilled, rejected, hypersensitive, shy, disturbed, lonely, miserable, misunderstood
Lower Dantian	vital, gutsy, dynamic, charismatic, self-confident, healthy; the power to manifest	devitalized, gutless, impotent, helpless, weakly, sickly, self-doubting, victimized, powerless

Recall that a dantian is an energy center situated inside your body that acts as a reservoir of energy. A healthy dantian is like an abundant well from which you can draw water whenever you are thirsty. If you thirst for wisdom, you can draw on the refined mental energy stored in the Upper Dantian and become more intuitive, visionary, and insightful. If you thirst for love, you can draw on the pure emotional energy stored in the Middle Dantian and become more caring, sensitive, and generous. And if you thirst for vitality, you can draw on the raw potency stored in the Lower Dantian and become more gutsy, dynamic, and charismatic.

On the other hand, an unhealthy Dantian is like a dry well. When you thirst for its energy and draw on its paltry resources, you come up short. An unhealthy Upper Dantian dims your mental powers and leaves you feeling confused, disoriented, and gullible. An unhealthy Middle Dantian shuts off the flow of love and leaves you feeling lonely, rejected, and unfulfilled. And an unhealthy Lower Dantian disables

your confidence and leaves you feeling impotent, helpless, and weak.

If you understand these three basic building blocks, you'll be able to follow along as I map out a dantian typology. As I run through the six combinations, try to identify the type to which you belong and also see whether you can associate each of the other types with someone you know.

In the first dantian scenario we will examine Type 1, which consists of a strong Upper Dantian and a weak Middle Dantian.

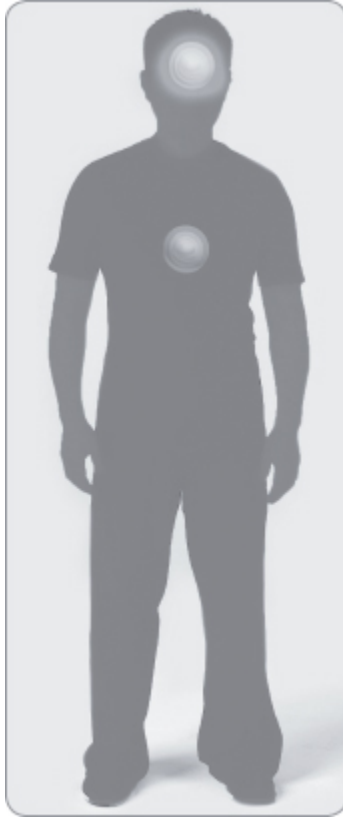
Type 1

Strong Upper Dantian and Weak Middle Dantian

A well-respected university professor falls secretly in love with one of his students. He is a bright, insightful man with a sharp wit, but his emotional side is grossly underdeveloped. He never learned to express his feelings growing up and fears his own vulnerability. Up to now he has never been able to actually express his love for a woman.

Every time he sees the object of his affection walk into the classroom, his heart races, and each time she leaves it shrivels up. All semester he longs to tell her how he feels, but he simply can't. Each time he approaches her, his chest tightens and he gets all choked up. One day he sees her on campus holding hands with her boyfriend, and for the first time in his adult life, he cries.

After the semester ends, he realizes that he will probably never see her again. That night he ponders his solitary life and realizes that he has always been a lonely, unloved man. His emotional pain becomes intolerable. Suddenly life no longer seems worth living. He opens the window, steps out onto the ledge, and stands there for a long while as he seriously ponders whether or not he would be better off taking that step ...



Strong Upper Dantian—intuitive, visionary, and insightful
Weak Middle Dantian—lonely, rejected, and unfulfilled
Characteristic: This person is wise but miserable.

Poets and songwriters have created their finest works on the simple premise that love makes life worth living, and that when we are denied that love our lives feel worthless. The professor in this scenario may well be a wise man with a distinguished career, but he is also a miserable man, as reflected by his constricted Middle Dantian and the emotional anguish it churns.

An ample supply of Upper Dantian energy may give him heaps of intuition, visionary brilliance, and insightfulness, but those qualities can't make up for his inability to love and receive love. A clever mind can cover up the feelings of loneliness for only so long. Eventually the hole in the chest becomes too big for even the most cynical head to ignore.

The forsaken heart always catches up, one way or another, and its pain is unbearable. That is why our

otherwise accomplished professor is still staring down from that ledge, deciding whether or not to jump.

In the next dantian scenario we will examine Type 2, which consists of a strong Upper Dantian and a weak Lower Dantian.

Type 2

Strong Upper Dantian and Weak Lower Dantian

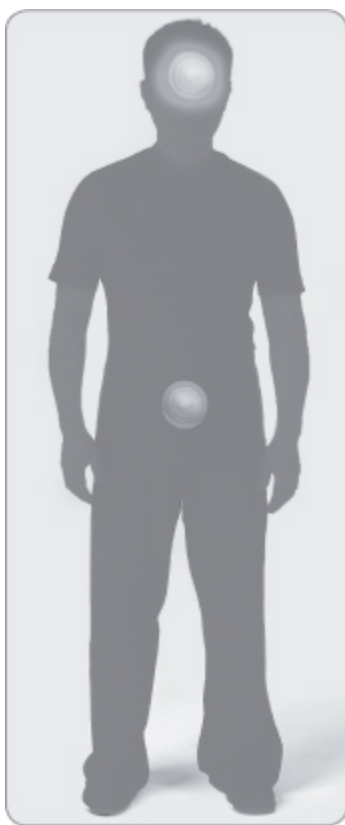
A quiet, sheepish man is part of a group of business managers at a brainstorming session. All kinds of wild ideas are being tossed around, none of them really worth considering. The sheepish man is suddenly struck by a brilliant insight. But he “sits” on his inspired vision for a long time, unable to summon the confidence to break into the discussion and express his point of view. Finally he manages to share his idea with the group, but he describes it with such a meek, uninspired voice that no one pays any attention to him.

The discussion picks up steam again as a few other inane ideas are presented. About half an hour later, a charming, loud-mouthed woman repeats the exact same idea the man had—but she expresses herself confidently and underscores her self-assurance with assertive gestures. The group is mesmerized by her brilliant performance, and when she finishes they all congratulate her, including the sheepish man whose idea she “borrowed.”

Later, at his office, the sheepish man contemplates the day’s events. It’s not the first time other people have exploited his ideas. He angrily recalls the time his boss got all the credit for the innovative plan he had developed singlehandedly for another important project. This pattern of exploitation has gone on for years. It has held him back. If only he conducted himself more assertively, he would be much further along in his career. He decides that today will

be the day he finally draws the line and ask for a much-deserved promotion and raise.

He walks over to his superior's office and asks the secretary to let him see his boss right away. She seems surprised by his unusually assertive tone and asks him to wait a few minutes. As he does, he begins to second-guess himself. Nervous tension forms around his lower abdomen, and his hands become cold and sweaty. His legs grow feeble and his resolve weakens. Before long he feels completely impotent and excuses himself with characteristic sheepishness. He returns to his office and dutifully gets back to his work.



Strong Upper Dantian—intuitive, visionary, and insightful

Weak Lower Dantian—impotent, helpless, and weak

Characteristic: This person is wise but devitalized.

A well-developed Upper Dantian fills the mind with brilliant visions and endows us with forward-thinking insight, but a

weak Lower Dantian robs us of the power to express that creative wisdom convincingly and stand up for ourselves. With this combination we can't effectively push our wise inner knowledge out into the world effectively, or claim what we rightfully deserve.

Big head; no guts. If we fall into this category, we have a hard time engaging in life fully. We lack the power to manifest change, and eventually our self-esteem erodes. Despite our visionary intelligence, we settle for mediocrity and lackluster half measures. Fearing any kind of risk, we end up retreating from both opportunities and challenges and attract vultures, snakes, and sharks who milk our talents, just as we saw happen to our sheepish man.

In the next dantian scenario we will examine Type 3, which consists of a strong Middle Dantian and a weak Upper Dantian.

Type 3

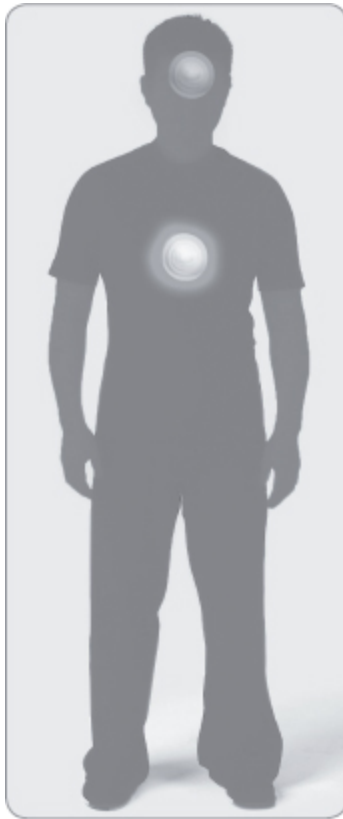
Strong Middle Dantian and Weak Upper Dantian

A young woman falls in love with a man who likes to drink, just like her previous boyfriend. Her best friend thinks he is unruly and disruptive and finds him unsettling, but the young woman shrugs off her friend's concerns. As far as she's concerned, his foibles are "cute" and a lovable part of his character.

The boyfriend's drinking habit worsens. The friend points out this growing problem, but the young woman attributes it to work-related stress and assures her friend that there is nothing to worry about. Soon the boyfriend becomes increasingly abusive toward the young woman, but she remains convinced that she can save him from himself by loving him even more.

She decides that having a child will persuade him to tone down his drinking and improve their relationship, so she

gets pregnant. The boyfriend gets angry and resentful when she breaks the news.



Strong Middle Dantian—caring, sensitive, and generous

Weak Upper Dantian—confused, disoriented, and gullible

Characteristic: This person is loving but mindless.

One night he comes home drunk and smelling of cheap perfume. She confronts him, and in his debilitated state he curses her protruding belly and hits her hard, knocking her to the floor. He leaves that night and never returns.

The young woman gives birth to a boy and becomes a doting mother who spoils her child with misguided permissiveness that she calls “unconditional love.” He grows up to become a wild, bratty child who runs around screaming in public places and bullying other kids. She lets him do what he wants, dismissing his rowdiness as “cute.”

Her worst nightmare comes true as the boy grows into a man with an uncontrollable violent streak, develops an

appetite for alcohol, and lacks a sense of proper boundaries and respect for women, just like his father. After he ends up in jail for assaulting his girlfriend, she wonders incredulously, how could this have happened?

This dantian combination—big heart; small head—generates a mixture of good intentions and poor judgment that invites chaos and confusion into a situation. This type of person ends up repeating the same mistakes over and over again, usually in the name of love, and always hopes for a different result each time. But love is not a substitute for wisdom, and when we lack the lead of our intuition and simply rely on our heart to guide us, we can end up making mindless choices and bad decisions. And then, just like the young woman in the story, we end up thoughtlessly weaving our own web of destruction. The list of attributes of the witless heart includes wishful thinking, naïve sentimentalism, and idiot compassion, which all lead to the same address: disaster.

In the next dantian scenario we will examine Type 4, which consists of a strong Middle Dantian and a weak Lower Dantian.

Type 4

Strong Middle Dantian and Weak Lower Dantian

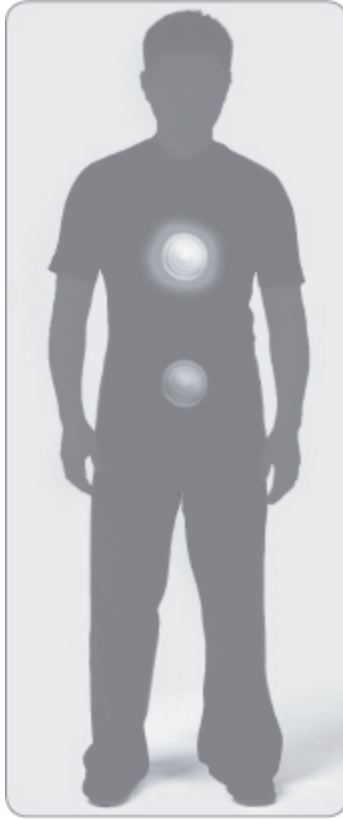
Meet the kind school assistant librarian who has been toiling at the same thankless job for the last five decades. She attended that same school when she was a teenager, though at the time she dreamed of becoming a singer. At the talent show one year she sang so beautifully it brought tears to everyone's eyes. But her parents discouraged her from pursuing her "impractical," childish dream. After she graduated from high school, she remained on site as the assistant librarian, never expecting that she'd still be there so many years later.

Although she is by far the most senior faculty member, no one else on staff takes her seriously. Even the students mock her as she pushes the book cart along and rummages through the bookshelves, lost in a daydream while humming old songs to herself.

In her daydream fantasy she is young once again and bursts into the school principal's office to announce that she is quitting her job to pursue a singing career. Then she sees herself on stage singing, and that's when she hums those old songs. These are the only times she ever feels truly alive.

The assistant librarian has played out this fantasy daily for the last fifty years, bursting in unannounced on a dozen different principals and quitting her job countless times with each one. But she missed her chance to make her dream come true long ago, and the weight of that dispiriting knowledge makes her the sad, weary old woman she has become.

The last day before her retirement, the school throws a party in her honor. The assistant librarian is asked to make a parting speech on the same stage where she sang so many years ago. Halfway through, she stops, and with uncharacteristic feistiness offers to sing a song instead of reading more words. By the time she finishes, the audience is up on their feet, clapping and cheering her on enthusiastically.



Strong Middle Dantian—caring, sensitive, and generous

Weak Lower Dantian—impotent, helpless, and weak

Characteristic: This person is loving but devitalized.

The next day, as the assistant librarian boxes up her belongings, a young student knocks on her office door to tell her how beautiful her voice is. She announces self-assuredly that she is also a singer, and that when she graduates she intends to pursue her dream of becoming a Broadway star. The assistant librarian wishes the young girl good luck and continues to clear out her belongings. Then she wonders how differently her life might have played out if she had ventured out into the world and courageously followed her heart ...

People of this dantian type are extremely sensitive and easily intimidated by the harshness of the “real world.” Though warm and loving, they lack the guts to pursue their heart’s desires and often compromise their ambitions,

settling for a safe choice and retreating into an imagined fantasy world that is more palatable than the actual one they inhabit. They are often nice, likable people, like the assistant librarian, who exude an aura of sweetness, but they easily get stuck in unsavory situations for a long time—even their entire lifetime.

Why do these good-hearted people tend to get trapped in unfulfilling situations? The combination of a big heart and no guts favors that outcome. Their sad stories invite our sympathy and compassion, but let us also acknowledge the energetic imbalance responsible in large part for their imbalanced lives. The root cause of their sad, unaccomplished lot ultimately lies within. The bane of their existence is a feeble vitality.

In the next dantian scenario we will examine Type 5, which consists of a strong Lower Dantian and a weak Upper Dantian.

Type 5

Strong Lower Dantian and Weak Upper Dantian

It is wartime, just before dusk. An inexperienced but charismatic officer gathers his troops. The battle-weary soldiers form a circle around him. He tells them that they have fought bravely today, but that the day is not over yet. There remains one last hill left to capture before they can rest.

The soldiers are physically exhausted, low on supplies and ammunition, and fatigued, but the officer delivers a rousing, stirring, patriotic speech. His passionate rhetoric hypes up the soldiers and by the time he is done they are ready to fight again.

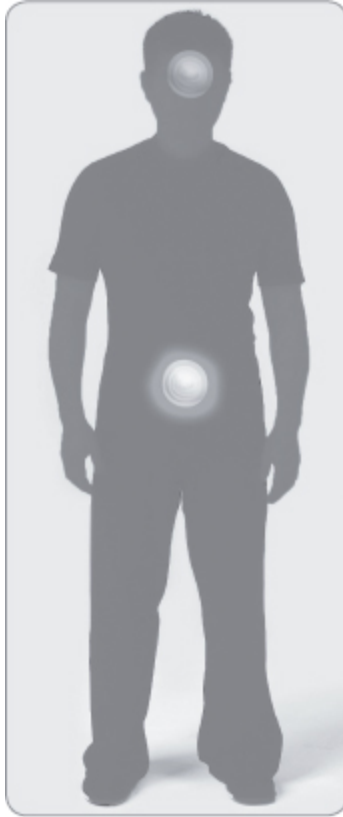
The troops charge the hill with fiery courage, but it is a poorly planned, harebrained attack. Despite their bravery, all the soldiers, including the officer, are dead within

minutes—all, that is, except for one who manages to escape with a flesh wound.

After the war ends the deceased officer is awarded a medal posthumously for his bravery on the battlefield, and the wounded soldier is asked to accept it on his behalf. To the shock of his superior, he refuses. They ask him for an explanation. He tells them that in his estimation the officer was not a hero. On the contrary, he sent good men—his friends—to their death needlessly, and he himself died in vain. His raw courage was devoid of wisdom. The decision to attack that night was inept, and the horrible results reflected the officer's poor judgment and bad timing. Hero? He shakes his head. "At best, he was a brash fool."

This dantian type—all guts and no brains—likes to "shoot first" and think later, if at all. This is a formula that will get you in trouble, sooner rather than later. Gutsiness is praiseworthy, but mindless action is costly, even lethal.

In the business world we encounter this type in the investor who impulsively bets his savings on a risky business venture. We encounter it in the womanizer who gets the girl pregnant carelessly in the heat of the moment. A surplus of hormones and a shortage of wisdom create the conditions for impulsive decision making that's guaranteed to lead to "confident mistakes."



Strong Lower Dantian—gutsy, dynamic, and charismatic

Weak Upper Dantian—confused, disoriented, and gullible

Characteristic: This person is vital but mindless.

This dantian type leaves behind a trail of messy footprints, some of them bloody. Like a child playing with a loaded gun, the potential destructiveness of mindless action can be devastating. Ironically, however, the most dangerous enemy this type will ever confront is seen each time he or she looks in the mirror.

In the next dantian scenario we will examine Type 6, which consists of a strong Lower Dantian and a weak Middle Dantian.

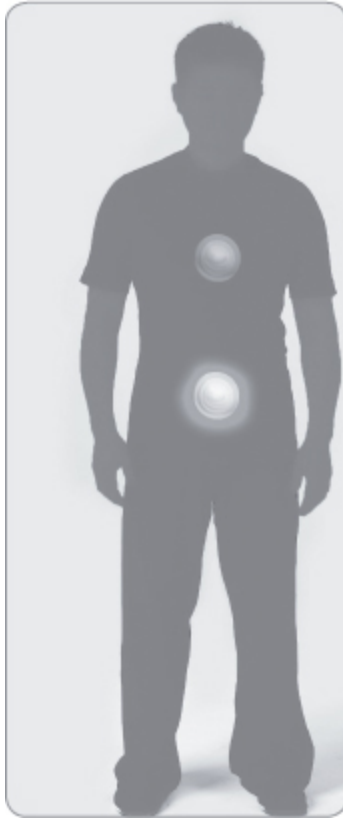
Type 6

Strong Lower Dantian and Weak Middle Dantian

An old homeless woman approaches a high-powered attorney on the street on his way to the courthouse. She is

hungry, tired, and cold, and her features remind him of his mother. The two make eye contact. She asks him for spare change in a frail voice. She holds a tin cup in her wrinkled, shaking hand. He feels a contraction in the middle of his chest, followed by a pang of anger that causes him to shake his head spitefully and move on.

The lawyer arrives in court and aggressively defends a client who he knows is guilty. Still, he manages to get the charge dropped on a technicality. On the way out, he makes eye contact with the defendant who was wronged. He feels the same hardening of his chest and walks away, proud of his “victory.” Later that day he receives an urgent phone call from his wife. His mother has suffered a heart attack. She is now hospitalized and in intensive care. Annoyed by the timing of the call, he checks his schedule and tells his wife he’ll do his best to get to the hospital after his next meeting. He spends half an hour at the hospital, mainly talking to the doctor to get the facts about his mother’s chances of recovery. Then he spends only a few minutes at her bedside. Despite the seriousness of his mother’s condition, he feels no emotion; instead his mind drifts to work-related issues.



Strong Lower Dantian—gutsy, dynamic, and charismatic

Weak Middle Dantian—lonely, rejected, and unfulfilled

Characteristic: This person is vital but heartless.

The next day on his way to the courthouse he gets another call informing him that his mother has died. Numbly, he hangs up. Just then, that same homeless woman approaches him with her tin cup and shakes it at him. He takes a step away, but then stops and turns back. He reaches into his pocket and drops a quarter into the cup before continuing on his way. Through this one measly act he expresses the deepest sentiment he can muster to mourn his mother's passing.

Type 6 is a ruthless combination. A contracted Middle Dantian leaves us emotionally numb. Whenever a situation arises that calls for love or compassion, this individual tends to respond with bitterness and resentment. And an expanded Lower Dantian amplifies one's self-confidence and

ambition. This dantian combination is able to justify the most low-minded, selfish human behaviors.

On a mass level we may witness this dantian combination as heartless bureaucracy and pitiless oppression. On a smaller, more personal scale we may also see this type engaging in acts of heart-numbing selfishness at work, in friendships, or even toward your own mother, as exemplified by the attorney in our example.

A constricted heart that can't experience love will always be the loneliest place in the world, and no amount of power or personal gain can change that fact. Eventually, even the most tyrannical dictator comes to realize that ultimately he is the biggest casualty of his own hardened heart.

The Seventh Dantian Type

Were you able to identify with any one of the six types? Were you able to identify the other five types with people you know? Your boss, father, best friend, or perhaps a favorite movie star? I hope that after reading through these examples you have now developed a more concrete understanding of how your own dantian imbalance sometimes throws your life into disarray.

Not everyone, however, can be ascribed to one of the previous six types. A small percentage of individuals exist whose Three Dantians are balanced and integrated, and whose lives are in an ongoing state of harmonious equilibrium all the time. These individuals cannot be reduced to a typology that describes various kinds of imbalances. Xiao Yao belonged to this category. I never detected any imbalance in my master's energy field or in his life. The same steady, happy, balanced man enacted the roles of lowly boiler room attendant and senior monk at the monastery.

And in Xiao Yao's presence, something odd happened to my own imbalances: they disappeared. Whenever I was

confused or troubled by something, once I spent time with him in the boiler room I would leave illuminated with a clear, intuitive sense of what to do about it. If I was ever emotionally upset when I arrived, I would leave feeling content. If I arrived feeling weary and devitalized, I would leave feeling invigorated and enlivened.

Xiao Yao's energy field had the same effect on other people who came into his presence too. He made them feel more balanced and integrated, and most incredibly, he didn't have to say or do anything for that to happen. His aura was like a magic bubble that brought happiness to everyone who stepped inside it.

My master was a Type 7, which consists of three strong dantians that are evenly balanced and integrated.

Type 7

Three Strong Dantians

The spiritual master is in deep meditation when someone knocks on his door. He gets up and opens it. An old man stands outside, looking weary and haggard.

"How may I help you?" the master asks.

"May I come in?" the man responds.

"Please do."

The master ushers him inside and bids the old man to sit on a cushion on the floor.

"Would you like some tea?"

"All right, thank you."

The master offers the old man an aromatic cup of tea, and they both take a sip from their cups.

"I am here on my wife's behalf," the old man says, on the verge of tears. "She is ill."

"If I can help to heal her, I will," the master replies.

"But we are poor and can't afford to pay you."

"There is no need for you to worry about that," the master reassures him.

"She is bedridden, and so she can't come to you."

"Then I will go to her."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

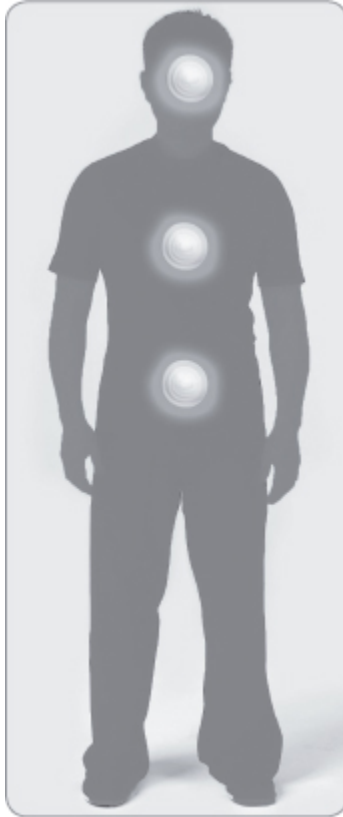
"Thank you," the old man says, wiping his eyes dry.

"Drink the tea," the master replies. "It will make you feel better."

As they sip more tea in silence, the master continues to meditate, but with his eyes open. He fills his Three Dantians with Qi and radiates it into the old man's energy field. He continues to do this until both their teacups are empty.

"I feel much better," the old man says, now looking invigorated.

"This is a special tea," the master says with a tender smile. "And now we shall get going to see your wife."



Strongest: All three dantians

Upper Dantian—intuitive, visionary, and insightful

Middle Dantian—caring, sensitive, and generous

Lower Dantian—gutsy, dynamic, and charismatic

Weakest: None

Characteristic: This person embodies wisdom, love, and vitality.

A Type 7 person embodies the balanced integration of wisdom, love, and vitality. In ancient traditional cultures such individuals were known as spiritual masters. Today we might refer to such an individual as someone who is balanced, integrated, or self-actualized.

Type 7 is the spiritual type—and I'd like to stress that the term "spiritual" doesn't necessarily have a religious connotation. Our criterion for spirituality is based on the energetic condition of our Three Dantians, not on morality or affiliation with any organization. In this sense, both religious and secular people *are* spiritual if they embody a balanced integration of the Three Dantians, and both religious and

secular people *lack* spirituality to the degree that they do not.

To be doubly clear, from here on the term “spiritual” will refer to the balanced integration of the Three Dantians. “Spiritual practice” will refer to any practical means that can help us achieve that goal, and the title “spiritual master” will refer to any individual who embodies that harmonious condition.

With those definitions out of the way, let me now ask you a question: *How would you like to become more spiritual?* In fact, each one of us can transform from any of the first six types into a Type 7. In the next chapter I will show you how to initiate that transformation by empowering the fourth Golden Wheel, the Central Meridian.

Brace yourself; the next leg of our journey will literally change the shape of your life!

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Empowering the Central Meridian

The Fourth Golden Wheel: The Central Meridian

The Central Meridian—also known as the Wheel of Harmony, is the main “artery” of our energy system. It is a funnel-shaped channel that runs through the body’s central core from the top of the head down to the perineum at the base of the pelvic floor. Along the way it passes directly through the Three Dantians, like a cocktail straw that skewers three pitted olives.

In addition, the Central Meridian extends *above* the cranium like a shaft of light beaming up into the sky and *below* the feet like a drill tunneling deep into the ground. It is our personal bioenergetic field that constantly recycles our own internal energy with the energy of the universe by circulating our Qi between its two poles, one high above our head in the sky, and the other down below the surface of the Earth.

We all have a Central Meridian, but until the channel is expanded through spiritual practice it remains relatively narrow, and only moderate amounts of energy can flow up and down it. Once the Central Meridian is awakened, empowered, and cultivated, however, the channel gradually broadens to the size of a fire hose, or even wider, and then ample amounts of energy can jet through.

The feeling we experience with an expanded Central Meridian is *happiness*. It’s like the feeling you get when your

favorite song comes on the radio and suddenly the world lights up and you want to dance. That's the feeling you get when lots of fresh energy streams through your Central Meridian, except that you don't need music or any other gimmicks to activate intrinsic happiness. You just feel that way naturally, all the time.



The Central Meridian.

When the Central Meridian is not developed, we usually need an excuse—like hearing really good news or attending a fun party—to generate a surge of energy powerful enough to make us feel happy. The energetic rush generated by those uplifting events expands the Central Meridian and we feel good, but only for a short while. Gradually the current of

energy weakens, and our happiness wears off. In contrast, an internally expanded Central Meridian is a mighty river of happiness that never dries up.

The Central Meridian serves multiple functions, and we'll consider each of them one at a time. We'll begin by first exploring the functions it serves *inside* the body as a conduit between the Three Dantians, and then we'll consider the functions it serves *outside* the body as a conduit of the celestial and terrestrial energy fields known in Qigong terms as "Heaven" and "Earth."

The Central Meridian can be likened to a road used to transport essential goods between three cities—more specifically, the Three Dantians. If that road is a narrow street, traffic will be heavy much of the time and few goods will pass through. But if that road expands into a four-lane highway, then traffic eases and more goods can flow through smoothly and in less time.

Of course, for our energy "traffic" to flow continuously along the Central Meridian, the dantians themselves must also be expanded and energized. A contracted or blocked dantian will cause a traffic gridlock that turns the Central Meridian into a pinched hose. This means that for us to *truly* be happy, our Wisdom Qi, Love Qi, and Vitality Qi must be awakened, empowered, and in a healthy state of flow.

Once we achieve that condition, then the surplus energy stored within each dantian can flow up or down the expanded Central Meridian to balance another dantian whenever necessary. But what exactly is signified by that kind of interaction? What do we actually experience when the energies of our dantians are blended?

Let's begin to answer these questions by considering how the Wisdom Qi stored in your Upper Dantian affects you when it flows down to your Middle Dantian.

Recall that the Wisdom Qi stored in your Upper Dantian is associated with intuition, and that when you tap into that energy, your "GPS" is turned on and you feel guided. When

your Upper Dantian is thriving and your Central Meridian is expanded, you can easily circulate your Wisdom Qi down into your Middle Dantian to empower your heart with discernment.

Have you ever reacted to a situation on an emotional impulse and regretted your words as soon as they crossed your lips? When your Upper Dantian is energetically connected to your Middle Dantian, your “wise heart” is less likely to be provoked into saying something foolish that can get you in trouble.

Similarly, when the Love Qi stored in your Middle Dantian flows up into the Upper Dantian, your mental activities become more heartfelt. Sometimes a brilliant mind can be emotionally blind and injurious to others—for example, when a person speaks the truth, but insensitively. When your tongue is energetically connected to your heart, you develop the ability to express your wisdom in a more considerate and compassionate manner, thereby avoiding being unintentionally hurtful.

The same basic principle applies to Love Qi and Wisdom Qi in relationship to the Lower Dantian, the source of the dynamic vitality that regulates our actions. When the energies of the two upper Dantians flow into the Lower Dantian, our Vitality Qi is informed by our intuition and compassion. We factor sound judgment, good timing, strategic vision, empathy, and understanding into the way we get things done. We no longer act first and then think and feel later. All three things occur simultaneously.

When our Vitality Qi flows into the two Upper Dantians, our minds and our hearts become charged with alluring confidence. We express ourselves intelligently, wholeheartedly, and passionately, and we possess the power to rouse others to action.

The Central Meridian acts as the energetic “ligament” that aligns, coordinates, and leverages the actions of the Three Dantians, much like the sinews and connective

tissues that bind individual vertebrae into an integrated spine. A vibrant current of Qi running up and down the core of our body is the energetic backbone that endows us with greater structural integrity. And just as our spine helps us counteract the force of gravity each time we stand up, a robust Central Meridian helps us counteract the forces of adversity that tend to keep us down as we strive to actualize our highest potential.

With a strong Central Meridian, a new set of attributes develops that empower us to overcome the hurdles that separate us from our own potential for greatness. We become more *reliable*, *responsible*, and *trustworthy*, and we also establish a reputation for outstanding excellence. These qualities transform us into achievers and stack the odds in favor of our success—in whatever endeavor we wholeheartedly engage in.

When we are marked by these positive attributes, we not only embody excellence but we also inspire it in others. Think of the outstanding school principal, respected by all his students, who inspires them to go beyond their limits, or the outstanding manager who motivates his team to outperform all expectations. Outstanding individuals stimulate our own Central Meridians, and when those energy circuits are fired up in us, we become inspired to strive for excellence.

But what happens if our Three Dantians are strong but we lack an equally strong Central Meridian to coordinate their actions? Three strong dantians without a well-developed Central Meridian are like three powerful horses tied to the same chariot by ropes, but without a harness keeping them in alignment. If each of the horses runs off in a different direction at the same time, that chariot will get jerked around without ever getting anywhere. Similarly, we may be wise, loving, and vital but if we lack the ability to harness and concentrate those energies, they scatter and we become unreliable and undependable.

With three strong dantians and a weak Central Meridian, we are prone to becoming underachievers. We may be good at doing many things but never attain excellence at any one of them. We become fickle, volatile, and erratic, like a gusty wind that changes directions all the time. We establish a reputation for being capable but unreliable. We fall short of living up to our full potential, and we eventually disappoint ourselves. Other people's successes make us feel like floundering failures—and the stronger our individual dantians are, the bigger that sense of failure is.

The table on the following page summarizes some of the positive and negative attributes associated with a strong and weak Central Meridian. As I noted, the Central Meridian also extends up above our head and down below our feet. It thus serves a second, broader integrative function as our energetic link to the rest of the universe. Next we will deepen our understanding of this energy channel by considering the attributes of the Central Meridian when it is both strongly and weakly connected to the sky above and the ground below.

Attributes of a Strong Central Meridian		Attributes of a Weak Central Meridian	
happy	responsible	unreliable	untrustworthy
integrated	genuine	underachiever	incompetent
balanced	sincere	inconsistent	irresponsible
harmonious	trustworthy	scattered	immature
outstanding	dignified	undependable	amateurish
upright	respectable	disappointed	failed
reliable	successful		
dependable	actualized		

The Three Treasures

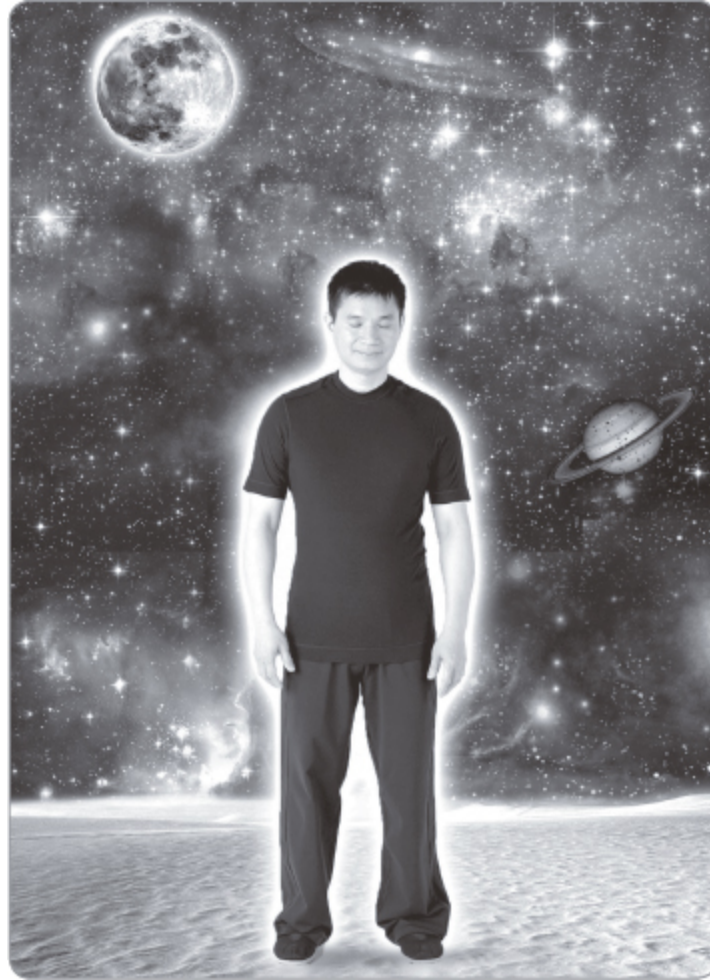
In Qigong philosophy *Heaven*, *Earth*, and *Human* are considered the three basic building blocks of the universal energy system. These three components, known as the Three Treasures, are interlinked by the Central Meridian. The

Central Meridian balances and integrates the Three Treasures just as it does the Three Dantians. The part of the Central Meridian that extends above the head connects us energetically to “Heaven,” and the part that extends down below the feet connects us energetically to “Earth.”

We already explored the “Human” dimension of the Three Treasures and Human Qi, a catchall term that refers to our personal energy system, which includes the Three Dantians. We’ll now turn our attention to the celestial and terrestrial energy fields that make up the two other treasures.

Heaven and Earth each possess distinct energetic qualities that impact our experience in a specific way, just as each one of the Three Dantians does. Heaven includes the energy of the sun, moon, stars, and planets, and the blended energetic essence of these celestial bodies is called Heaven Qi. That energy is constantly funneling down into the body through the Central Meridian to some degree, but once the channel is expanded, vastly greater amounts of Heaven Qi can pour down from the sky into our energy field.

When Heaven Qi is activated inside the body, you become instantly *inspired*. You feel as though a higher power has personally assigned you a special mission. It’s as if your guardian angel just tapped you on the shoulder and handed you instructions. You suddenly feel eager to take an enthusiastic leap of faith forward and stretch your horizons in new directions toward the unknown. That’s the feeling of Heaven Qi, which fills us with a sacred sense of *purpose* and *meaning*.



Heaven, Earth, and the Human Being make up the Three Treasures.

A young boy visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City with his father. While walking through the Ancient Egypt exhibit, he becomes entranced by the hieroglyphs and the golden sculptures. In this mystical atmosphere his head “opens up” and he literally feels himself expanding upward until he is as huge as the sky. That instant he conceives an inspiring vision: he envisions himself as an archeologist dressed in dusty clothes excavating time-worn ruins in a distant land. This boy has just received his instructions from “above.” His destiny has been set. For the rest of his life he will be guided by this compelling vision, and any time he immerses himself in the

study of ancient civilizations, he will feel in alignment with the will of Heaven.

Most of us feel connected to Heaven only occasionally, but when the upper portion of the Central Meridian is wide open and we constantly draw in large amounts of Heaven Qi, that connection is ongoing and strong. And as that energy streams through the Three Dantians, it endows our wisdom, love, and vitality with a deep sense of purpose and fills our life with heavenly, cosmic meaning.

Earth includes wind, water, and fire, and their blended elemental energy constitutes Earth Qi. This energy is constantly funneling up into the body through the lower section of the Central Meridian to some degree, but once the channel is expanded, vastly greater amounts of Earth Qi can be scooped up from the ground.

When Earth Qi is activated inside your body you become *grounded*. You feel the elemental powers of the natural world supporting you in your endeavors. Imagine the fairies and nature spirits creating a protective field around you and offering their abundant resources. When a burst of Earth Qi streams in, you feel nurtured and sustained. You stand your ground comfortably and become more productive. As that Earth Qi flows into your Three Dantians, you are endowed with *common sense, resourcefulness, and practicality*.

Picture a woman who is a mother, spouse, and nurse. All day long she cares for others and brings them comfort. Almost everyone she encounters on a daily basis leans on her for support. She is the stable ground that sustains the needy, and without her nurturing care and resourceful practicality, they would lose their footing. But how does she find her own source of comfort? How does she sustain her own groundedness? Where does she get all that energy?

Here is her secret: each morning when she walks her dog, she sings to the trees and the plants along the way. That daily ritual fills her up with enough Earth Qi to be a super mom, spouse, and nurse.

The Earth is your energetic “Mother,” and when you sink your energy roots into her she supports your ambitions. Earth Qi keeps the world stable and firm, and makes you more sensible. When you lie down on a patch of soft grass to take a nap, you usually get up feeling recharged, nourished, and grounded. You can think straight again. When your Central Meridian is expanded and channeling Earth Qi all day long, you feel that way all the time.

Heaven Qi and Earth Qi form a polarity. They represent opposite but complementary energies. Although in theory they embody contradictory principles, in practice one can’t function without the other. You need both in equal measure to effectively actualize your worldly ambitions. Any kind of imbalance will disrupt the even flow of your life, just as an imbalance between the Three Dantians does.

A relative overabundance of Heaven Qi makes you lightheaded, airy, dreamy, and impractical, like the proverbial absent-minded professor with his head in the clouds. You have ten thousand inspired ideas but none ever takes root. With an excess of Heaven Qi, your mind races around like an Olympic sprinter on a treadmill, exerting much energy but never getting anywhere. Despite all your noble efforts, nothing ever takes root or materializes.

A relative overabundance of Earth Qi leans your life in the opposite direction. You slow down below the speed limit. An excess of Earth Qi makes you dense, unyielding, and resistant to change. You say no to any new idea, you’re unwilling to embrace any untested possibilities, and you’d rather stagnate in the status quo than dare to venture into the unknown. You simply refuse to take a step forward. You end up outgrowing your reality, yet you entertain yourself in meaningless ways, like an adult still playing with childish toys. You sacrifice your destiny for the sake of walking a safe, predictable path and so your spiritual development ceases.

Ideally Heaven Qi, Earth Qi, and the energy of your Three Dantians should all be balanced and integrated. Once the Three Treasures are harmonized, your life can flow with magical ease. As soon as you embrace a meaningful task assigned to you by the treasure of Heaven, you are offered the resources to make it happen by the treasure of Earth, and the capacities to manage the process by the Three Dantians—your Human treasure.

As all these energies coalesce synergistically, your presence becomes a coherent field of spiritual power with the means to shape your environment and the people in it. Basically, once you achieve comprehensive equilibrium of the Three Treasures, any meaningful activity you undertake will tend to go your way.

The table below summarizes the qualities of each of the Three Treasures: In the next exercise, you will take another momentous step forward in your spiritual development by awakening and empowering your Central Meridian. To become a completely happy human being—wise, loving, and vital within the context of a meaningful and productive life—you need to empower both the internal section of the channel inside your body and the two external sections outside it. That objective is our next goal.

The Three Treasures	Attributes When Strong	Attributes When Weak
Heaven	inspired, meaningful, purposeful	airy, ungrounded, impractical
Earth	grounded, practical, productive	dense, meaningless, stagnant
Human	wise, loving, vital, outstanding	confused, unfulfilled, devitalized, unreliable

To do this you will use a new empowerment procedure called the Breathing Empowerment Method to empower your Central Meridian. This method uses the breath to direct the Qi stored in the Three Dantians in various patterns to activate it. Just as a drill can be used to widen an underground tunnel, your breath can also be used to flush

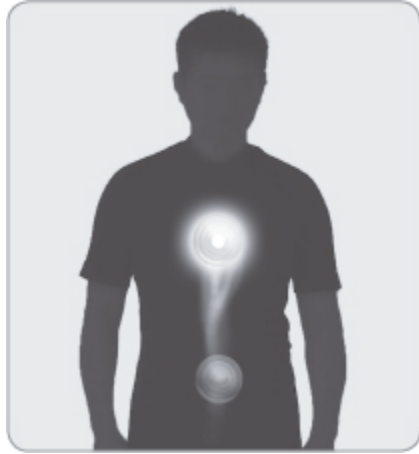
open your Central Meridian and activate all the positive attributes associated with it.

EXERCISE 9 **Breathing Empowerment of the Central Meridian**

This exercise is divided into two parts. In Part 1, you will use your breath to integrate the energy of the Three Dantians, and then in Part 2, you will use your breath to integrate the Three Treasures—Heaven, Earth, and the Human Being (the Three Dantians).

Part 1. Integrating Human Qi

1. Stand in an upright position with your eyes closed and your arms and hands relaxed at your sides. You may also sit comfortably in a chair with your arms resting on your lap. Become aware of your Lower Dantian in the center of your waist. Feel your Vitality Qi stir as you activate the raw sexual essence you stored there in previous exercises. Gently inhale this energy up along the Central Meridian to the Middle Dantian in the center of your chest. Feel Vitality Qi rise up along the core of your body and blend with the Love Qi stored in the Middle Dantian. Feel the Vitality Qi empower your Middle Dantian. When love is infused with vitality, your emotions become charismatic and dynamic. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix.



Inhale Vitality Qi up to the Middle Dantian.

Video 4—[SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises](https://www.soundstrue.com/masterkeyexercises)

2. Now exhale slowly and guide the Love Qi stored in your Middle Dantian down to your Lower Dantian through your Central Meridian. Feel your Love Qi flow down and blend with the Vitality Qi stored in the Lower Dantian. Feel the Love Qi empower your Lower Dantian. When vitality is infused with love, your alluring charm becomes considerate and compassionate. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix. Repeat this breathing pattern for at least nine cycles, sinking a little deeper into the experience each time.



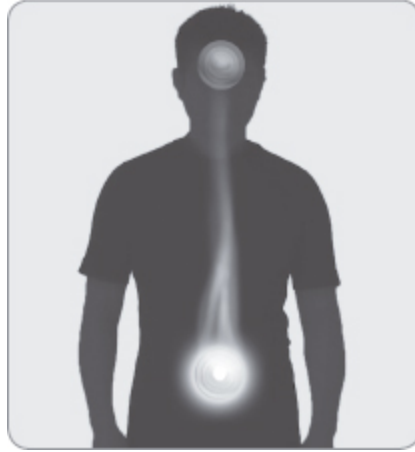
Exhale Love Qi down to the Lower Dantian.

3. Now become aware of your Lower Dantian again. Feel your Vitality Qi stir as you activate the raw sexual energy you stored there in previous exercises. Inhale this energy along the Central Meridian all the way up to the Upper Dantian in the center of your head. Feel Vitality Qi rising through your body and blending with the Wisdom Qi stored in the Upper Dantian. Feel Vitality Qi empowering your Upper Dantian. When wisdom is infused with vitality, your mind becomes charismatic and dynamic. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix.



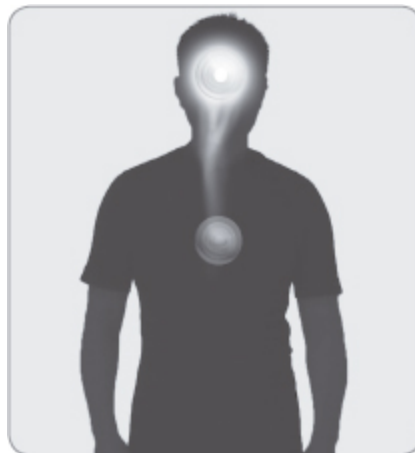
Inhale Vitality Qi up to the Upper Dantian.

4. Now exhale slowly and guide the Wisdom Qi stored in your Upper Dantian all the way down to your Lower Dantian through your Central Meridian. Feel your Wisdom Qi flow down and empower your Lower Dantian. When vitality is infused with wisdom, your actions become more intuitive and discerning. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix. Repeat this breathing cycle at least nine times, sinking a little deeper into the experience each time.



Exhale Wisdom Qi down to the Lower Dantian.

5. Next, become aware of your Middle Dantian. Feel your Love Qi stir as you activate the raw emotional energy you awakened inside your chest in previous exercises. Inhale this energy up along your Central Meridian to the Upper Dantian in the center of your head. Feel Love Qi rising through your body and blending with the Wisdom Qi stored in the Upper Dantian. Feel your Love Qi empower your Upper Dantian. When wisdom is infused with love, your mind becomes more considerate and compassionate. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix.



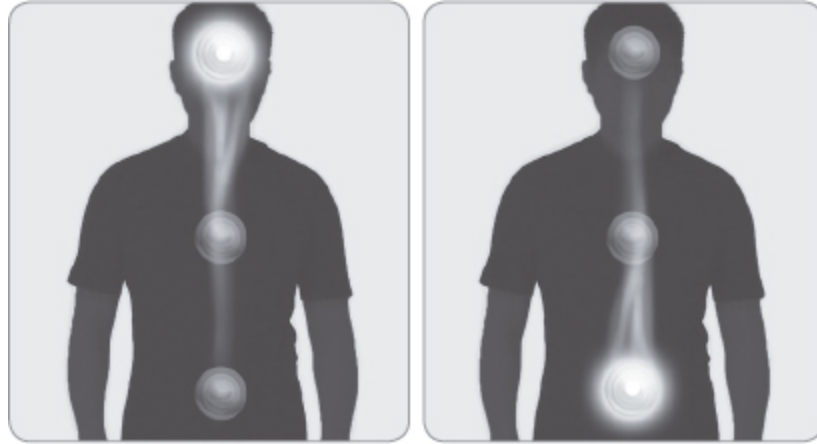
Inhale Love Qi up to the Upper Dantian.

6. Now exhale slowly and guide the Wisdom Qi stored in your Upper Dantian down to your Middle Dantian through your Central Meridian. Feel your Wisdom Qi fill the center of your chest and empower your Middle Dantian. When love is infused with wisdom, you become more intuitive and more discerning about your emotions. Feel these qualities emerge as the energies mix. Repeat this breathing cycle at least nine times, sinking a little deeper into the experience each time.



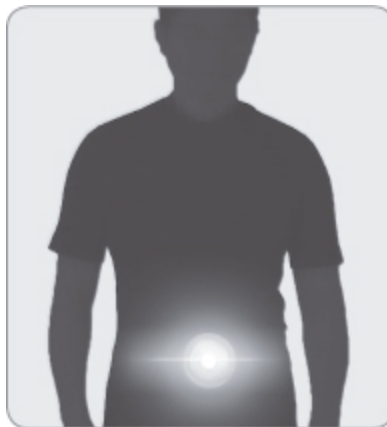
Exhale Wisdom Qi down to the Middle Dantian.

7. Next, inhale all the way up from the Lower Dantian to the Upper Dantian, and then exhale all the way back down from the Upper Dantian to the Lower Dantian. Feel the essences of your Wisdom Qi, Love Qi, and Vitality Qi fuse together inside the Central Meridian. The blended essence of all three Dantians is your spiritual essence. Each time you cycle through another breath, feel the Central Meridian expand with more energy. Allow this energetic charge to empower the core of your body. Visualize the Central Meridian growing brighter and brighter. Repeat this step at least nine times, sinking a little deeper into the experience each time.



Inhale Vitality Qi and Love Qi up to the Upper Dantian, and then exhale Wisdom Qi and Love Qi down to the Lower Dantian.

8. Finally, exhale deeply and guide the blend of Human Qi you just cultivated inside your Central Meridian down to the Lower Dantian. Using your mind, concentrate that energy into a pearl and store it there.



Concentrate the energy of the Three Dantians into a pearl at the Lower Dantian.

Part 2. Integrating Heaven Qi, Earth Qi, and Human Qi

9. Become aware of the pearl inside the Lower Dantian. Next, become aware of the sky above your head. Then become aware of the Earth beneath your feet. Inhale the pearl all the way up through your Central Meridian to the highest point in the sky

you can imagine. Absorb the essence of Heaven Qi into the pearl. Heaven Qi is inspiring and purposeful. Feel these qualities collecting above your head.



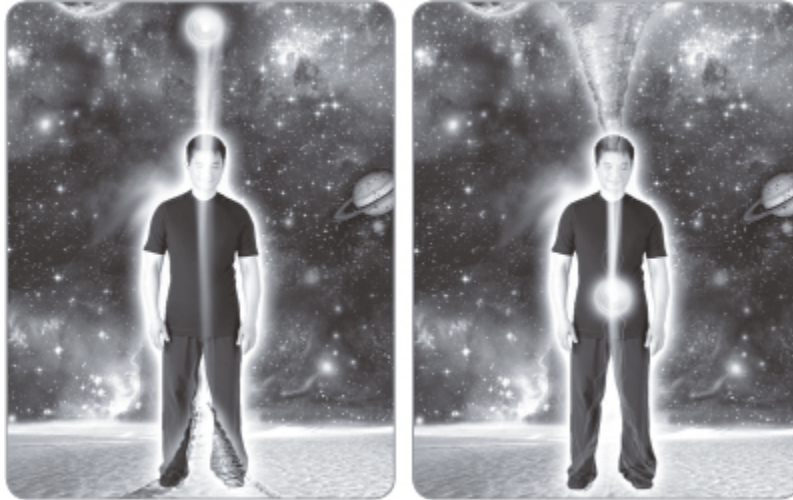
Inhale the pearl up to Heaven.

10. Now exhale and draw the pearl all the way down through your Central Meridian to the center of the Earth. Absorb the essence of Earth Qi into the pearl. Earth Qi is grounding and productive. Feel these qualities collecting below your feet. Next, inhale the pearl back up to the sky along the Central Meridian and then exhale it back down to the Earth again. Repeat this cycle at least nine times, sinking a little deeper into the experience each time.



Exhale the pearl down to Earth.

11. Complete the empowerment by inhaling the pearl that is now a blend of Heaven Qi, Earth Qi, and Human Qi all the way up to the sky, and then exhaling it all the way back down to the Lower Dantian.



Inhale the pearl back up to Heaven, and then finally exhale it down to the Lower Dantian.

12. Feel the pearl radiate the balanced and integrated essences of Heaven Qi, Earth Qi, and your Three Dantians. Feel its energetic connection to the whole universe. You are in the universe; the universe is in you. Nourish your Qi by imagining that this special pearl is a star floating in space, like a sponge in warm bathwater. Then relax and be happy.



You are in the universe; the universe is in you.

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Who Am I?

Siddhartha's Problem

Siddhartha Gautama was an Indian prince who lived in the sixth century BCE. He was handsome, rich, married to a beautiful, loving wife, and next in line to inherit the throne. By all accounts he was a wise, loving, vital man leading a happy life within the protective palace walls. But one day he ventured beyond the gates and was shocked by what he witnessed: a wrinkled old man, another man suffering from a terrible disease, and a rotting corpse.

The prince had never seen so much misery, and these experiences startled him. A profoundly troubling thought began to torment him: *I may be happy today, but someday I too will grow old, become sick, and die.* He couldn't stop thinking about his impermanence and the notion that someday everything dear to him—his looks, health, wealth, family, and power—would be taken from him, and that worst of all, he was totally helpless in stopping that inevitability. Although Siddhartha was only twenty-nine years old, he realized what many people don't see clearly until the end of their lives: that eventually we run out of time and death will rob us of all our accomplishments, possessions, and even our happiness.

The prince abandoned his privileged, happy life in search of an answer to the “problem” of death. He left behind his wife, riches, fame, and the power that so many others

coveted, and spent years living meekly in the jungle studying with various spiritual masters and undergoing numerous hardships. He learned various kinds of practices and experienced many blissful states, but no matter how spiritually accomplished he became, the problem of death continued to haunt him.

The former prince became extremely frustrated. He hadn't made any headway in resolving the issue since leaving the palace, and he felt like a complete failure. He didn't know where else to turn for guidance. Exasperated, he sat down under the bough of a bodhi tree and vowed not to get up until he figured out the answer. Days and weeks passed and, true to his vow, he remained under the tree. He struggled steadfastly against many challenges and temptations—and then one day it suddenly happened.

Sitting under that tree, Siddhartha was *enlightened*. He realized his *true nature*.

After this experience, he wandered the countryside profoundly transformed. People became drawn to his radiant, peaceful presence.

"Are you a god?" they asked him.

"No," he replied.

"Are you a wizard?"

"No."

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"What are you then?" they inquired.

"I am awake," he replied.

These locals started to call Siddhartha *Buddha*, which means "the awakened one," and the name stuck.

Before "waking up," the former Prince had been afflicted by the intractable problem of death, which had eroded his worldly happiness. But when he became the Buddha, that nagging problem evaporated like a drop of water dancing on a sizzling skillet. After he attained enlightenment, the existential anguish that had tormented him was replaced by

a profound and unshakable peace that no one could take away from him, not even the Angel of Death.

The Buddha had attained his goal—*absolute happiness*—and he spent the rest of his life systematizing a set of guidelines to help others awaken and become Buddhas just like him. Over time, stories about the Buddha were recorded, his sermons were written down as sacred texts, his philosophy was ritualized, and a religion emerged.

Buddhist scriptures are full of beautiful insights, and its ceremonies are deeply symbolic, but we are well served to remember that these embellishments are merely fingers pointing the way to the Buddha's experience under the bodhi tree. They are not a substitute for the core teaching of the Buddha—enlightenment—which can *only* be realized when we also realize our true nature.

Xiao Yao made this point explicitly clear. Although he was a devout Buddhist monk well versed in Buddhist theology, he never indoctrinated me into the religion. My master was wise. Life conditions during the Cultural Revolution did not permit me the luxury of adopting any religious belief, so he sidestepped the traditional indoctrination and religious formalities that might have endangered me and my family, and instead simply led me directly to the experience of enlightenment.

To this day I appreciate the distinction he made between being a “Buddhist” and being a “Buddha.” The former involves embracing the religion while the latter alludes to a universal experience that anyone can have regardless of religious affiliation. One can become a Buddhist Buddha, Hindu Buddha, Jewish Buddha, Christian Buddha, Muslim Buddha, or even an atheist Buddha.

Now I would like to offer *you* a taste of the enlightenment experience too. You may be wondering whether you are ready, or even worthy of it at this stage of your spiritual development, but let me reassure you, you are—definitely.

If we compare your true nature to a white canvas colored over with countless ideas, beliefs, and philosophies by the paintbrush of your mind, becoming a Buddha simply involves recognizing the original underlying “whiteness” of your being—your fundamental nature—which is ever present and transcends all the colorful impressions layered over it. Every human being *already* possesses a Buddha nature. That is the reason why you too can realize the experience Siddhartha attained under the bodhi tree, at any time, in any place. In a very real sense, you are sitting under that same tree right now.

So how would you like to dip your toes in those waters? Would you like to awaken your true and unshakable nature and glimpse your own Buddhahood? If so, then take the first step toward that goal by sincerely asking yourself, *Who am I?* This is the most basic and straightforward question you can ask about yourself. It is also the most difficult to answer.

Who are you, really?

If we asked a group of experts, they would size you up in different ways using their specific measuring sticks. A biologist might reduce you down to your genes and blood type, a psychologist to your family history and neuroses, and a sociologist to the life conditions that shape your culture and environment. Admittedly, each of these perspectives is partially right, but most of us would rightfully suspect that ultimately, we are constituted of something more fundamental than just our physical body, conditioned mind, and internalized social programming. So even if we collected facts about you from every field of knowledge and lumped all that information into a huge database, we still wouldn't be able to put our finger on that elusive “something.”

So let me ask you again: *Who are you, really?*

We all possess a relative identity made up of a collection of personalities that we invoke to function in society. Over the course of any given day, we shuffle that deck of cards

repeatedly as we assume different roles: brother, sister, child, parent, lover, spouse, friend, employer, employee, student, mentor, and many, many others.

Often we become completely identified with one of the expressions of our relative identity, mistaking it for our true nature. Consider the business executive who stakes his whole identity on his title. He truly believes that he really is who his business card says he is. Or consider the wife so fully embedded in her marriage that she is totally identified with her role as a spouse. While there is nothing inherently wrong with appreciating our position at work or being deeply committed to a relationship, we should be extremely wary of giving *absolute* status to any one role we play in our daily lives, no matter how meaningful it might be.

We should also be wary of “losing” our true nature by projecting that innermost identity onto a social group like a sports team, an ethnic minority, a religious institution, a political organization, an exclusive clique, a particular socioeconomic class, or even a noble, humanistic cause. Ultimately, we are much more than any one of these affiliations.

Siddhartha had happily identified with his social role as prince until the steely face of his own inevitable mortality fractured that perspective. His great quest for the unshakable truth stemmed from his realization that eventually *all* the attachments formed in the *relative world*—the everyday world in which our personal lives play out—will necessarily come to an end. The executive may one day be fired or retire, and the wife’s husband may leave her or die. And if both the executive and the wife staked their innermost self on those fleeting roles, they would suffer extreme disappointment.

From the Buddha’s perspective, anyone who embraced a worldly bond as the form of their ultimate nature was a victim of mistaken identity, and that blunder would eventually lead to a terrible letdown. And as the Buddha

walked around the countryside after his enlightenment, it became evident that nearly everyone he encountered was exclusively identified with some social role or another. Hardly anyone had an inkling about their true nature. It was as though people were walking around mistaking their hats for their heads.

This situation prompted the Buddha to instruct his followers on how to achieve enlightenment, since by helping people even just glimpse their own Absolute Self, he was offering them a life raft in which to escape their sea of suffering.

The Buddha had a great deal of compassion for the irony of the human condition. If he could speak to you now, he would tell you that your own Absolute Identity is not an exotic, unattainable object that exists in a faraway land. On the contrary, he would impart the radically simple notion that your Absolute Identity—your true nature—is so close by that it is very, very easy for you to miss.

So, who are you really?

Plain, everyday, moment-to-moment *awareness!* Yes, it is that simple.

When was the last time you contemplated your own awareness? For many of us, the answer is never. So let's delve into the matter of our own Absolute Identity in order to make it more tangible and concrete.

The most notable feature of awareness is that it is not subject to any kind of change over time. When you were a baby, you were aware of the milk bottle; as a child, you were aware of your toys; as a teenager, you were aware of your friends; as an adult, you became aware of your responsibilities; and as an elder, you become increasingly aware of your own mortality. While the forms of awareness occupying your mind change constantly like the weather, awareness remains as constant as the sky.

If we had to distill the Buddha's core teaching into a bumper sticker, it might read, *Everything that "is" arises in*

awareness. The idea seems almost trivial conceptually, but those men and women who fully embody its meaning claim that being established in our Absolute Identity—being continually immersed in pure awareness—is itself a radically monumental experience. But in all fairness, we must also ask, if this experience is so special and so simple, why have so few individuals followed in the footsteps of the Buddha?

Here is one answer: Awareness is inconspicuous. It is like the movie screen you never noticed, but on which you've already watched ten thousand films. Think about it. Every experience you ever had was projected on this invisible, unassuming screen of awareness. The best of times, the worst of times, and everything in between happened in awareness. This very sentence is arising in your awareness right now! And any "crinkle" in awareness would disrupt the flow of events just like a distracting blotch on a movie screen.

The distinguishing characteristic, of awareness is that it has no distinguishing characteristic, and its mute omnipresence makes it easy to miss. That is why the *awareness of awareness* has eluded the grasp of so many bright, inquisitive intellects like the hologram of a slippery fish. We could live to be a hundred years old, travel the world, read hundreds of books, meet thousands of people, and never once notice the common thread of awareness weaving through the whole drama.

Fortunately, once we understand this idea—as you just have—we inadvertently take a giant leap forward toward our own enlightenment. And the good news is that we don't have to go to India, China, or anywhere else to awaken our awareness. It can happen to you right now, wherever you are, since awareness is always and forever. And you don't have to buy into any strange ideas or religious beliefs to become enlightened since your Absolute Identity—the pure awareness that constitutes your innermost nature—transcends all the productions of the mind.

Many different traditions acknowledge the moment of enlightenment and allude to it by different names such as Samadhi, Satori, Self-realization, Gnosis, Illumination, Divine Union, and Nirvana. And they also refer to pure awareness—or our Absolute Identity—through impersonal names like the Void, Emptiness, Infinity, or the Godhead, and more personal ones like your Original Face or the Self.

In order to keep all our terminology manageable, we will continue to refer to the experience of realizing our true nature as enlightenment, and to our true nature as Absolute Identity, awareness, or infinity with the understanding that all these terms refer to the same underlying reality. With that clarification out of the way, let's now edge a step closer toward a real taste of enlightenment by considering the ways that you might have *already* encountered your true nature without having been properly introduced.

Now and then we unwittingly experience momentary enlightenment without paying much attention. Since awareness is such a constant, unwavering feature of our ordinary consciousness, when we get a pure “hit” of it—whenever our awareness is unadulterated by any thoughts or feelings—we barely notice, though the experience stands out as special.

Ponder those magical times when you let go of the heavy mental and emotional baggage you normally lug around. At those times your relative identity unhinged momentarily, and for an instant you were liberated and felt like a peaceful point of consciousness floating through timeless, formless space.

Perhaps this happened as you gazed up at the summer constellations from a grassy knoll, watched frothy waves rolling in at the seashore, or were awakening from a dream. If someone had entered your *field of awareness* at that instant and asked you your name, you would not have known it. The self is literally nameless. You would have had

to “pull” yourself together again and reestablish one of your relative identities before remembering.

That peaceful, timeless, vast spaciousness that constitutes our Absolute Identity is always there. But since our mind is usually “dressed up” in one role or another, we don’t ever really notice the naked awareness that actually wears those worldly disguises. During our waking hours, our minds are busy deftly juggling roles in the endless labyrinth of the relative world, and those roles even follow us into our dreams.

The one time we drop the contents of our minds like a hot potato is when we become totally unconscious during deep, dreamless sleep. That is the one occasion when most of us unwittingly come face to face with our Absolute Identity, and when we are confronted with our own impending mortality.

An old woman lies on her deathbed. She knows that in a few hours she will be gone. She looks down at her saggy arms and blemished skin. She touches her face. Wrinkles washed away her beautiful, chiseled features long ago. She feels a tinge of remorse as she bids her body farewell. Her connection to the relative world is weakening, and her identification with the many roles she embodied in her lifetime is receding. But instead of experiencing fear as this detachment unfolds, she is graced with a new experience. A vast spaciousness opens up around her: her dying body, her bed, the bunches of flowers on the night table, the room, and indeed the whole universe all fall into this sweeping hole of clear light.

She looks around incredulously, like a baby staring at the world for the very first time, only what delights her are not the colorful flowers and objects all around, but rather the immense peacefulness in which they are arising. Having realized her true nature as infinity, she bursts out laughing, overjoyed.

A nurse rushes to her bedside.

“Are you all right?” she asks with concern.

“Never better,” the dying woman replies, her eyes sparkling.

“Do you want some medication to ease the pain?”

“No, thank you. I feel perfectly fine.”

The nurse looks at her, confused.

The woman spends her last hours basking peacefully in that radiant light. Later that night, after her final exhalation, only a faint trace of her enlightenment remains, the slight “Buddha smile” on her lips.

You don’t have to wait until your final hours to awaken your true nature. You can become enlightened long before that happens. The following exercise, Awakening Awareness, is intended to initiate that process. Practice it often and you will deepen your own self-awareness. With persistence and grace, perhaps someday you too will become a Buddha, abiding in absolute peace even as you move through the spellbinding worlds of work, friends, and family.

EXERCISE 10 **Awakening Awareness**

Awakening Awareness can be practiced standing, sitting, or lying down. This is an exercise you can do anytime, anywhere, for any length of time, even while you are waiting for an elevator or at the checkout counter. The more you practice it, the easier it becomes to integrate Awakened Awareness into your daily activities until eventually it becomes as natural as walking or breathing.

The exercise is divided into three parts.

Part 1

1. Sit upright comfortably in a chair with your hands resting on your lap. Open your eyes and become aware of the outer world. This is the world that flows into awareness through the physical senses. Concentrate on the sights, sounds, smells, and the

sense of space around you. Continue doing this for a few seconds.



Open your eyes and become aware of the outer world.

2. Now close your eyes and become aware of your inner world. This is the world that flows into awareness through the inner senses. Concentrate on the feelings and images floating through your mind, and even on the sense of time flowing by. Continue doing this for a few seconds.



Close your eyes and become aware of your inner world.

Part 2

3. Now with your eyes still closed, focus your attention outward once again on the qualities of the outer world. This state of consciousness feels like being in a dark forest on a dark night while your senses

extend like antennas. Continue doing this for a few seconds.



Close your eyes and become aware of the outer world.

4. Next open your eyes and focus your attention on the qualities of your inner world. This state of consciousness feels like being in a daydream in which your eyes are open but your senses are introverted. Continue doing this for a few seconds.



Open your eyes and become aware of your inner world.

Part 3

5. With your eyes still open, now become aware simultaneously of both your inner world and the outer world. Become aware of both objective and subjective experiences arising in awareness. Concentrate on the spacious quality of awareness for a few seconds.



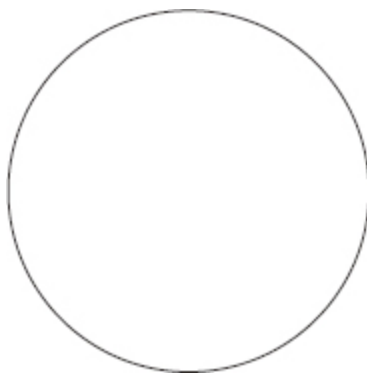
Open your eyes and become aware of your inner world and the outer world.

6. Then close your eyes while maintaining an awareness of awareness of both your inner world and the outer world. Realize that all experiences arise in the light of awareness. Concentrate on the formless quality of awareness for a few seconds.



Close your eyes and become aware of your inner world and the outer world.

7. Now let go of all experience. Allow your inner world and the outer world to dissolve into nothingness. Become “aware” of awareness itself. Awaken your awareness. Realize that Awakened Awareness is your true nature.



Realize that Awakened Awareness is your true nature.

Picture a room divided by an opaque, velvety veil. Half the room is lit and the other half, where you stand, is plunged in darkness. Each time you awaken your awareness, the veil is lifted a bit. Gradually, light amplifies and the darkness fades until finally the entire room is inundated with beautiful light: enlightenment!

Continue to practice this exercise, and that is what you can look forward to.

You may be wondering, how would my relationship to the world change if I became a Buddha? A Buddha may look like an ordinary human being, but inwardly he or she is experiencing a totally different kind of reality. The vision of the world through an unawakened perspective and the vision of that same world through an awakened perspective are as different as Newton's and Einstein's models of the universe. So how does a Buddha experience reality? How does enlightened awareness experience the relative world?

Let's find out.

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Buddha World

Awareness Is One

Consider the following scenario. It's Saturday night and a young woman is sitting at the bar with some friends, chatting and sipping a glass of wine. As she glances across the room, she makes eye contact with an alluring pair of dark eyes. Their pupils lock. *Awareness* suddenly meets *awareness*, and for a brief moment, both are lost in dreamy, timeless space. Then a waiter walks across their line of sight and their eye contact is abruptly broken. Later the young woman tries to reestablish the connection. Both sets of eyes meet up again, but this time the glances are tentative and shallow. The two become self-conscious and look away uncomfortably.

Most of us can relate to some version of this scenario. At one time or another we too connected with a person and experienced a moment that bordered on a mystical union, and then later, instead of feeling that oneness again, we experienced a chasm as huge as the Grand Canyon.

This simple scenario represents a snapshot of two extremely different kinds of realities we can inhabit. In the first instance we encounter Buddha World, the reality that opens up to us when we are grounded in our true nature through our Awakened Awareness. In this state we experience the universe and everything in it as a singular, unified field that includes you as well as me.

In Buddha World *me plus you equals one*. And not just the two of us, but me plus you plus every other human being roaming the planet. From this perspective, all seven billion of us are like trees of different species and varying sizes in a vast forest, all rooted to the same common ground: the ground of awareness. And any time two or more people relate from that ground, they enter Buddha World and experience that mystical feeling of oneness arising effortlessly, even if they are strangers.

So the first time the two characters in our scenario made eye contact, they were standing in Buddha World. They shared an “enlightened” moment and experienced one awareness reflecting back on itself across their perspectives.

The other reality we can inhabit is a divided, polarized, and fragmented world where we run around as unawakened personalities constantly changing relative identities like carnival masks, unaware of the underlying aspect of our own being that wears each one of them. From this perspective we experience the world dualistically, and here, *me plus you equals two*. Add another person and we get a complicated threesome, and so on. When we relate as unawakened personalities, we lack a common existential ground and feel as inherently disconnected as two potted plants, even if we like each other.

The second time the two characters in our scenario connected, their minds were filled with anticipation, their personalities flared, and they lost the mutual awakened awareness that made their initial connection special. Consequently, when they made eye contact again, they felt cut off, became self-conscious, and uncomfortably looked away.

Individuals who have not cultivated their awareness often chance upon a delightful moment of unified awareness unintentionally but can’t replicate that experience again at will, though they might try. Fortunately, you now possess a

tool—Exercise 10: Awakening Awareness—to help you develop and refine your awareness. It is your key to gaining access to Buddha World all the time.

As you become more proficient at Awakening Awareness, you will be able to integrate your Buddhahood and your personality, thereby allowing your Absolute Identity and multiple relative identities to coexist harmoniously and function seamlessly as a unit. Then that delightful sense of union will arise more often and remain more stable, even as you interact in diverse social contexts such as with family, in personal relationships, and at work. And if you someday become permanently enlightened, then you'll become a citizen of Buddha World and experience oneness arising effortlessly and continually with everyone, everywhere, always.

Buddha World is a marvelous, magical place and I would like to offer you a sneak preview of it. Let's imagine that I have a magic "enlightenment wand," and if I wave it around in a circle three times, anyone holding this book will instantly become enlightened for a few minutes.

Poof!

Amazing—it worked! So now that you're enlightened, let's quietly tiptoe into Buddha World and explore it through your newfound Buddha eyes ...

As you open your Buddha eyes, you realize that you are at home sitting comfortably on your couch with your cat lounging lazily next to you. You stroke its head and it looks up at you. Your pupils lock. There is no sense of separation between the two of you. You realize with vivid clarity that the same awareness that acts as the ground of your human consciousness also acts as the ground of your pet's cat consciousness.

Beyond its "catness" and your "humanness" lies the same awareness. Ultimately, you and your cat are one. You pet him again lovingly, acknowledging his divinity with your gentle touch. Then a bird lands on the open windowsill,

peeks in, chirps, then flies away. Your lips curl into a Buddha smile as you realize that every walking, creeping, swimming, buzzing, and flying creature is part of an invisible trail that leads to infinity, which is where you actually are right now.

It's a beautiful, lush summer day, and you step out barefoot into your backyard. There's a majestic, ancient, mossy oak tree on the grounds. You walk up to it and stroke its gnarly bark. The oak tree doesn't have eyes that you can stare into like you could with your cat, yet you recognize that just as the cat possesses a cat consciousness, the tree has its own unique *tree consciousness*.

The "oakness" of the tree is further removed from your own "humanness" than the "catness" of your pet was, but that doesn't matter. You tune in to the awareness of the tree that lies beyond its form and merge with it effortlessly. You stroke a leaf, feeling intimately connected to this special being, and lovingly acknowledge its divinity.

As you step out from under the shade of the tree into the light, you feel the warm glow of the sun stroking your face. You instinctively realize that the same awareness that underlies human, cat, and tree consciousness also underlies the sun. The father of the solar system is also rooted in infinity. You merge with the sun and honor its divinity with heartfelt gratitude for its life-giving power.

Then you scrunch the ground under your feet and realize that awareness also underlies the rocks and minerals that make up the Earth's crust. You merge with the whole planet and bless it, along with every living being it carries on its surface, realizing that every speck of the entire universe is grounded in the same field of primordial awareness.

One day, around twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha was preparing to give a sermon. His many disciples were gathering and slowly settling in. As he waited for them, he noticed a golden lotus blooming in a muddy pond. He grasped the stem and lifted it up. The petals and roots

dangled in the air. His disciples quieted down and stared for a long time, waiting for him to speak. But the Buddha didn't say a word.

Finally one of the Buddha's disciples, Mahakashyapa, smiled. He alone understood the meaning of the Buddha's "flower sermon" and was acknowledged for that realization by being appointed his successor. Standing in your own backyard, surrounded by nature and enveloped in a vast, endless cosmos, you too now realize the meaning of the Buddha's sermon: *the universe is a flower growing out of the ground of awareness.*

Now I'll wave my magic wand again three times to reinstate your ordinary, everyday consciousness.

Poof!

From this more conventional perspective, I would like you to consider some practical questions about your enlightenment. Why should you care about your enlightenment at all? Ultimately what difference does it *really* make if you walk around experiencing the unity that underlies multiplicity? It won't necessarily make you richer, healthier, or more attractive, so why even bother?

Until we become enlightened, our consciousness is like a strobe light constantly flickering on and off as our attention bounces around from one fractured moment to the next. Unenlightened consciousness has no solid ground on which it can rest. It's like a bird lost at sea. But when we realize our true nature and permanently awaken awareness, solid, restful ground suddenly materializes under our feet that supports us and offers us the most precious gift of all: *perfect peace.*

A Buddha experiences supernal peace even in the midst of a whirling world that is spinning out of control. Peace follows an enlightened being around like the eye of a hurricane, even through the most harrowing darkness. Thirty miles away, furious winds and thunderous clouds may

be battling in the sky, but the ground a Buddha stands on is anchored in stillness and illumined by the clearest light.

We live on a planet teeming with fear, disease, mistrust, social unrest, and conflict. These issues play out on a global scale as well as in our own personal lives. A Buddha abiding in unshakable serenity and centered in consummate tranquility is capable of expressing the finest acts of noble courage in the face of that existential suffering, as well as more effectively managing the simple challenges and opportunities that make daily life more meaningful.

Enlightenment is not an experience that carries you away from the responsibilities of this world to some other place where you can leave everything behind. On the contrary, Buddhahood will make you feel more intimately connected to this world and inspire you to make it a better place for yourself and for others.

You may be wondering, will I have to adopt a different lifestyle when I become enlightened? Not at all! You could remain exactly who you are, or you might change. That is entirely up to you. There is no specific job description that a Buddha needs to take on either. A truck driver, a homemaker, a criminal lawyer, an eye doctor, a Wall Street stockbroker, a state trooper, a pastry chef, the president, or even a football player can all be Buddhas. Enlightenment is like water that can be poured with equal ease into a small yellow pitcher or a big blue one. The crucial point to remember is this: enlightenment and your life are mutually inclusive.

There is a popular Zen saying: Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water! This saying implies that while enlightenment transforms everything, it changes nothing. Your relative identities do not cease to serve their functions when you realize your Absolute Identity. But now that aspect of your identity is firmly rooted to your true nature and grows out of it. In fact, a Buddha has to first embody a healthy

personality to be of any use whatsoever to him- or herself as well as to anyone else. A Buddha unable to comfortably project a personality and engage the world productively is like a light bulb in a black box.

Buddhahood is not a free pass that exempts you from experiencing the ups and downs of the roller coaster of life. A Buddha still has to pay the bills at the end of the month and get regular health checkups. A Buddha still has to rely on wisdom, love, and vitality to manage his or her daily affairs. And for this reason, it is essential that a Buddha continues to cultivate the Four Golden Wheels.

We have now reached the point in our discussion where we are ready to weave together the two independent threads that we have developed—spirituality, which refers to the cultivation of our Qi, and enlightenment, which refers to the cultivation of our awareness. The integration of both processes is essential to establishing a holistic Qigong practice. Let's briefly describe each thread one more time before weaving them together.

Spirituality refers to the process of cultivating our Qi by empowering and refining the Four Golden Wheels and balancing the Three Treasures—Human Qi, Heaven Qi, and Earth Qi. The goal of spirituality is to achieve happiness in the relative world by integrating the Three Dantians and the Central Meridian. A spiritual master is someone who has developed wisdom, love, and vitality to a high degree, and can access these qualities at will in order to make his or her life more productive and meaningful.

Enlightenment, on the other hand, refers to the endgame of the process of Awakening Awareness. The goal of enlightenment is Absolute Happiness, which is achieved by realizing the Absolute Self. A Buddha is someone who has realized his or her true and eternal nature, abides continually in perfect peace, and recognizes the oneness underlying everything at all times.

With this distinction in mind, it's possible for us to imagine a spiritual master who lacks enlightenment, or a Buddha who lacks balance and integration. In either case that individual's happiness would be lopsided, partial, and incomplete.

For example, an energetically imbalanced Buddha might embody perfect peace but would lack happiness in the relative world. Such a person would be deficient in the ability to express wisdom, love, or vitality, and thereby unable to cope effectively with the messy complexities of life. We wouldn't be surprised to see this Buddha develop a negative view of the relative world and then retreat from society in order to live a peaceful, reclusive, and uneventful life.

Alternatively, consider a spiritual master who possesses an abundance of wisdom, love, and vitality but lacks a deep awareness of the Absolute Self. This individual may well be a powerful human being who is able to achieve personal happiness and bring about great changes in the world, but he or she would lack the centering quality of unwavering peace and would be inwardly haunted by the terror of human impermanence.

The ideal, of course, is to become a spiritual master *and* a Buddha. Such a person would be an enlightened spiritual master who is both relatively and absolutely happy, radiating wisdom, love, and vitality along with a peaceful presence. He or she would be beautifully human and sublimely divine, laughing and crying as the world turned, while simultaneously dancing with infinity.

It turns out, however, that not all Buddhas are fully balanced and integrated. If we study the lives of enlightened teachers, leaders, social activists, and artists who have emerged over the course of human history, we observe that some were recognized for their wisdom, others for their love and compassion, and others for their endless vitality, which they often channeled into social service and

charitable causes. And no doubt there were also many fully integrated Buddhas who flawlessly balanced all these qualities.

This pattern, of course, reflects the Four Golden Wheels. More specifically, we can classify the four different types of Buddhas as follows: the Wise Buddha whose awakened Upper Dantian is relatively more developed than the other two, the Loving Buddha who has a relatively more awakened Middle Dantian, the Vital Buddha who has a relatively more awakened Lower Dantian, and the Happy Buddha whose Four Golden Wheels are equally awakened, balanced, and integrated.

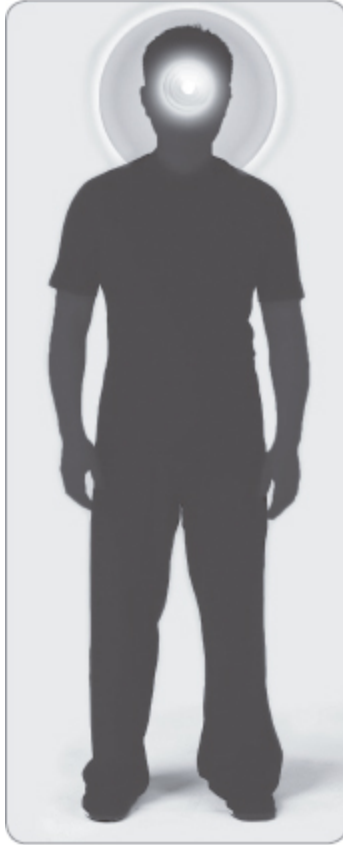
Let's now survey these four types of Buddhas and consider the unique characteristics of each one, beginning with the Wise Buddha.

Wise Buddha

The Awakened Upper Dantian

A Catholic nun is awed by a vision of a shimmering Jesus and falls to her knees before the cross, while halfway across the world a Hindu monk has a flashing vision of a luminous Krishna and bows before a statue. How different are these two experiences, really? They are not. Cultural differences aside, both individuals envisioned "God"—the personification of the Absolute—in a form consistent with their cultural beliefs.

Seeing visions of holy beings is one type of expression of a Buddha with a highly developed Upper Dantian, but there are other head-centered ways God can be revealed. Some Buddhas hear the voice of God guiding them. Just as with visions, the content of prophetic messages will reflect deeply engrained cultural beliefs. But the voice itself, which is accessible to anyone with awakened ears, has the distinguishing characteristic of always being heard as the voice of Absolute Wisdom.



Developed Upper Dantian: intuitive, visionary, and insightful

Buddhahood: divine, peaceful, and infinite

Characteristics of a Wise Buddha: This person has divine visions, prophetic powers, and a mind that can perceive and communicate the “Absolute Truth.”

The shamans who heard that voice named it the Great Spirit. The ancient Greeks associated it with the voice of Zeus or another one of their many gods. The Judean prophets believed it was the voice of Jehovah, while Christians called it the Holy Spirit. And Chinese mystics called it Tian Yin, the voice of Heaven. A Buddha unaffiliated with any organized religion who heard that voice might attribute it to the Higher Self, or simply relate to it as the impersonal voice of the universe.

The Absolute can also arise through any of the other physical senses associated with the head. It is possible to “smell” God in the form of a divine fragrance and even “taste” God in the form of divine nectar.

But of all the functions associated with the head, one stands out—thinking—so we should also consider the wisdom produced by the Buddha Mind. Not surprisingly, the awakened mind delights in the expression of the Absolute Truth. An articulate, enlightened mind is especially adept at communicating the notion that a singular awareness pervades the entire universe. Again, due to cultural differences, the terms will usually vary between one mode of expression and another, but the underlying universal message of oneness will always be the same in each instance.

Here are a few examples of Buddha wisdom. The Rigveda, the oldest collection of religious Indian hymns that dates back to the second millennium BCE, proclaims, “Truth is one, but Sages call it by different names.” The Buddha described the Absolute Truth in this way: “When you experience the unity of life, you will see your own Self in all beings.” Jesus said, “I and my father are One,” while Plotinus, the Egyptian founder of Neoplatonist philosophy who lived in late antiquity, said, “God is not external to anyone or anything, but exists in everyone and is with all things even though many people are ignorant that this is so.”

Eleven centuries ago the Sufi master Al-Hallaj cried out, “I am God!” He was misinterpreted by the religious authorities of his time, who could not understand his “language” of enlightenment, so they sentenced him to death for blasphemy. According to eyewitness reports, he danced in divine ecstasy as they led him in chains to the gallows.

Three centuries ago the British Buddha William Blake described his vision of the Absolute Truth in this way: “To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower; hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.” And sixty years ago the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi succinctly summed up the essential message of

Buddha wisdom by declaring, “God, Guru, and the Self are one.”

One of the hallmarks of Buddha wisdom is the seemingly paradoxical statements it engenders, which paralyze the rational, logical mind. For example, the Heart Sutra, a sacred Buddhist text that dates back to antiquity, is best known for this core teaching: form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

What is the unawakened mind supposed to do with this bit of twisted logic? To the unenlightened mind these words are meaningless and nonsensical. But an enlightened mind would understand them perfectly as another expression of the fundamental idea that the One is found in the Many, while the Many simultaneously abide in the One.

The same kind of mind-twisting logic is also found in stories crafted by the Buddha Mind. Consider the parable of The Butterfly and the Dream as told by the Chinese sage Zhuangzi:

One day Zhuangzi was sleeping and dreamt that he was a butterfly fluttering around happily among the flowers in a beautiful field. Suddenly he woke up and then wondered: was I, Zhuangzi, dreaming that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am Zhuangzi?

A Buddha hears the story and smiles, understanding that Zhuangzi and the butterfly are both impermanent phenomena being dreamt by eternal awareness. The same theme of awareness acting as the unmoving stage on which all change unfolds is echoed in the following story of two monks watching a flag wave around in the wind:

“Look,” the first monk says, “that flag is moving!”

“No,” the second one says, shaking his head, “the wind is moving the flag!”

An old, enlightened monk who overhears the discussion breaks in. “You are both wrong. You see, it is awareness that is moving both the flag and the wind.”

These types of stories are typical of Zen, the Japanese spiritual path that specializes in awakening the Buddha Mind by challenging its students with paradoxical riddles known as koans. Old-school Zen masters would smack a student who tried to answer a koan from the logical, unenlightened mind. The foolproof method to answer a koan successfully is to reply with an awakened Buddha Mind.

Try it.

What is the sound of one hand clapping?
What was your face before you were born?
When you approach an enlightened man on the road,
you don't greet him with words and you don't
greet him
with silence, so how then should you still greet
him?

Did you manage to answer these koans with a Buddha Mind, or did you backslide into logical thinking?

Smack!

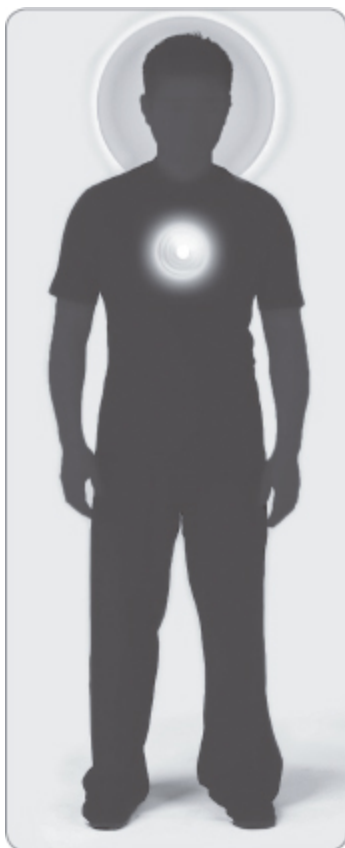
The second type of Buddha is the Loving Buddha.

Loving Buddha

The Awakened Middle Dantian

A little boy falls down and scrapes his knee. He runs crying to his mother. She holds him tightly in her arms and the pain lessens instantly; love heals. A mother tends to love her child with complete devotion. But how does a mother feel about other children? She might feel some degree of love and compassion for them, but probably less than she would for her own child. And how would she feel about the schoolyard bully who taunted her own little boy? Wouldn't her motherly feelings be likely to get in the way of what she could feel about that other child?

The heart of a mother is like a well. It runs deep, but it is narrow. But when the Middle Dantian awakens, our hearts become a boundless, fathomless ocean of love. The Divine Mother incarnates within us and we become an outpouring of infinite compassion that knows no limits.



Developed Middle Dantian: caring, sensitive, and generous

Buddhahood: divine, peaceful, and infinite

Characteristics of a Loving Buddha: This person embodies the “Divine Mother” archetype and possesses an awakened heart receptive to timeless beauty and disposed to universal prayer.

Divine Mother loves every human being as her own child. Her heart is universal. It does not discriminate. She can embrace a grimy, homeless woman on the street corner as lovingly as her own daughter, or behold a violent, drug-addicted murderer as her own son. The Buddha Heart of Divine Mother showers its love on all, especially those

unsavory individuals who are in great pain and need to be nurtured the most.

The contemporary Indian saint known as Amma embodies a Buddha Heart. She teaches universal love, and she practices her creed by hugging anyone who comes to see her. Amma has blessed millions of people worldwide by cradling them in her arms and blessing them with her divine, motherly love. Since her love is grounded in infinity, it never tires.

You don't have to be a woman to experience Divine Mother incarnating within you. Many male saints have embodied some version of this archetype and expressed her infinite love with unabashed enthusiasm. The nineteenth century saint Ramakrishna developed a devotional relationship with Divine Mother in the form of the goddess Kali. He was deeply in love with Kali and worshiped her statue daily in her temple shrine. For the first few years he would enter into an intoxicating, ecstatic trance in her presence and lose all awareness of the external world. But as the years passed, his love for Divine Mother ripened even more. Then she finally manifested and merged inside his being.

Another expression of an awakened Middle Dantian is our capacity to perceive divine beauty spread throughout the world. When our heart is open, even a smelly junkyard becomes lovely. Buddhas with a highly developed Middle Dantian have a special relationship to beauty, and often long to communicate their appreciation of the Absolute aesthetically through art and music.

What happens when a Loving Buddha grabs a paintbrush or composes a piece of music? Art that emanates from the awakened heart infuses its medium with a touch of divinity that can instantly awaken our own hearts and carry us off into infinity as well.

For example, the ceiling panels on the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, painted by the Italian Buddha Michelangelo in the

sixteenth century, portray sacred, uplifting images that fill us with the presence of God, and just a few notes from the German Buddha Beethoven's inspired "Ode to Joy" fire up the heart with divine ecstasy.

Divinely inspired art transcends the classical genre. Contemporary rock artists like the Beatles have awakened universal love in millions with divinely inspired melodies and lyrics about peace, and more recently the popular Kirtan performer Krishna Das has awakened the timeless presence of God in the hearts of many nonreligious Western youths by using ancient Indian chants.

How can we tell whether a work of art originates from a Buddha Heart? The answer is simple: if it inspires universal love and peace, it qualifies.

Another form of expression closely associated with the awakened Middle Dantian is prayer. When our heart is open, prayer flows effortlessly from our lips. What does the awakened heart pray for? The essence of Buddha prayer is the same cross-culturally: the eradication of human suffering and the enlightenment of our entire species. In two words: universal peace.

Listen to the plea of the Native American Buddha Black Elk:

Hear me, four quarters of the world—a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth. Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds. Great Spirit ... all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their arms, that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet. This is my prayer, hear me!

And listen closely to St. Francis of Assisi's humbling prayer, which could only have been created by a Buddha Heart immersed in the splendor of universal love:

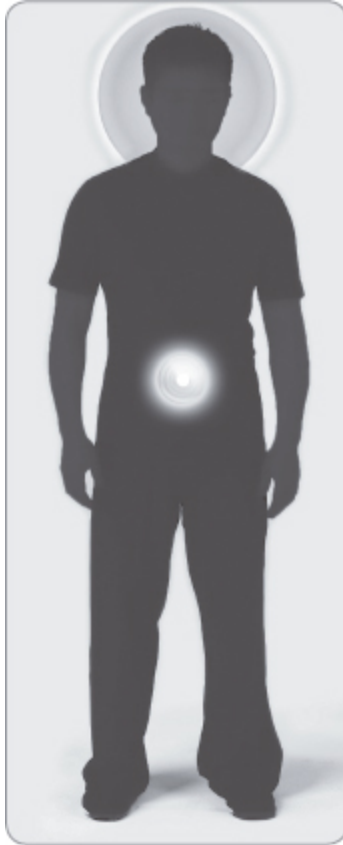
Lord, make me a channel of your peace,
Where there is hatred, may I bring love,
Where there is wrong, may I forgive,
Where there is discord, may I bring harmony,
Where there is error, may I bring truth,
Where there is doubt, may I bring faith,
Where there is despair, may I bring hope,
Where there are shadows, may I bring light,
Where there is sadness, may I bring joy,
Lord, may I seek to comfort rather than to be comforted,
To understand rather than to be understood,
To love rather than to be loved,
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds,
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven,
And it is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

The third type of Buddha is the Vital Buddha.

Vital Buddha

The Awakened Lower Dantian

A young woman comes home exhausted after a long, hard day. She plans on having an early dinner, watching a little television, and going to bed early. The phone rings. It's her best friend calling to invite her to a dinner party. She turns down the invitation. But then her friend informs the young woman that the guy she really likes will be there. In the blink of an eye the young woman changes her mind. She rummages through her closet for a provocative dress, now delighted and recharged. Minutes ago she was a soggy vegetable, and now a swarm of butterflies is fluttering in the area of her lower abdomen. She feels alive.



Developed Lower Dantian: gutsy, dynamic, and charismatic

Buddhahood: divine, peaceful, and infinite

Characteristics of a Vital Buddha: This person's sexual vitality embraces infinity and he or she experiences the universe as a wild lover who tingles with the blissful charge of divine eroticism.

The Lower Dantian stores our sexual essence, which fuels our vitality. Sexual energy doesn't necessarily have to be channeled into sexual activity. That energy also regulates our vigor, passion, and zest for life and can be directed into a host of other activities. But the main characteristic of a highly developed Lower Dantian is a strong libido, so we will focus on this aspect for now.

What happens to an individual who is both enlightened and has a highly developed Lower Dantian? What is ignited when juicy passion meets infinity? What happens when a Vital Buddha gets turned on?

These questions steer us in a delicate direction. Normally in Western society, a mile-high partition separates sex and

God. But that division is arbitrary and reveals the cultural barrier between mainstream notions of sacredness and sexuality. Is there some universal law that prohibits the fusion of those two forces in the form of sacred sexuality? Not at all!

Indeed, when a Buddha awakens his or her Lower Dantian, the whole universe is transformed into a boundless field of sexual charge and every object in it becomes eroticized. Once our vitality participates in our enlightenment, then even a trivial experience—like tying a shoelace or feeling moonbeams stroke our face—can send us into fits of divine, erotic rapture. No wonder, then, that some of the most powerful religious iconography is expressed through sexual symbols.

The Star of David, for instance, is an abstract image that depicts two intertwined triangles that represent the “union”—a highly suggestive sexual term commonly found in sacred traditions—of the Absolute and the relative world. That same symbol is also rendered figuratively in the Indian tantric image depicting the union of two of the gods, Shiva and Shakti.

Tantra is a spiritual path that is known for emphasizing the erotic face of the Absolute. The iconography of this system includes an image of the sexual union between the male god Shiva, who symbolizes the Absolute, and the female goddess Shakti, who symbolizes the relative world. In many instances, Shiva is depicted sitting cross-legged with Shakti straddling him. The sexual position insinuates Shakti’s “undulations,” which pleasures Shiva, and Shiva’s “stillness,” which acts as the ground for Shakti’s pleasure.

According to Tantric philosophy, the union of Shiva and Shakti—or the Absolute and the relative world—generates desire, the ubiquitous force that drives *creation*. For a Buddha with a highly developed Lower Dantian, this erotic desire is universal. It is literally found everywhere, in the roots of a tree trunk penetrating the soil, in the rolling

rhythm of the waves at the seashore, and even in the play of white, billowy clouds in the sky. Can you imagine relating to the universe as an alluring, sexy partner and to your whole life as an ongoing, infatuating love affair with creation? When your Lower Dantian is awakened, that perspective arises naturally.

Throughout the ages, Buddhas with an awakened Lower Dantian have articulated visions of the Absolute that are overtly sexual. The Japanese Zen master Dogen noted that enlightenment was “intimacy with all things.” The Persian mystic Hafiz called God “the most intense lover!” And the celebrated German mystic Meister Eckhart said that after he was enlightened it became obvious to him that “all the objects in the world are madly in love.”

But by far the juiciest expression of sacred eroticism is found in the Bible. Credit goes to King Solomon’s “Song of Songs,” an explicitly sexual tribute addressed to God. It begins:

This is Solomon’s Song of Songs,
Let him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,
For your love is better than wine,
Your name is like the fragrance of fine oils,
That’s why the virgins love you.
Draw me near, we will chase after you,
To the royal bedchamber,
Where we will rejoice in you.
We will remember your love,
Which is more fragrant than wine,
And love you sincerely.

We now return to our scenario of the young woman who was invited to the dinner party. We find her sitting next to the hot guy she really likes. He smiles at her and all her defenses melt away. They flirt. After dinner they go for a walk. He leans forward and touches her neck. Then he

fondles her hair. The butterflies in her belly ignite like wildfire. Half an hour later they are back at her place, passionately coiled in bed.

Five centuries ago another young woman had a sexual escapade too—with God. She was a Catholic nun named Teresa of Avila, and in her autobiography she describes her encounter in graphic detail. It all began when a small angel with a fiery face swept down beside her holding a long spear of gold with a blazing tip, and then ...

He appeared to thrust it into my heart and I felt it pierce my entrails. When he drew out the spear I felt that he was drawing them out as well and he left me all fired up in God's love. The pain was so awesome that it made me moan. But the tenderness caused by that feeling exceeded the great pain and I didn't want the pain to leave me. Only God can satisfy my soul now ... The split between my soul and God is now so tender that I beg God to let those who think I am lying experience it for themselves.

The seventeenth-century Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini was so moved by this account that it inspired his masterpiece, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. The statue depicts Teresa in divine rapture as the angel stands beside her holding up his golden spear. Teresa is wearing a hooded cloak that covers the length of her entire body. Her neck follows the curve of her back, which arches backward suggestively. Her lips are parted and her half-opened eyelids reveal that she is in the throes of an unparalleled, divine orgasm.

The fourth, and last, type of Buddha to consider is the Happy Buddha.

Happy Buddha

The Awakened Central Meridian

It is midnight and an alchemist is blending a potion in his basement laboratory. He mixes the essences of wisdom, love, and vitality in a glass tube, and it begins to glow and gurgle. Then, very carefully, he adds a drop of divinity to the mixture and takes a sip. He feels the energetic core of his body expand quickly. It shoots up like a laser beam high above his head through the paint-cracked ceiling toward the sky and straight down through the tiled floor toward the center of the Earth. His Central Meridian gushes like a gigantic geyser of light.

Next, the room grows brighter and brighter until a tidal wave of intense light drowns out all the objects in it. An indescribably beautiful, dazzling, incandescent luminescence washes away the world like a sand castle, and the alchemist dissolves into it, merging into boundless, peaceful eternity.

After an unknown span of time, the alchemist opens his eyes and the ceiling gradually reappears. He is lying on the floor, staring up. He sits up slowly and glances over at the ticking wall clock. Three hours have passed. With some effort he regains control over his limbs, stands up, and surveys the scene. The laboratory is intact. The vials are stacked in their proper places, the voluminous books are tucked away on the bookshelf, and his notes are neatly stacked on the table.

The alchemist walks to a mirror and smiles at the radiant face staring back at him. His familiar features look somewhat different now; they are more lustrous. His eyes are beaming especially brightly. He walks up the stairs and across the living room. His cat is sleeping on the couch. He quietly opens the back door and steps outside into the backyard.

The summer night air is warm, crisp, and sweet, and he delights in breathing it in like a child playing with his favorite toy.

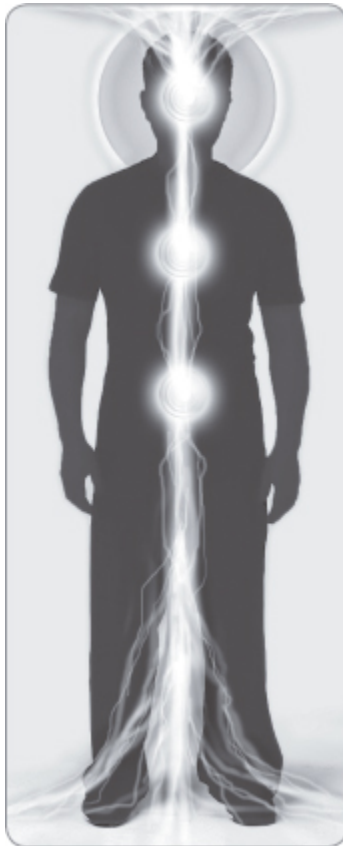
Inhale; exhale.

Inhale; exhale.

Inhale; exhale.

"It feels so good!" he exclaims.

The tranquil heavens are beautifully illuminated by the constellations. He looks up at the regal sky. Jupiter hovers near a crescent moon, both of them looking like precious jewels mounted on the starry crown of night. He senses that God is wearing that crown, and he bows his head reverently.



Developed Central Meridian: wise, loving vital, and happy

Buddhahood: divine, peaceful, and infinite

Characteristics of a Happy Buddha: This person no longer experiences a distinction between "human" and "divine." His or her immediate presence embodies infinity with natural grace and radiates the deepest peace through every expression of wisdom, love, and vitality.

The alchemist walks past the ancient oak tree into the forest and follows a soft, grassy path down to a meadow of wildflowers. He walks to the center of the meadow; the trees form a quiet circle around him.

As the alchemist looks all around, he notices that everything appears slightly different from before. The whole universe and all the objects within it have become subtly translucent. The clear, white light in which he was previously immersed has not disappeared. Oh no! The world has rematerialized within it and now everything is arising in that radiance—the sky, the stars, the moon, the trees, the rocks, and the flowers. He observes his hands and moves his fingers. Even they are gloved by a shimmering aura of pristine clarity.

A thought enters his mind—the first one that has formed since he drank the potion in his laboratory. It feels like a tiny firefly buzzing inside the fathomless cavern of his head. It takes him a while to grasp it, to comprehend it. Then, finally, he does: *the universe is so beautiful!*

Then he feels the area around his heart stir tenderly. The sensation amplifies and expands from a point of joy into an awesome outpouring of gratitude. His eyes moisten, and with tears rolling down his face, he lifts his arms up toward the sky.

“Thank you!” he cries out.

The gentle breeze replies by caressing his face like a kind, soft hand. The touch of the wind stirs in him a ripple of arousal that flares up in the area around his lower belly. He draws in a deep breath, and the jet of air rushing into his body heightens the delightful sensation. Each time he breathes in or out, that pleasure grows. The insides of his body are vibrating with bliss and that feeling rushes down throughout his arms and legs, spreading all the way out to his fingers and toes. His entire body is now pulsing with joyful pleasure.

A tall yellow wildflower catches the alchemist's eye. Its petals are invitingly open. As he walks toward it, he can feel the mutual desire between them increasing. He reaches down and touches the petals with his intoxicated fingers.

"I love you," he whispers.

The alchemist closes his eyes and kisses the flower softly. Then, inexplicably, the sky, the stars, the moon, the trees, and all the wild-flowers in the meadow materialize inside his head. The entire universe has been sucked up inside of him. He suddenly finds himself looking down on himself from high up in the sky like a cloud. As he revels in the mystery of the moment, a cricket chirps. He opens his eyes, now realizing that inside and outside are one. Then a prayer forms in his heart, and he blesses all the crickets that have ever chirped.

The darkness of night begins to fade and he leaves the meadow to return home. On the way back he sees the glowing, translucent figure of a Chinese sage with kind, intelligent eyes draped in a long, black robe standing on the path beside the ancient oak tree.

"Are you a ghost?" the alchemist asks.

"I am like you, a Buddha," the sage replies.

"Am I dead?"

"No."

"Am I dreaming?"

"No."

"What has happened to me then?"

"You finally woke up."

"Yes, I did," the alchemist replies, adding, "it is all so simple."

"Yes, it is," the sage agrees. "There is no need to chase wildly after all the waves. They too are going to wither and die. But even when they break upon the shoreline, the ocean doesn't disappear. Water flows in all directions, inside and outside. You are an ocean within an ocean and those two waters are one."

"I understand," the alchemist says.

"I know that you do," the sage replies.

The two of them stand peacefully on the dewy ground for a while, and then, without saying a word, the sage vanishes like a wisp of vapor.

The alchemist walks back home as the first light of day breaks in the sky. He enters and sits down on his couch. The cat meanders over to him lazily and plops its head on his lap. The alchemist strokes its back.

"I am nothing, I am everything," he tells the cat, adding, "I am happy."

The cat purrs and the alchemist closes his eyes, dissolving into a peaceful, luminous sleep.

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Exercising the Four Golden Wheels

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Mastering Willpower

Boosting Your Qi Power

Now is a good time for us to pause briefly, assess where we stand, and establish where we go from here. In Part 2, Awakening the Four Golden Wheels, you came into possession of the master key to happiness by awakening and empowering the Three Dantians, the Central Meridian, and Awakening Awareness. Now in Part 3, Exercising the Four Golden Wheels, I will guide you through a series of four exercises known as the Essential Practices, which are designed to develop that seed you planted in Part 2 into a mighty tree.

The Essential Practices presented in this section will considerably increase and refine your energy reserves. Each practice exercises all Four Golden Wheels by repeatedly pumping in fresh Qi and pumping out stagnant Qi. And just as physical exercises like aerobics and weightlifting will improve your circulation and strength, the Essential Practices will improve your Qi circulation and boost your Qi power.

Over the course of the day you constantly draw on your Qi reserves, especially as you interact with other people. These energetic flows take place invisibly, and at this stage of your Qigong development, you are going to start noticing them more and more. For example, while exploring a visionary idea with a colleague at the office, you might

notice that you are both exchanging Wisdom Qi; while hugging a loved one during a tender moment, you might notice that you are exchanging Love Qi; while watching an exciting basketball game with a group of friends, you might notice that you are all exchanging Vitality Qi; in the midst of contemplating your future, you might notice that you are channeling Heaven Qi; and while exploring practical ways to increase efficiency at a budgeting meeting, you might notice that you are whipping up Earth Qi. And to the extent that these interactions unfold in Awakened Awareness, you might also notice that you are more centered and peaceful as these activities take place.

After working with the Essential Practices for some time, you will begin to realize that you are projecting more wisdom, love, vitality, excellence, inspiration, practicality, and peacefulness each time you express yourself. The quality of your social interactions will improve. Conversations will flow more smoothly. People will feel good around you. You will become more magnetic. Others will listen to you more attentively and you will have more interesting ideas to share with them. Your life will become more productive, meaningful, and serene.

Admittedly, your everyday problems won't magically disappear, but you will be better equipped to deal with them. You will also have enough energy to plow through troubling times while keeping your life aimed in a meaningful direction and filled with stimulating activities relevant to your growth. You will acquire *dynamic happiness*—the ability to remain inwardly contented even when unexpected reversals of fortune occur.

Xiao Yao taught me hundreds of different Qigong exercises, but the Essential Practices stand apart from all the rest. These exercises are the foundation of his Qigong system. My master practiced them regularly his entire life. I learned them in the boiler room when I was a boy, and I continue to practice them regularly as well. I have

discovered, as I hope you will, that they ripen like fine wine and deepen over time. These are lifelong practices.

Many of my students have used the Essential Practices to improve their lives in significant ways. They serve as powerful tools for personal growth, self-empowerment, and life transformation. You too will discover this if you practice them sincerely.

The four exercises include:

Three Treasures Standing Meditation: The first practice my master ever taught me was Horse Stance. Though it was hard and taxing, this practice strengthened my willpower tremendously. The Three Treasures Standing Meditation consists of a sequence of static standing postures intended to give you the benefit of Horse Stance without the strain. This first Essential Practice exercises your ability to channel the Four Golden Wheels into your willpower.

Four Golden Wheels Exercise: This practice exercises the Four Golden Wheels while your body is in motion. Being able to access the Four Golden Wheels while the body is active is an essential skill to develop if you want to tap into your Qi reserves throughout the day. This second Essential Practice develops that skill by repeating a series of slow, gentle movements that activate the Four Golden Wheels.

Lotus Meditation: This exercise is a visualization practice that involves the purification of your physical body and the invocation of a Holy Being in a beautiful, ethereal garden. Then you merge that being into the Four Golden Wheels, with special attention given to the Middle Dantian.

Lotus Meditation amplifies your capacity for compassion, and with its mastery you will embody the power of universal love.

Connecting Universe: In this exercise you circulate the energy stored in the Central Meridian in a series of loops in order to reorganize your entire energy field by drawing in fresh Qi from all over the universe. Connecting Universe is one of the most integrative practices I learned from Xiao Yao. I spent hundreds of hours practicing it in the dark chamber. Continued practice of this exercise also dissolves negativity.

Recommendations for a daily practice program of these four exercises tailored to your own needs will be presented later in [chapter 17](#), Practice Guidelines. And before we get started, I would also like to offer one important word of advice. In the technical instructions for all the exercises that follow, I will repeatedly ask you to “become aware” of some aspect of the practice. Each time you run into that phrase, please take a second or two to gently awaken your awareness as you practice. That small, subtle refinement will dramatically improve your experience and accelerate your progress.

Now, before we dive into Three Treasures Standing Meditation, let’s play a little game to test your willpower.

EXERCISE 11 **Changing the Taste of Brandy Using Willpower**

The following exercise is often performed by Qigong masters in China to demonstrate their ability to transform the taste of alcohol through their willpower. This sounds impossible, but once you understand the basic principle behind the process, even as a beginner

you can achieve instant success with a little concentrated effort.

The stronger the alcohol tastes the more notable the effect, so using brandy or whiskey is recommended. The exercise doesn't require you to drink any more than two tiny sips, but if you are underage or don't drink alcohol, you may use freshly squeezed lemon juice as a substitute. The effect is less dramatic, but still discernible.

1. Pour a few ounces of brandy into two glasses. Place one of the glasses off to the side. Place the other glass directly in front of you.



Pour brandy into two glasses. Video 5—[SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises](https://www.soundstrue.com/masterkeyexercises)

2. Rub your hands together vigorously for twenty seconds, then hold them about a foot apart on either side of the glass in front of you as you create a Qi Field between your palms. Feel your energy penetrate the liquid inside the glass for twenty seconds.



Create a Qi Field.

3. Pick up the glass. Visualize a brilliant light shining down from your hand into the liquid and beyond it. Feel your energy flow through the brandy and purify it, draining away the dark, heavy quality of the liquid. Visualize the alcohol becoming brighter. Continue doing this for up to one minute.



Purify the brandy with the Qi of your palm.

4. Imagine beams of golden energy shooting from your fingertips and use that Qi to “stir” and refine the brandy. Feel your Qi inside the glass transforming the alcohol. Visualize the brandy gradually becoming more and more smooth. Smile as you continue doing this in a steady and relaxed way for up to one minute.



Send golden light from your fingertips.

5. Use the Blade of Sword Finger to seal the energy in the glass, but don't touch the alcohol. "Stamp" the brandy energetically with a Yin Yang symbol nine times to keep the refined brandy Qi sealed in.



Seal with Sword Finger.

6. Now sip the refined brandy from the glass you just worked on, and then taste the brandy from the other glass. Taste the difference?



Sip from the glass you worked on ... and then the other glass

The results of this exercise are often startling. The alcohol in the two glasses tastes undeniably different. The brandy in the first glass has a lighter, smoother flavor. The brandy in the second glass is so strong it can make you wince and sometimes even gag. The reaction is physiological, not psychological. For further validation, you can repeat the exercise and let another person taste the two glasses. If your willpower is strong enough, you can even perform the exercise standing a few feet away from the glass. A powerful Qigong master can even change the taste of the alcohol remotely with the glass in another room, or even from miles away.

Consider the implications of this exercise. If you can transform the taste of alcohol in under a minute using your own willpower, what do you suppose happens when you recycle hurtful thoughts about yourself throughout the day? And what kind of effect do you have on others as a result of your negative projections? As a society we are increasingly concerned about air pollution, water pollution, electronic pollution, and noise pollution, but how mindful are we about the “pollution” caused by our own consciousness?

If you believe that your thoughts and feelings have no bearing on objective reality, you won't have to assume any

responsibility for them. Most of us relate to our own consciousness in this manner. We behave as though the contents of our minds and hearts don't affect our bodies and the people around us. But what if the line dividing our private thoughts and the outer world were permeable and not solid? How would you feel about cruelty, jealousy, and other forms of inner violence you projected onto others—and yourself—if you realized that each time you generated a negative impression you were leaving behind an invisible “bloody fingerprint”?

The first Essential Practice—Three Treasures Standing Meditation—teaches you to empower your willpower by fusing it to the Three Treasures and the Four Golden Wheels. You accomplish this goal by holding several different static postures while standing in a high Horse Stance. Each posture activates one of the Three Treasures as well as one of the Four Golden Wheels and your willpower. When you hold the posture steadily for a few minutes each time, all these elements amalgamate. Then the final posture integrates all the Three Treasures, all the Four Golden Wheels, and your willpower together simultaneously.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE 1 **Three Treasures Standing Meditation**

Three Treasures Standing Meditation consists of five different postures. The sequence includes:

1. Starting Posture
2. Heaven Posture
3. Earth Posture
4. Human Posture
5. Universal Posture

Posture 1: Starting Posture

1. Stand comfortably with your feet pointing forward, one and a half to two shoulder-widths apart. The proper distance varies depending on your weight and body type, so find a position that feels natural to you and then close your eyes.
2. Keep your knees slightly bent and tuck your pelvis in. Imagine that you are sitting on a tall stool.
3. Relax your arms at your sides with your elbows slightly bent.
4. Relax your shoulders. One simple way to relax the shoulders is by lifting and tensing them up, then letting them drop back down again. Repeat this three times.
5. Stretch your tailbone downward. To do this, imagine that you have a “tail” and imagine touching the ground with it.
6. Keep your spine supple and relaxed, like a willow tree.
7. Next, stretch your head upward by imagining that your head is a buoy floating on a calm sea.
8. Softly touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth.
9. Relax your entire body. Feel that you are breathing Qi through all the pores of your skin.
10. Smile and allow a pleasant, happy feeling to spread everywhere.
11. Listen for the sound of an imaginary bell coming from far, far away.

12. Good. Now hold Starting Posture for three minutes before moving on to the next posture.



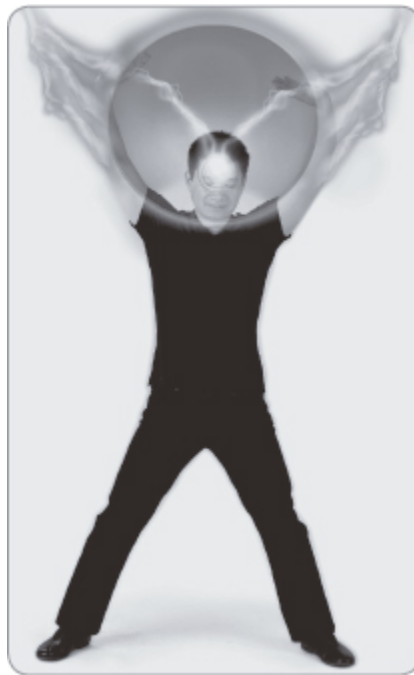
Settle into Starting Posture.

Video 6—SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

Posture 2: Heaven Posture

1. From Starting Posture, with your eyes still closed, raise your arms slowly to form an open circle around your head. Keep your palms facing outward. Imagine that your arms extend high up into the sky. Find a comfortable position that minimizes the tension in your arms.
2. Inhale, pay attention to your Upper Dantian, and as you exhale, expand your Upper Dantian until it fills the space between your head and your arms, forming a large “beach ball.” Feel the essence of your Wisdom Qi flow inside the ball between your hands.

3. With your palms still facing out, absorb inspiring Heaven Qi through both your palms and your arms. Feel the celestial energy flow into the ball of your expanded Upper Dantian. As you hold this static position, relax and become aware of the Heaven Qi and Wisdom Qi empowering your willpower, infusing it with inspiration and intuition. Keep standing in Heaven Posture for three minutes, then move on to the next position.



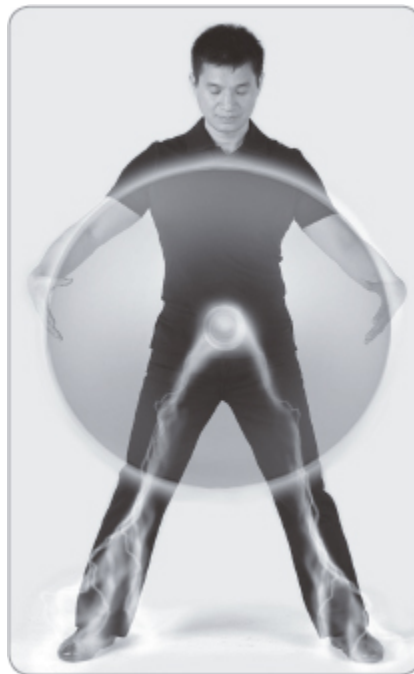
Heaven Posture empowers your will with inspiring wisdom.

Posture 3: Earth Posture

1. From Heaven Posture, with your eyes still closed, lower your arms to your sides and form an open circle in front of your Lower Dantian, with your palms facing inward. Imagine that your feet are roots sinking deep into the ground.
2. Inhale, pay attention to your Lower Dantian, and as you exhale, expand your Lower Dantian until it fills

the space between your arms, forming a large beach ball. Hug your expanded Lower Dantian. Feel your Vitality Qi flow inside the ball between your hands.

3. Absorb Earth Qi through your legs. Feel this grounding energy flow into your expanded Lower Dantian. As you hold this static position, relax and become aware of the Earth Qi and Vitality Qi empowering your willpower, infusing it with productivity and charisma. Stand in Earth Posture for three minutes, then move on to the next position.

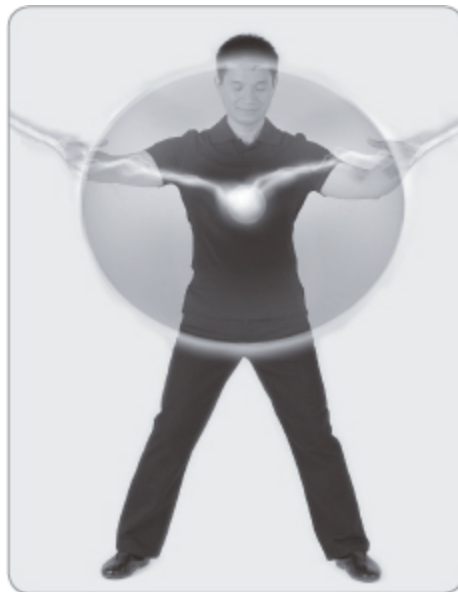


Earth Posture empowers your will with grounding vitality.

Posture 4: Human Posture

1. From Earth Posture, with your eyes still closed, raise your arms slowly and form an open circle in front of your chest. Keep your palms facing your body. Imagine that you are hugging the horizon.

2. Inhale, pay attention to your Middle Dantian, and as you exhale, expand your Middle Dantian until it fills the space between your arms, forming a large beach ball. Hug your expanded Middle Dantian. Feel your Love Qi spread into the ball between your arms.
3. Now absorb all the Human Qi in the world—the love and tenderness stored in the hearts of all living beings. Feel this energy flowing into your expanded Middle Dantian. As you hold this static position, relax and become aware of the Human Qi and your own Love Qi empowering your willpower, infusing it with compassion and tenderness. Stand in Human Posture for three minutes, then move on to the next position.



Human Posture empowers your will with love and compassion.

Posture 5: Universal Posture

1. From Human Posture, with your eyes still closed, readjust your arms into the “universal hand position.” To do this, place one hand pointing up

vertically in front of your upper chest and place the other hand near or under your elbow with your palm facing up. Either hand can be in either position.

2. Inhale, pay attention to your Central Meridian, and as you exhale, expand your Central Meridian both above your head up into the sky and down into the Earth below your feet. Feel the Three Treasures blending inside the central core of your body. As you do this, visualize yourself standing inside a large golden pyramid, and then imagine a smaller golden pyramid appearing and covering your upper body. These two pyramids help integrate the energy inside the Central Meridian.
3. As you hold this static position, relax and become aware of the Three Treasures and the Four Golden Wheels empowering your willpower, infusing it with dynamic happiness. Stand in Universal Posture for three minutes. Then, when you finish, return to Starting Posture and nourish your Qi.



Universal Posture empowers your will with spiritual well-being.

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Empowering Movement

Qi Flow and Physical Movement

One of the characteristics of Qigong is the importance it places on dynamic movement exercises. Practitioners are often seen in public parks in China, and more recently in Western countries, waving their arms and bending their legs in gentle, repetitive motions. These exercises are beautiful to watch, but one may wonder what benefit they have. After all, one could go to the gym and lift weights or go to the beach and jog or swim to become stronger, faster, and fitter instead of merely standing in one place moving in slow motion.

The physical health benefits of Qigong movement exercises are numerous and they have been soundly documented in medical studies performed in China and abroad, but the foremost reason for practicing Qigong movement exercises is spiritual. Even an Olympic-level athlete with superb physical conditioning would benefit from practicing these low-impact Qigong movement exercises.

In what way does moving in slow motion improve your energetic condition? The key to answering this question lies in understanding the connection that exists between various parts of your body and the Four Golden Wheels. It boils down to this: the crown of your head is connected to Heaven; your eyes, ears, and mouth are connected to your Upper Dantian; your arms are connected to your Middle

Dantian; your legs are connected to your Lower Dantian; the soles of your feet are connected to the Earth; and your palms are unique in their ability to absorb both Heaven Qi and Earth Qi.

Indeed, your crown, eyes, ears, mouth, arms, palms, legs, and the soles of your feet are like waterways that regulate Qi flow between the Four Golden Wheels and the environment. If you squatted repeatedly, for example, your legs would circulate Earth Qi to your Lower Dantian like a hydraulic pump, and in the process, you would become more vital and grounded. Or if you directed your palms up toward the sky during a moment of silent contemplation, you would absorb Heaven Qi and, in the process, become more inspired.

In fact, each of the Four Golden Wheels can be exercised through specific body movements and gestures. That is the notion that underlies all Qigong movement practice. So by repeating slow, gentle movements over and over, you can develop your body's capacity to draw in Qi from the universe that can then be stored in your Three Dantians and later channeled back through your body to empower your daily activities.

The second Essential Practice—the Four Golden Wheels Exercise—is designed to help you accomplish that goal, and soon I will guide you through it step by step. But if you hope to make rapid progress, it is essential to first understand the connection between your physical body and the Four Golden Wheels more precisely.

Heaven and the Crown of the Head

The crown: The crown of your head is energetically connected both to Heaven above it and to the Upper Dantian below it. The more awakened and empowered the top of your head is, the more Heaven Qi you will be able to channel into activities related to the Upper Dantian. During a Qigong movement exercise, you awaken and empower

your crown with Heaven Qi by paying attention to the top of your head whenever you move it. Then, when you interact with other people, you will be able to channel more inspiration and meaning into your activities with them.

The Upper Dantian and the Sensory Organs

The eyes, ears, and mouth are energetically connected to the Upper Dantian. In effect, the perceptions gathered by these sense organs act as the video and audio input and output that link our awareness to the outer world. The more awakened and empowered those senses, the clearer the incoming “signals” generated by an external event, and the more discerning our response to it will be. Let’s consider each of these three sense organs independently.

The eyes: Your eyes are situated directly in front of your Upper Dantian, and whenever you gaze at something attentively, your Upper Dantian is automatically activated. By becoming aware of your eyes during a Qigong movement exercise, you train your eyes to become a channel for your Wisdom Qi, even if they are closed. Then, whenever you make eye contact with someone, that person will instinctively feel refined wisdom shining through your gaze.

The ears: Your ears are situated on both sides of your Upper Dantian, and whenever you listen to something attentively, your Upper Dantian is automatically activated. By becoming aware of your ears during a Qigong movement exercise, you train your ears to become a channel for your Wisdom Qi. Then, when you are interacting with someone, you’ll be able to more wisely discern the quality of their words.

The mouth: Your mouth is situated directly below your Upper Dantian, and whenever you smile, your Upper Dantian is automatically activated. By becoming aware of your smile during a Qigong movement exercise, you train your mouth to become a channel for your Wisdom Qi. Then,

when you're interacting with someone, you'll be able to speak more wisely.

The Middle Dantian and the Arms

The arms are energetically connected to the Middle Dantian, and their movements regulate the flow of your emotional energy. In effect, your upper limbs act as the weathervane of your psyche, moving around as the winds of your temperament change. Meanwhile, your palms are like shovels that you can use to scoop up both Heaven Qi and Earth Qi.

The arms: Your arms extend like branches from both sides of your chest, and whenever you move them in a soft, gentle manner, as though you were going to hug another person, you automatically activate the Middle Dantian. By becoming aware of your arms during a Qigong movement exercise, you train them to become channels for your Love Qi. Then, when you are shaking hands with another person, or gesturing while speaking, you will be able to convey more love.

The palms: Your palms are also linked to the Middle Dantian, but due to their versatility, they can also be used to “scoop up” Heaven Qi and Earth Qi. By becoming aware of your palms during a Qigong movement exercise, you train them to become a channel for inspiration and productivity. Then you can convey those qualities in your interactions with another person through your hand gestures.

The Lower Dantian and the Legs

The legs: Your thighs, calves, and feet are energetically connected to the Lower Dantian, and whenever you bend or straighten them you automatically activate the Lower Dantian. By becoming aware of your legs during a Qigong movement exercise, you train them to become a channel for your Vitality Qi. Then, when a situation calls for decisive action, your legs will support you.

Earth and the Soles of the Feet

The soles: The soles of your feet are directly connected to the Earth below them and to the Lower Dantian above them. The more awakened and empowered the feet are, the more Earth Qi you are able to absorb into the Lower Dantian. During a Qigong movement exercise, you can awaken and empower the soles of your feet with Earth Qi by paying attention to them whenever you move or bend your legs. Then you can channel more groundedness and stability into your daily life.

Keeping track of all these different body-Dantian connections can be overwhelming at first, and that is why Qigong movement sets are practiced slowly. It is best to move at the speed of awareness. If you move any faster, then the exercise merely becomes a physical activity. Keep this in mind as you practice the second Essential Practice—the Four Golden Wheels Exercise. And just as importantly, assume an easygoing attitude and have childlike fun doing it. Think of the exercise as play, and as you move around with this lightheartedness, remember to smile. *Be xiao yao.*

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE 2 **Four Golden Wheels Exercise**

The Four Golden Wheels Exercise is divided into four parts:

- Part 1: Shaking
- Part 2: Swinging
- Part 3: Blessing
- Part 4: Channeling

Part 1: Shaking

1. Stand with your feet pointing forward and slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. Close your eyes. Relax, smile, and start shaking your body up and

down in a steady, comfortable rhythm. Imagine that your arms are swinging like ropes and that your body is soft and pliant like a water balloon. Allow tension to melt away as you shake.



Shake your body up and down.

Video 7—[SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises](https://www.soundstrue.com/masterkeyexercises)

2. Breathe naturally. As you shake, visualize a golden beam of Heaven Qi traveling down from the sky into your crown and flooding your head with golden light. Then direct that light into your chest and arms, down to your waist, to your legs, and then “sink” the light of Heaven Qi through both soles of your feet and down deep into the Earth. Repeat this visualization as you continue to shake for three minutes.



Draw down the golden light from head to toe.

3. Finish by placing your hands over your Lower Dantian with one hand on top of the other. Either hand can be on top. “Hook” the thumb and index finger of the hand on top around the other hand’s wrist and relax your shoulders. Become aware of your Four Golden Wheels tingling with energy. Hold this position for ten seconds or longer to nourish your Qi before moving on.



Hook your hands together over your Lower Dantian.

Part 2: Swinging

4. Keep your eyes closed. Imagine that you are standing on a large swing, and begin to swing your arms back and forth in a steady, comfortable

rhythm. Feel your whole body swinging through space. As you swing your hands, feel your palms collecting Qi like magnets. Keep your palms facing toward you and guide the energy you collect back up toward your face.



Swing your arms back and forth.

5. Imagine that the swing you are on is hooked to the moon and that you are swinging thousands of miles from one end of the Earth to the other. If you feel cold, swing from Florida to Tahiti; if you feel hot, swing from Alaska to Antarctica. Then swing to visit a friend in a faraway country, swing through meadows of blooming flowers, or swing above the deep blue sea. You may also wish to swing through the solar system and even to the edge of the universe. Be creative and playful as you “Travel Swing” for three minutes.



“Travel Swing”: If you are cold, swing from Tahiti to Florida; if you are hot, swing from Alaska to Antarctica.

6. When you finish swinging, your hands will be pulsating with Qi. Bring them up just a few inches away from the front of your face and rotate them in a circular motion three to nine times in both directions. Feel the radiating energy “washing” away impurities and cleansing your skin. Feel your face glowing with Qi. Then project the energy from your palms deeper inside your head and empower your Upper Dantian. You may also direct this healing energy to any other part of your body that requires attention.



“Wash” your face with the Qi radiating from your palms.

7. Complete this part of the exercise by raising your elbows up to head level and then direct any extra energy you collected down to your Lower Dantian with your hands. Place your hands over the Lower Dantian with one hand on top of the other as you did before. Hold this position for ten seconds or longer to nourish your Qi before moving on.



Raise your elbows, and then bring your hands down over the Lower Dantian.

Part 3: Blessing

8. Keep your eyes closed and extend your arms out to your sides until they are level with the ground. Then bring them into a “prayer position” in one large, circular, sweeping motion. Be sure that both thumbs make full contact with your chest when your hands are in prayer position. Feel blessed as your Middle Dantian expands with love and gratitude.



Extend your arms, bring your hands together in prayer position, and feel blessed.

9. From prayer position, lower your hands to your Lower Dantian, and then slowly move your arms out to your sides until they are level with the ground, keeping your palms facing the Earth. Absorb Earth Qi through your downward-facing palms and arms, and feel a mountainous amount of grounding energy rise up to your chest as you raise your arms up to chest level.



Lower your hands and then slowly raise your arms.

10. Rotate your downward-facing palms until they face upward, toward the sky. Through this action you are reversing Earth Qi and Heaven Qi. As you do this simple movement, feel that you are standing at the center of the universe “flipping” the elemental forces of creation. Feel the awesome tidal force of

spiraling galaxies swirling around you as you rotate your arms.



Reverse Earth Qi and Heaven Qi by rotating your arms.

11. With this sense of awesome power, raise your arms over your head and gather Heaven Qi, and then guide that energy through your crown and right into your Central Meridian by bringing your hands together above your head. Move your hands down the centerline in front of your body with your palms facing down, and feel the rush as the energy follows them down the Central Meridian like a pillar of brilliant light. When you reach your Lower Dantian, place your palms on your abdomen and then slide your palms and the energy down toward your inner thighs.



Gather Heaven Qi, and then empower the Central Meridian and the Three Dantians.

12. To continue to spread the energy, slide both your palms down the insides of your legs, then around your feet to the backs of your ankles, and then begin to slide them all around your heels and calves.



Slide down the insides of your legs and around your ankles.

13. Continue to slide your palms up the back of your legs, buttocks, lower back, kidneys, and all the way up to your shoulder blades. Then return your hands to prayer position at the Midchest Point. Pause for a moment. Allow the Qi you collected to fill your heart with love and compassion. Smile and feel blessed. Repeat this movement sequence three to nine times. Then place your hands over your Lower Dantian with one hand on top of the other as you did before. Hold this position for ten seconds or longer to nourish your Qi before moving on.



Slide up the back of your body and return to prayer position.

Part 4: Channeling

14. With your eyes still closed, step into a wider stance, about one and a half to two shoulder-widths apart. Raise your arms and hands slowly upward until your arms are outstretched and your palms are facing your head. Imagine that the light of the sun and the moon is shining through your palms into your Upper Dantian. Feel the warm, radiant light of the sun and the cool, silvery light of the moon shining down and empowering your Upper Dantian. Hold this position for about thirty seconds.



Raise your hands and shine the light of the sun and the moon toward your Upper Dantian.

15. Now stretch your arms farther outward and face your palms up toward the sky as you tilt your head upward. Inhale and absorb Heaven Qi. As you exhale, direct that energy down through your crown right into your head, and move your hands down along the center in front of your body, “channeling” the Heaven Qi through your Central Meridian, through your Three Dantians, and down toward the Earth.



Inhale and absorb Heaven Qi, then exhale, spreading it through the Central Meridian.

16. When you reach your Lower Dantian, begin to bend your knees and spread your arms out to your sides with your palms facing down. Feel your Central Meridian plummet like a heavy weight falling toward the center of the Earth as the Heaven Qi you gathered sinks deep into the ground.



Bend the body and sink the Heaven Qi into the Earth.

17. Inhale as you reverse the motion and raise yourself back up, easy and relaxed. Concentrate the nourishing Earth Qi between your palms and channel it up the soles of your feet, your legs, and up along your Central Meridian. Allow the Earth Qi you gathered to flow up above your crown and rise high up into the sky as you stretch your arms

outward above your head again. If you get tired, you may rest for one or two breaths while your hands are raised toward the sky. Otherwise, continue this upward and downward swinging motion for at least one minute, ending with your arms stretched outward above your head with your palms facing up.



As you inhale, bring Earth Qi through your Central Meridian and out into the sky.

18. Now turn your palms inward and imagine that the light of the sun and the moon is shining through your palms into your Upper Dantian once again. Feel their light flowing down through you, nourishing your whole body. Continue doing this for thirty seconds.



Shine the light of the sun and the moon toward your Upper Dantian.

19. Create a Qi Ball between your palms. Then bring your palms closer together and lower your hands, guiding the Qi Ball in front of your body until it reaches the level of your Lower Dantian.



Create a Qi Ball of sun and moon energy and lower it to your Lower Dantian.

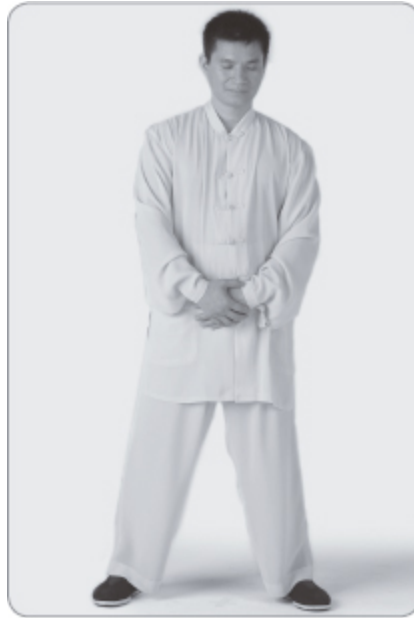
20. As you inhale, pull your palms slightly farther apart and then move them closer together as you exhale. Become aware of the energy field being refined and empowered as you squeeze and release the Qi Ball in front of your Lower Dantian. Continue doing this for thirty seconds.



Compress the Qi Ball and restore it to your Lower Dantian, and then nourish your Qi.

21. Compress the Qi Ball and place your hands over your Lower Dantian as you did before to restore the energy. Shorten your stance to shoulder-width and

seal the energy by rubbing your hands in a circular motion over your Lower Dantian area, at first clockwise and then counterclockwise. Do this in each direction nine times, visualizing a violet light from your palms penetrating deep inside your body. Direct this energy wherever you need healing. When you finish, nourish your Qi.



Seal the energy by rubbing your hands in a circular motion over your Lower Dantian.

Sea of Compassion

The World Mirrors the Heart

Xiao Yao occasionally visited other monasteries on official business or to see old friends. I liked to accompany him on these trips, which could last for days or sometimes even weeks. All the places we visited had a temple similar to ours at Jiuyi Temple, and that was always the first place my master visited when we arrived.

Xiao Yao went through the same routine each time inside the temple. First, he walked up to one of the Buddha statues. Then he meditated in front of it for a while, and then worked his way around the room, spending a few moments with all the other statues. Some temples had hundreds of statues. If we were pressed for time, he paused for only a few seconds in front of each one. But if we had more time, he closed his eyes with his hands in prayer position and remained in a deep meditative state for a long while.

I mimicked him for a few minutes. Then I grew bored and ran off to explore the temple grounds and talk to the monks. When I returned hours later, my master would still be standing in front of a statue, lost in deep concentration. I once asked Xiao Yao about the benefit of this meditation practice, and he replied by retelling the popular story about Master Foyin and the crafty scholar Su Dongpo.

Su Dongpo prided himself on his wit and liked to debate Master Foyin.

One day, over tea, he challenged the master.

“Foyin, people think you are an enlightened monk, but to me you just look like a big, stinking pile of worthless dung sitting on your pillow all day long.”

Su Dongpo leaned backward and crossed his arms slyly.

Master Foyin placed his hands in prayer position.

“My dear Su Dongpo, to me you look like a Buddha.”

Su Dongpo grinned and bid Master Foyin farewell.

When Su Dongpo got home, he was wearing a triumphant smile. His sister asked him what happened.

“Today I outsmarted Master Foyin,” Su Dongpo replied, then recounted the events to her.

“Oh no, brother! I’m sorry to tell you this, but you lost badly,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you realize that the world mirrors the heart? Master Foyin sees you as a Buddha because he is a Buddha. You see him as a pile of dung. What does that make you?”

Su Dongpo turned beet red, and then, all of a sudden, became enlightened.

Xiao Yao elaborated by explaining that he used his “temple rounds” to open his heart to each Buddha statue and merge with it. Going around the room while holding that attitude trained him to become more like Master Foyin, who experienced all people—including a mischief maker like Su Dongpo—as living Buddhas.

The third Essential Practice—Lotus Meditation—yields the same spiritual benefit that Xiao Yao derived from his temple

rounds. But instead of meditating in front of a tangible statue and merging with it, you will visualize a Holy Being of your own choosing, guide it to your heart, and merge with it there. Xiao Yao taught me to do the practice by invoking the image of Guan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion. I still use her likeness whenever I do this meditation, but you are free to substitute her image with Mother Mary, Green Tara, Lakshmi, or any other symbol that evokes a sense of divine love. It doesn't matter what image you choose to visualize; what does matter is that the sacred image you select arouses divine love in your heart.

Have you ever been in the presence of a special person who exudes an aura of universal love and compassion? Standing before that individual you feel safe, seemingly for no special reason. That person doesn't need or want anything from you and their mere presence always makes you feel good. They simply love you as you are, unconditionally, without any strings attached. How would you relate back to such a person? You'd probably surrender your guardedness. Your defensive walls would come down and you'd just love them back.

Lotus Meditation slowly transforms you into that special being. As you become proficient at the practice, you are increasingly able to embody the divine love that you're merged with, and you can express that quality in your dealings with other human beings—and not just the ones you like. The mastery of Lotus Meditation will eventually transform you into a sea of compassion. And then as you look around, you'll see *all* the faces before you reflecting back beautiful Buddha smiles.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE 3 **Lotus Meditation**

Lotus Meditation can be practiced while seated cross-legged on the floor or sitting comfortably in a chair. You may also practice it lying down, especially before going

to sleep if you suffer from insomnia. The exercise is divided into four parts, which include:

Part 1: Chanting

Part 2: The Waterfall

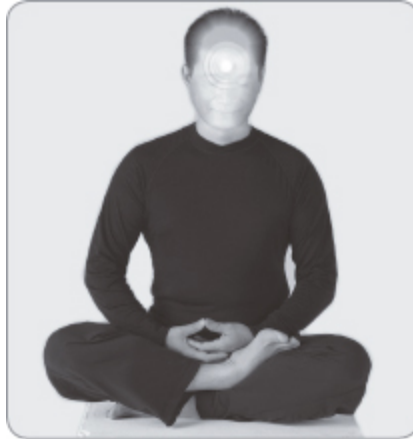
Part 3: The Holy Being

Part 4: The Lotus Flower

Before we begin, I need to introduce a new tool into your Qigong repertoire, *chanting*. Chanting means vocalizing specific sounds that can be used to energetically activate specific parts of the body. The actual sounds don't mean anything in particular. They are not mantras or prayers. In Part 1 of Lotus Meditation, you will chant three specific sounds designed to empower the Four Golden Wheels.

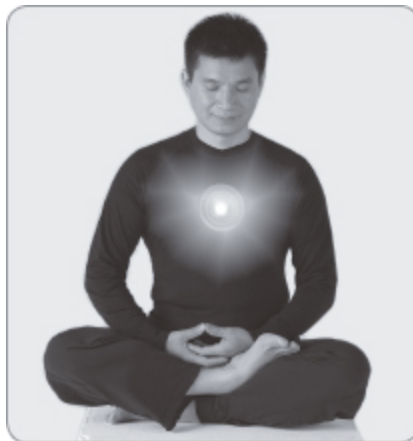
The first sound—*Aung*—resonates throughout your head and activates the Upper Dantian; the second sound—*Ahhh*—resonates throughout your chest and activates the Middle Dantian; and the third sound—*Hong*—resonates throughout your lower torso and activates the Lower Dantian. And when you chant all three sounds in succession—*Aunnnng-ahhhhh-honnnng*—you activate the Central Meridian. Let's practice chanting in preparation for Lotus Meditation:

1. Chant, "Aunnnnng ..." The sound is like "Om" but with an "ng" instead of a "m" at the end. As you chant out loud, close your eyes and feel the sound vibrate your Upper Dantian. Feel the sound vibrate your whole head: your face, eyes, ears, mouth, nose, forehead, the top of your head, the back of your head, and your whole brain. Keep your jaw relaxed as you chant. Can you feel the inside of your head tingling with Wisdom Qi? Repeat this chant three to nine times.



“Aung” activates the Upper Dantian. Video 8—
SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

2. Chant, “Ahhhhh ...” As you chant out loud with your eyes still closed, feel the sound vibrate your Middle Dantian. Feel the sound vibrate your ribcage and internal organs. Feel your heart, lungs, liver, and spleen tingle and buzz with energy. Relax your chest. Try again. Go deeper. Vibrate your upper back and your spine. End the chant by focusing your awareness on your Middle Dantian. Can you feel the inside of your chest tingling with Love Qi? Repeat this chant three to nine times.



“Ahhh” activates the Middle Dantian.

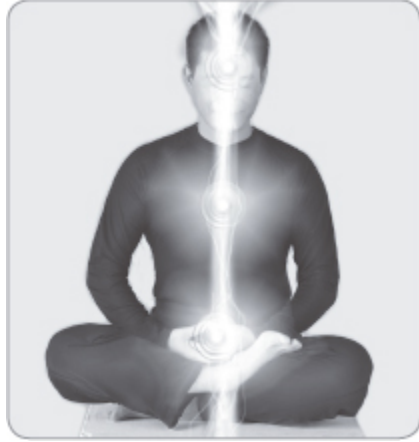
3. Chant, “Honnnnnng ...” As you chant out loud with your eyes still closed, feel the sound vibrate your

Lower Dantian. Feel the sound vibrate your abdomen, kidneys, and sexual organs. Feel the sound penetrate deeper each time you chant. End the chant by focusing your awareness on your Lower Dantian. Can you feel the inside of your waist tingling with Vitality Qi? Repeat this chant three to nine times.



“Hong activates the Lower Dantian.

4. Chant, “Aunnnngahhhhh-honnnng ...” As you chant out loud with your eyes still closed, feel the sound activate your Central Meridian and your Three Dantians. Feel the inside of your head, torso, and waist massaged internally by the streaming current of vibrating sound. End the chant by becoming aware of your Four Golden Wheels. Can you feel the inside of your whole body tingling? Repeat this chant three to nine times. Good work. Now you are ready to begin practicing Lotus Meditation.



“Aung-ahhh-hong” activates the Central Meridian and the Three Dantians.

Part 1: Chanting

5. Sit comfortably on a meditation cushion or chair with your eyes closed. Put your hands on your lap over your Lower Dantian with your palms facing upward. Place the fingers of one hand on top of the fingers of the other with the ends of your thumbs touching. Relax your eyebrows, smile, and listen to a sound coming from far, far away. Part your thumbs and then gently rejoin them. This gesture signals the beginning of a new part of the meditation.



Part your thumbs and then gently rejoin them.

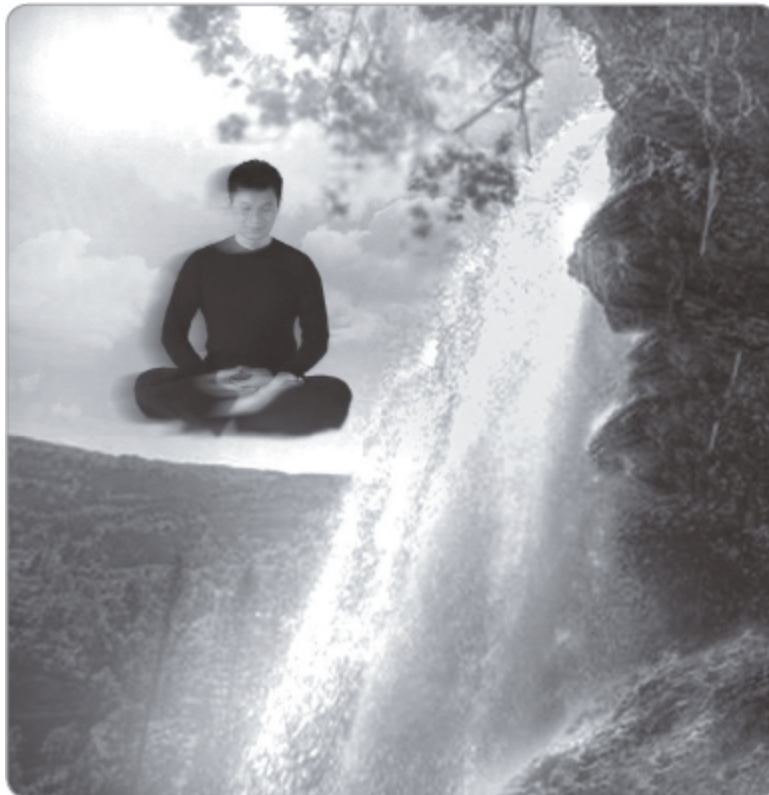
6. Inhale deeply, and as you exhale, softly chant, “Aunnng-ahhh-honnnng ...” to activate the Four Golden Wheels. Observe the vibration the sound makes in your body. Feel the qualities of wisdom, love, and vitality awaken, and feel the subtle

tingling sensations spread throughout your body. Continue chanting these sounds repeatedly for at least two minutes.

Part 2: The Waterfall

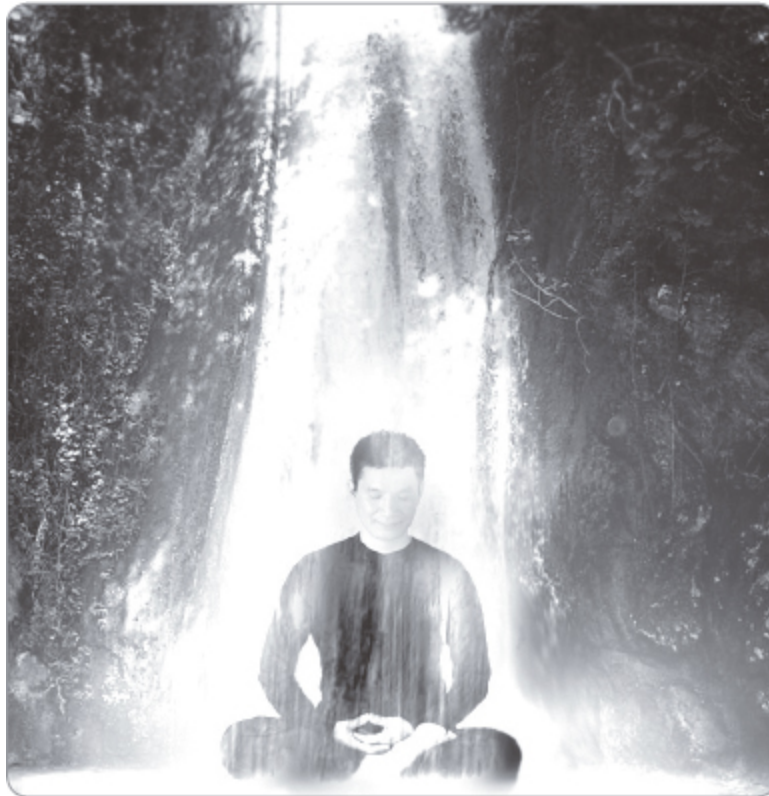
In the second part of Lotus Meditation, you visualize yourself sitting under a waterfall that flows down from the sky. The pure celestial waters wash away all impurities, leaving you feeling fresh and energized.

7. Keep your eyes closed and relax every part of your body. Imagine energy filling you up like helium filling up a balloon. Feel yourself growing lighter and lighter and gradually floating upward. The winds carry you through the sky to a large green mountain with a beautiful, cascading waterfall.



“Float” toward the waterfall like a helium balloon.

8. You settle down under the waterfall and feel the powerful jet of water streaming all over your body. The water washes over your skin, muscles, blood vessels, meridians, nerves, internal organs, and your bones and bone marrow. Feel the water wash away all impurities, leaving you feeling clean and your body, mind, and spirit returned to their natural, healthy condition. You are now completely purified, like a newborn baby, sparkling and radiating a sweet fragrance. Happiness rises up from the bottom of your heart.



Feel the water purifying your body, mind, and spirit.

Part 3: The Holy Being

In this part of Lotus Meditation you invoke and merge with a Holy Being. You may choose the figure of a spiritual master, saint, religious figure, angel, deity, or even a figure from mythology. I will guide you through

the process by referring to the image of Guan Yin, the goddess of compassion, but feel free to substitute her image with one more meaningful to you. The Holy Being can also be someone who embodies a specific quality you wish to develop, such as courage, patience, or generosity. The more you identify with this Holy Being, the more you will benefit from the practice, so choose wisely.

9. Remain seated with your eyes closed and your hands placed together on your lap as before. Now part your thumbs and then gently rejoin them. Visualize yourself sitting in a beautiful garden surrounded by flowers and birds. Guan Yin, the goddess of love and compassion, appears before you as a being of pure, shimmering light. Observe her smile, her voice, and her actions. Slowly, she glides through the air and hovers over your head. As she does so, pay attention to your long, slow breaths. As you inhale, breathe in the calming light of Guan Yin. Experience the comfort and safety this brings as you allow the light of the goddess to fill your body.



Guan Yin, the goddess of love, shines her light over you.

10. Gradually, Guan Yin begins to become smaller and smaller as well as brighter and brighter until she finally becomes a point of intense light. This light enters the top of your head and moves down your Central Meridian to your Middle Dantian. Feel the quality of love awaken in you as the point of light enters your heart. Visualize your heart transforming into an open lotus flower shining the light of love and compassion out from within.



Guan Yin becomes a point of intense light and enters your heart.

11. Watch the light grow bigger and bigger. Feel Guan Yin expand until she is as big as you. You and the goddess are now merged. Your breath is her breath; her breath is your breath. Absorb her divine, loving energy into every cell of your body as this intimate connection deepens.



Guan Yin expands until she is as big as you; you and the goddess merge as one.

Part 4: The Lotus Flower

In Chinese culture, the lotus flower represents purity. Its natural beauty stands in sharp contrast to the muddy water in which it grows. Despite the unsightly environment where it thrives, the lotus flower retains its lustrous colors and sweet fragrance. It symbolizes incorruptible beauty: our true, divine nature.

In the final part of Lotus Meditation you visualize a lotus flower blooming within you and then you visualize yourself inside a huge lotus flower. This imagery represents the flourishing of your divine nature. As you identify with your own Buddhahood more completely, you will begin to perceive other people in this light until you eventually experience the whole universe as a reflection of divinity.

12. Remain seated with your eyes closed and your hands placed together on your lap as before. Now

part your thumbs and then gently rejoin them. Visualize a lotus flower in your Lower Dantian, covered with dew and glowing brightly. Feel the blend of wisdom, love, and vitality radiate to your internal organs. Feel this energy penetrate deeper and deeper. The flower opens and closes, in sync with your breath, while emitting a sweet fragrance. This scent permeates each cell of your body and seeps into the pores of your skin. Bathe in this Divine Perfume.



Visualize a lotus flower in your Lower Dantian and feel its fragrance fill your body.

13. Visualize the lotus flower growing larger and larger until its petals extend beyond your body. You are now sitting in the middle of this giant lotus. Soak up the peace and tranquility. Spend as much time as you wish in this special place.



Sit inside the giant lotus and soak up the peace and tranquility.



Compress this energy into a lustrous pearl, and feel happiness rise up from deep inside.

14. Now compress all this energy into a lustrous pearl and store it in your Lower Dantian. Feel happiness rise up from deep inside your body and nourish your Qi.

The Shadows Cast by the Dantians

Malevolence

There are times when the light of all that is good and decent dims and darkness engulfs a human being, who then acts out in a despicable, dishonorable, or horrific way. Malevolence exists; that's undeniable. We only have to scan the front page of a daily paper or randomly flip through a history book to read about it.

A medieval theologian might refer to the root cause of ignoble human behavior as *evil*, while a modern psychologist might view it as an expression of the *shadow*, but however we choose to label this phenomenon, one simple fact remains: bad intentions and their destructive consequences have continuously impacted the theater of worldwide human affairs as well as the smaller stage of our personal lives. And if malevolence has been a constant theme unfolding around us, we must at least admit the possibility that we are not immune to its ravages.

Speaking for myself, my own shadow overtook me as I confronted Zhang Gong and his gang in the streets of Xiangtan when I was a teenager. One moment I was my normal, friendly, everyday self, and then suddenly the "demon" of rage took over and I lost control. In that fight I injured Zhang Gong badly and almost killed him, simply because he had stolen my friend's soldier cap. As you'll recall, Xiao Yao became angry and punished me by making

me kneel for two agonizing hours on a serrated washboard that was propped up against the wall.

Coming face to face with my own shadow was a horrible, harrowing, and humbling experience. I became aware that despite my positive self-image as a good and honorable person, I was still capable of losing control and becoming a destructive force. If I had killed Zhang Gong, my life would have been turned upside down, my parents would have been dishonored, and I would have gone to prison. I would not have been accepted to the university, and in all probability my Qigong training would have come to a tragic end. Fortunately that didn't happen, but it was a close call.

Perhaps you, too, have also come face to face with your own shadow and engaged in shameful, regrettable behavior that you'd rather forget about. Or perhaps you're struggling with shadow material right now. Our journey would not be complete if we ignored the frightful side of human nature and our own potential for malevolence and did not explore ways in which Qigong can help us guard against it.

A safe place to start this exploration is by considering the nature of the shadow through the lens of the Four Golden Wheels. If you think about it, there exist various types of malevolence, and when we look for a pattern among the different kinds of wrongdoings, a familiar one appears: one expression of the shadow centers on wrongdoings we enact with the mind, a second type centers on wrongdoings we enact with our emotions, and a third type centers on physical wrongdoings we enact with the body.

Once again, we encounter the Three Dantians, only this time it is in the context of their malevolent expressions. Below is a description of the three shadows cast by the Three Dantians.

The Shadow Cast by the Upper Dantian

The Upper Dantian is the source of our wisdom, and when it casts its gloomy shade, we become prone to enacting lies,

deceit, trickery, duplicity, pretense, deviousness, and guile. If at its best the Upper Dantian is the source of *truth*, then at its worst it becomes the source of all that is *false*. When our shadow controls the Upper Dantian, we become manipulative liars, swindlers, cheaters, and frauds.

The Shadow Cast by the Middle Dantian

The Middle Dantian is the source of our love, and when it casts its gloomy shade we become prone to enacting sadistic, vicious, cold-blooded, stone-hearted, mean, bitter, vengeful, callous, unforgiving, and diabolical emotional torment on others. If at its best the Middle Dantian is the source of *beauty*, then at its worst it becomes the source of all that is *ugly*. When our shadow controls the Middle Dantian, we become hateful, cruel, and fiendish villains.

The Shadow Cast by the Lower Dantian

The Lower Dantian is the source of our vitality, and when it casts its gloomy shade we become prone to enacting aggressive, abusive, violent, bestial, savage, wild, predatory, and even murderous actions. If at its best the Lower Dantian is the source of all that is *good*, then at its worst it becomes the source of all that is *bad*. When our shadow controls the Lower Dantian, we become exploitative, greedy, and brutal monsters.

Now ask yourself a sensitive question: *Toward which of these three types of shadow do I tend to incline?* The point of doing this is not to shame or punish you with guilt, but rather to empower you with a deeper understanding of how these malevolent expressions characterize your dark side. Do you ever engage in deceitful lies, emotional cruelty, or aggressive violence? If you answer honestly, you will notice an interesting pattern emerge: your shadow gravitates toward your strongest Dantian, not the weakest one.

For example, if your Upper Dantian is relatively strong and your Lower Dantian is relatively weak, you are more likely to express your shadow in the form of malicious falsehoods than through brute force. If your Middle Dantian is relatively strong and your Upper Dantian is relatively weak, you are more likely to express your shadow by inflicting emotional torment rather than by weaving diabolical webs of deceit. Or, if your Lower Dantian is relatively strong and your Middle Dantian is relatively weak, you are more likely to express your shadow through blunt oppression rather than through backhanded emotional abuse.

Consider the difference between a weak Upper Dantian that causes us to be confused and a malevolent Upper Dantian that endows us with the power to confuse others; or a weak Middle Dantian that causes us to feel miserable and a malevolent Middle Dantian that endows us with the power to make others feel miserable; or a weak Lower Dantian that makes us feel impotent and a malevolent Lower Dantian that endows us with the power to make others feel powerless.

The Shadow is a powerful force because it loves power! It gets intoxicated by power, and therefore, the more powerful you are, the more capable you are of channeling destructive energies and enacting malevolence—*potentially*. This point is worth highlighting, especially in the context of Qigong training, since one of the main goals of practice is the development of our personal power. And unless we guard against the shadow while doing this, the spiritual path can become a slippery slope, for in our quest to find inner light, it is also possible to backslide into darkness. On the road to becoming an enlightened spiritual master, there is real danger in becoming a “black magician” instead—an individual dominated by the shadow who uses his or her powers maliciously.

Some of the most infamous, articulate, cruel, and brutal tyrants we learn about in history class and hear about on the nightly news exemplify this archetype. These men and women are masters at charming the masses with clever words and hyping their followers into committing unspeakable atrocities. They perpetuate evil on a large scale. But that same dynamic also manifests on a smaller scale and plays out in our private lives whenever we mislead through sweet talk, manipulatively needle an emotional wound, or overpower others against their will.

So what can you do to guard against your own shadow? A natural place to look for an answer to this question is religion, which has always placed heavy emphasis on the “damnable” consequences of malevolence and on ways to shield against it.

For millennia, religious authorities have preached that the antidote to evil lies in establishing a direct connection to God—or to some other “Ultimate Power.” When that connection is strong, they claim, we become upstanding, high-minded individuals with the power to fend off a malevolent impulse whenever it arises. But as that connection weakens, they warn, we become increasingly susceptible to enacting malevolent wrongdoings. And when the connection is cut, we become evil.

This inverse relationship between our connection to an “Ultimate Power” and our inclination to malevolence is worth considering in our search for a Qigong strategy to guard against the shadow. This religious “formula” is informed by a deep wisdom and holds the key to the nature of evil, and so, whether or not we embrace a particular religious view, it is worthy of closer scrutiny.

Most religious systems map out the universe along two axes: the *horizontal* plane is associated with the human realm, and the *vertical* plane is associated with the divine realm. That “Ultimate Power” with whom we are supposed to connect supposedly exists somewhere along the vertical

plane, either in Heaven above our heads, or deep under the Earth, right below our feet.

For example, tribal religions that worship their ancestral spirits usually envision them living in the sky among the stars or in subterranean caverns; polytheistic religions often depict their gods as residing in heavenly palaces set atop cloudy mountain peaks, or in deep underground lairs; and the three great monotheistic religions traditionally conceive of God as a being who lives in Heaven and looks down upon the Earth from high above.

According to religious authorities, whenever we establish a direct vertical connection and link to that “Ultimate Power,” we undergo a religious experience and strengthen our faith. That is, we experience the presence of the deity, we feel blessed, and the world becomes sacred. In the religious view, faith is the power that protects us from evil, and it is no coincidence that the words *religion* and *faith* are synonyms.

Religious authorities spanning across diverse cultures and historical epochs have preached that the way to guard against malevolence is by establishing a vertical channel that extends from us directly up to Heaven or straight down into the Earth, and we have already encountered that channel: it is the Central Meridian!

So while adherents of each religious faith will aim their attention at a different deity, religious authorities have been unwittingly advising their followers all along to guard against evil by activating their Central Meridian—and based on the popularity of religion, we can assume that this method has proven effective across cultures.

Faith belongs to *all* religions; it is just as easy to envision an ancient Greek priest activating his Central Meridian while worshipping the god Apollo as a kahuna worshipping a Hawaiian deity on a volcanic hilltop shrine, or a Puritan worshipping the Holy Spirit in the New World.

But what happens if we don't identify with any religion? Do we then lack the ability to develop faith and guard against the shadow? No, not at all. Our faith ultimately depends on the quality of the energetic connection that exists between us and Heaven and Earth, and not on any particular belief that we uphold. Faith *transcends* the specific content of belief, and so agnostics and atheists are equally capable of developing their faith by framing their "beliefs" in terms that conform with humanistic values.

We *all* guard against the shadow by empowering our energetic connection to the universe. When the jet of energy connecting us to Heaven and Earth is strong, our faith is strong, and we remain centered in the face of our own dark side. But when that current of energy weakens, we no longer feel uplifted and supported by the universal Qi Field.

As we lose our faith, we begin to feel increasingly cut off from the rest of the universe. We shrivel up and eventually become self-centered, egotistical narcissists. We begin to live for sensual pleasure, power, and glory. As we lose our connection to the universe, we also lose our faith in humanity. We no longer trust others, and we can justify their exploitation. We convince ourselves that the means justify the ends, and we don't assume responsibility for the consequences of our deeds. Gradually, the shadow overtakes our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Our Three Dantians become the agents of selfishness, and then, whenever we are confronted by either a juicy opportunity or a daunting challenge, we mislead, demean, and brutalize others just to get ahead. That is when the world around us darkens.

The day I fought Zhang Gong and his gang of thugs, I lost my connection to Heaven and Earth. When I found out that they had ruthlessly assaulted my friend—an expression of their shadow—I was overwhelmed by my own bad intentions. My Central Meridian contracted and all my

energy was sucked down into my Lower Dantian. I lost my mental and emotional clarity, my sense of purpose, and my common sense. I marched to them an enraged, bloodthirsty monster prepared to kill.

Had I been able to keep the energy stream between Heaven and Earth open and strong, I would not have succumbed to that malicious impulse. I would have been able to keep a cool perspective and perhaps even help my friend devise a plan to deal with the situation productively.

The fourth Essential Practice—Connecting Universe—is designed to help you avert falling into the snare of your own shadow by exercising your Central Meridian. You begin the practice by concentrating energy inside the Central Meridian, and then you loop that energy along a series of expanding, concentric spirals that stretch farther and farther out in all directions, all the way to infinity.

Then you reverse the motion and spiral the energy back toward your Central Meridian, absorbing vast amounts of fresh Qi from the universe along the way. This exercise helps develop the Central Meridian into a robust pillar of energy that will insulate your Three Dantians from the negative influence of the shadow before it ever gets the chance to overwhelm you and corrupt your life.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE 4 **Connecting Universe**

Connecting Universe is a simple meditation practice. Once you understand the basic principle, it is easy to remember and enjoyable. It can be practiced standing, sitting, or lying down. The practice is divided into three parts, which include:

Part 1: Horizontal Cycles

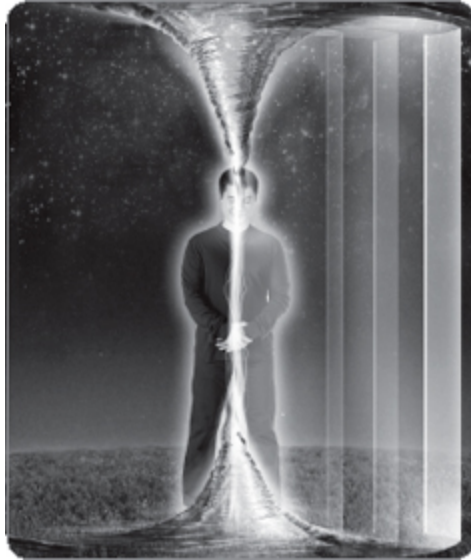
Part 2: Vertical Cycles

Part 3: Concentric Circles

Part 1: Horizontal Cycles

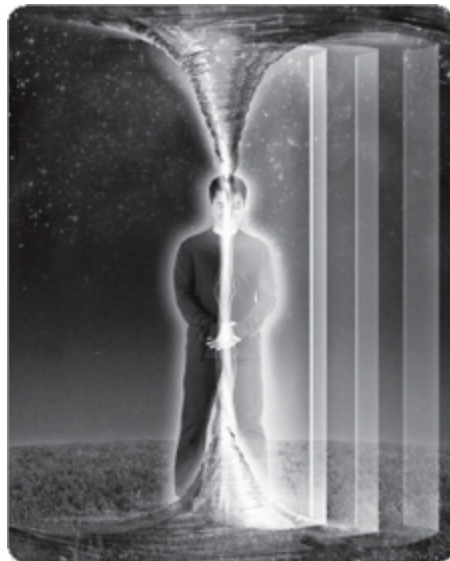
Left Side Horizontal

1. Stand comfortably with your feet a little wider than shoulder-width apart and your hands clasped gently over your Lower Dantian. Keep your knees slightly bent and tuck your pelvis in. Close your eyes and become aware of the energy inside the left side of your body from head to toe. Concentrate it into your Central Meridian. “Loop” that energy in a circular, spiral-like motion around the left side of your body while breathing naturally and allowing the energy to circulate at a comfortable speed. Either direction is fine—clockwise or counterclockwise. When the energy loops back to its starting position, begin the second “looping” cycle immediately, only this time, loop the energy several feet farther out from your Central Meridian. Then continue to loop the energy, going exponentially farther and farther out in each cycle for a total of nine times. On the last cycle, feel the energy sweeping a broad circle that extends all the way out to infinity.



Circulate the energy horizontally around your left side nine times, going farther and farther out until you reach infinity. Video 9—
SoundsTrue.com/MasterKeyExercises

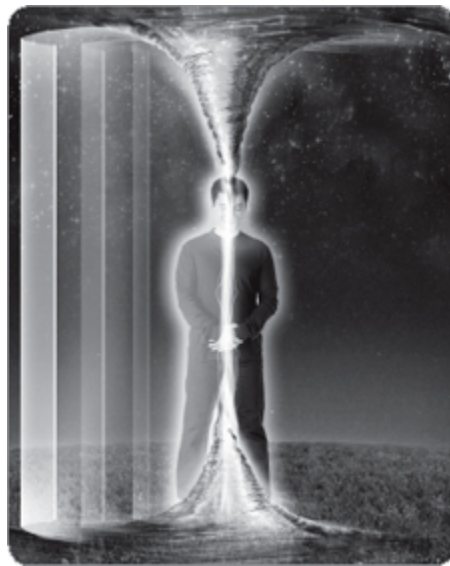
2. Then reverse directions and trace the same loops you just made, working your way back from infinity to your Central Meridian around the left side of your body for a total of nine times.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back from infinity to the Central Meridian.

Right Side Horizontal

3. Now become aware of the energy inside the right side of your body from head to toe and concentrate it into your Central Meridian. Then repeat what you did on the left side of your body in Step 1, only this time “loop” that energy in a circular, spiral-like motion around the right side of your body while breathing naturally and allowing the energy to circulate at a comfortable speed. Either direction is fine—clockwise or counterclockwise. When the energy loops back to its starting position, begin the second “looping” cycle immediately, only this time, loop the energy several feet farther out from your Central Meridian. Then continue to loop the energy, going exponentially farther and farther out in each cycle for a total of nine times. On the last cycle, feel the energy sweeping a broad circle that extends all the way out to infinity.



Circulate the energy horizontally around your right side nine times, going farther and farther out until you reach infinity.

4. Then reverse directions, and, as before in Step 2, trace the same loops you just made, working your way back from infinity to your Central Meridian

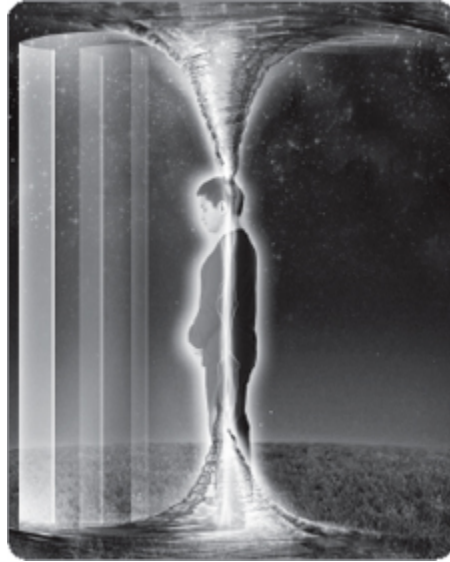
around the right side of your body for a total of nine times.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Central Meridian.

Front Half Horizontal

5. Become aware of the energy inside the front half of your body from head to toe and concentrate it into your Central Meridian. Then repeat what you did in Step 1, only this time loop that energy nine times around the front half of your body all the way out to infinity.



Circulate the energy horizontally around your front nine times, going farther and farther out until you reach infinity.

6. Then reverse directions and, as before, trace the same loops you just made, working your way back from infinity to your Central Meridian around the front half of your body for a total of nine times.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Central Meridian.

Back Half Horizontal

7. Become aware of the energy inside the back half of your body from head to toe and concentrate it into your Central Meridian. Then repeat what you did in Step 1, only this time loop that energy nine times around the back half of your body all the way out to infinity.



Circulate the energy horizontally around your back nine times, going farther and farther out until you reach infinity.

8. Then reverse directions, and, as before, trace the same loops you just made, working your way back from infinity to your Central Meridian around the back half of your body for a total of nine times.
9. Once you are finished, bring your awareness inside your body. Feel your internal organs and cells glowing. They are alive and full of Qi. Feel your deep connection to the universe. Become aware of the sacredness of the universe and allow that Qi to bathe your body.

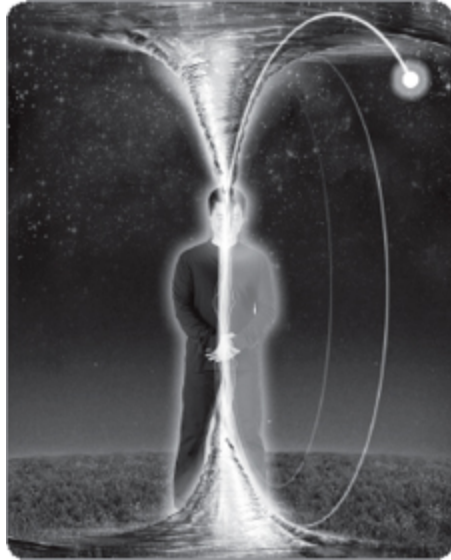


Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Central Meridian.

Part 2: Vertical Cycles

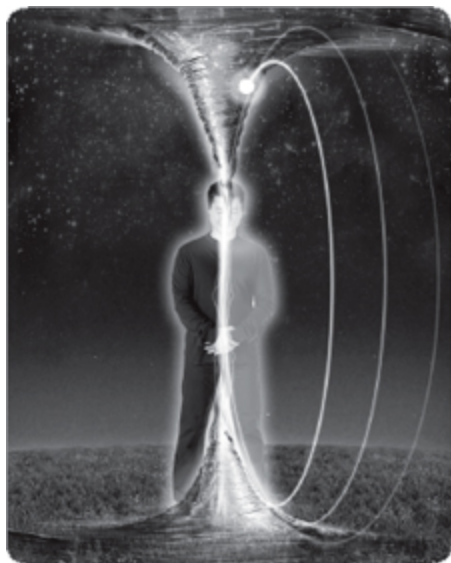
Left Side Vertical

10. Now become aware of the energy inside your Central Meridian and concentrate that energy into a pearl at your Lower Dantian. Circulate the pearl up along your Central Meridian, above your head, and then loop it back down toward the Earth around the left side of your body, then back up through your perineum to your Lower Dantian again. Continue to spiral the pearl in vertical loops around the left side of your body for a total of nine cycles, each time going higher up into the sky until you reach infinity, and then lower down into the ground until you reach the center of the Earth.



Circulate the pearl vertically around your left side nine times, going farther out each time.

11. Then reverse directions, and trace the same loops you just made, working your way back from infinity to your Lower Dantian around the left side of your body for a total of nine times.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Lower Dantian.

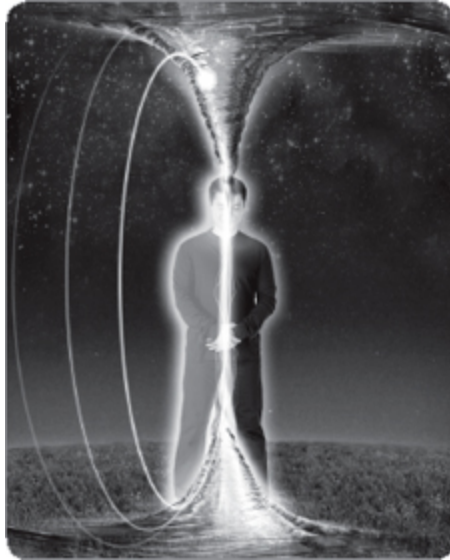
Right Side Vertical

12. Now circulate the pearl vertically along your Central Meridian around the right side of your body for a total of nine cycles, again each time going higher up into the sky and then lower down toward the center of the Earth.



Circulate the pearl vertically around your right side nine times, going farther out each time.

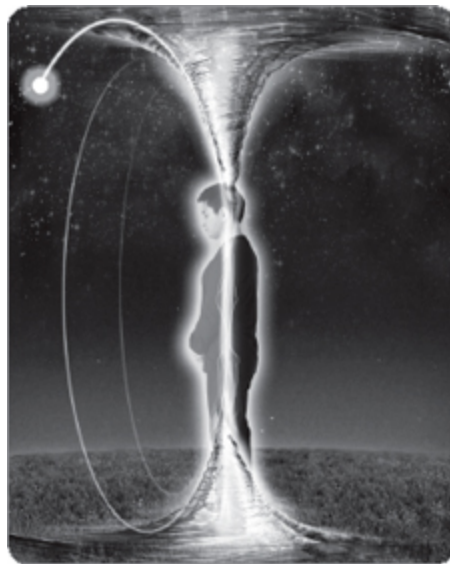
13. Then reverse directions and, as before, trace the same nine loops, working your way back to your Lower Dantian.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Lower Dantian.

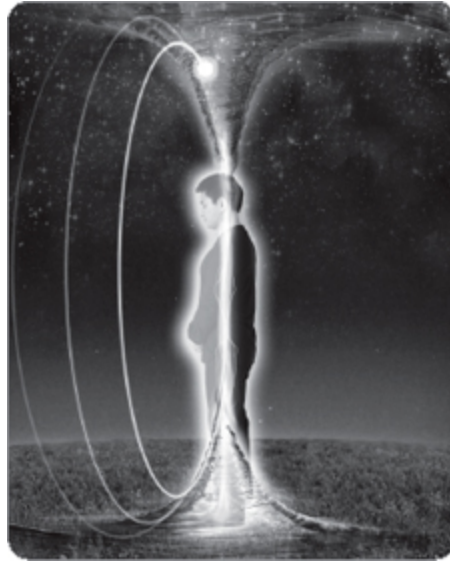
Front Half Vertical

14. Now circulate the pearl vertically along your Central Meridian around the front half of your body for a total of nine cycles, again each time going higher up into the sky and then lower down toward the center of the Earth.



Circulate the pearl vertically around your front nine times, going farther out each time.

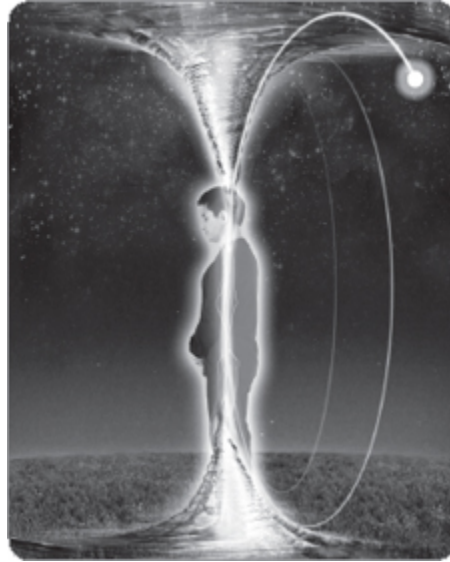
15. Then reverse directions and, as before, trace the same nine loops, working your way back to your Lower Dantian.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Lower Dantian.

Back Half Vertical

16. Now circulate the pearl vertically along your Central Meridian around the back half of your body for a total of nine cycles, again each time going higher up into the sky and then lower down toward the center of the Earth.



Circulate the pearl vertically around your back nine times, going farther out each time.

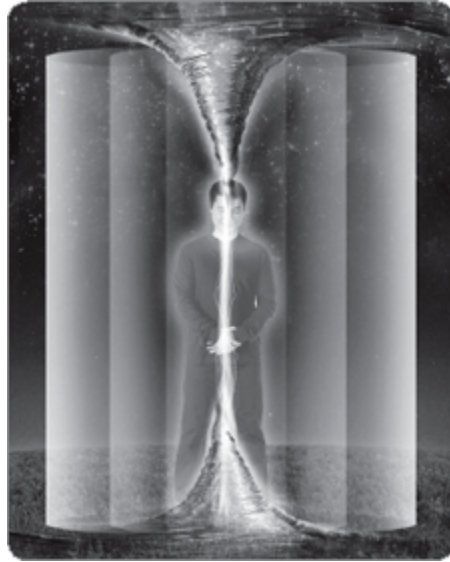
17. Then reverse directions and, as before, trace the same nine loops, working your way back to your Lower Dantian.
18. Once you are finished, bring your awareness inside your body. Feel your internal organs and cells glowing. They are alive and full of Qi. Feel your deep connection to the universe. Become aware of the sacredness of the universe and allow that Qi to bathe your body.



Reverse directions and trace the same nine loops, working your way back to the Lower Dantian.

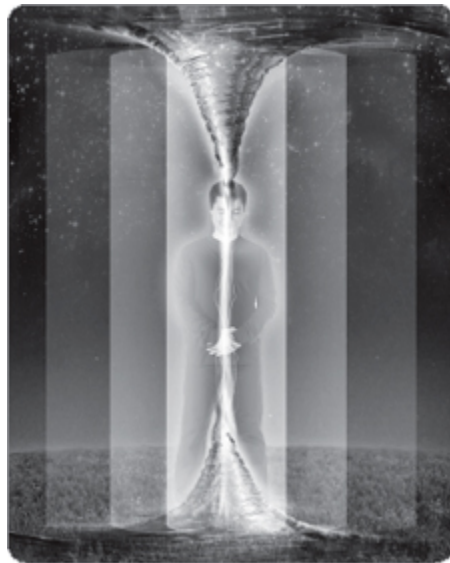
Part 3: Concentric Circles

19. Become aware of the energy inside your Central Meridian and expand that energy in concentric circles, making a pillar of light. Continue expanding your Central Meridian farther and farther out for a total of twenty-one cycles. On the last cycle, expand the energy all the way out to infinity.



Expand energy from the Central Meridian in concentric circles twenty-one times all the way out to infinity.

20. Then reverse directions, absorbing the energy of the universe as you return your expanded Central Meridian back into your body.



Reverse directions and collect the energy in concentric circles twenty-one times back to the Central Meridian.

21. Once you are finished, bring your awareness inside your body. Feel your internal organs and cells glowing. They are alive and full of Qi. Feel your deep

connection to the universe. Become aware of the sacredness of the universe and allow that Qi to bathe your body. Inhale and pay attention to your Upper Dantian; exhale and empower your wisdom with the Qi of the universe. Inhale and pay attention to your Middle Dantian; exhale and empower your love with the Qi of the universe. Inhale and pay attention to your Lower Dantian; exhale and empower your vitality with the Qi of the universe. Feel blessed all along your Central Meridian. Feel your connection to the universe grow stronger. And finally, nourish your Qi. Imagine Qi filling every single cell of your body. Visualize, “I am in Qi; Qi is in me.”



Visualize: “I am in Qi; Qi is in me.”



My Qigong Life

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Practice Guidelines

The Three Stages of Qigong Practice

Good morning.

I have just woken up after a sound eight hours of sleep. It is 6:30 on a crisp, spring morning, and I'm feeling refreshed and rejuvenated as I lie in bed with my eyes still closed. I'm in no hurry to get up, for sleep is a natural meditation practice. As the slower wheels of the nighttime mind turn, the "choppiness" of the busy, faster, daytime mind is left behind. As we dream and then venture beyond dreams into deep, dreamless sleep, our brain waves become smoother and lengthen like long, deep ocean swells. I enjoy "riding" back to the shoreline of wakefulness on those waves while relishing the sweetness of daybreak. I nourish my Qi with this energy, smile to my internal organs, and simmer peacefully under the sheets for a few minutes. Then I open my eyes, ready for the day.

I rise out of bed feeling juicy and alive. My mind is a gurgling fountain of clarity. My heart is soft, open, and tender. My body is welling up with resilient vitality. My Three Dantians are all brimming with Qi. I feel like a jubilant schoolboy on his first day of summer break. Nothing has happened, yet I am already extremely happy.

After a brief run to the washroom, I am ready to begin my morning Qigong practice. When I trained with Xiao Yao in the boiler room in my youth, I practiced Qigong for four

hours a day—two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. But my current lifestyle requires adapting my morning practice to fit into my busy adult schedule, so nowadays I usually practice Qigong for just about an hour before setting off to work.

I find that my morning practice sets the tone for the rest of the day, and I encourage you to develop a daily Qigong routine before setting off to start your day too. An hour is optimal, but a lot can be accomplished in half that time if you practice regularly. Half an hour practice time is reasonable and sustainable for most people, so I have based my recommended Qigong program on that time frame.

The structure of the morning practice session I propose is simple, straightforward, and easy to remember. Every practice session consists of a Primary Practice and a Secondary Practice, each of which takes between fifteen and twenty minutes to complete, as the following table indicates:

Daily Practice Sessions	Morning
Primary Practice	Approximately 15 minutes
Secondary Practice	Approximately 15 minutes

If you are pressed for time, you can divide the morning practice session in half and do only the Primary Practice in the morning, and then do the Secondary Practice in the evening, as follows:

Two Half Sessions	Morning	Evening
Primary Practice	Around 15 minutes	
Secondary Practice		Around 15 minutes

If you have extra time and you wish to accelerate your progress, repeat the morning practice session twice a day for a total of one hour, as shown below:

Two Daily Sessions	Morning	Evening
Primary Practice	Around 15 minutes	Around 15 minutes
Secondary Practice	Around 15 minutes	Around 15 minutes

What practices should you include in those two fifteen-minute time slots? The content varies depending on the stage of your development. I recommend that you follow the practice guidelines described in this chapter and begin with the program set for Stage 1 before moving on to the other two stages. Each stage is designed to help you meet specific objectives, and you will optimize results by following the pre-established sequences.

An overview of each of the three stages of practice follows.

Stage 1: Setting a Foundation

This stage lasts for four weeks, and within that time frame you will accomplish two objectives. The first objective consists of awakening and empowering the Four Golden Wheels using the exercises described in Part 2: Awakening the Four Golden Wheels, including the preparatory exercises, the Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Three Dantians, the Breathing Empowerment of the Central Meridian, and Awakening Awareness.

Collectively, these ten exercises make up the Primary Practice of Stage 1. We divide them into four groups and rotate them every seven days over the course of four weeks. By the end of this period, you will have practiced each of the exercises included in Part 2 to awaken and empower the Four Golden Wheels for a total of seven times. By then you should have firsthand experience with the basic building blocks of Qigong. The four groups include:

Group 1 (Exercises 1-4)

Exercise 1: Lengthening Fingers Using Qi power

Exercise 2: Sword Finger

Exercise 3: Creating a Qi Ball

Exercise 4: Nourishing Qi

Group 2 (Exercises 5-6)

Exercise 5: Activating the Midbrow, Midchest, and Midriff Points

Exercise 6: Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Upper Dantian

Group 3 (Exercises 7-8)

Exercise 7: Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Middle Dantian

Exercise 8: Hologram Palm Empowerment of the Lower Dantian

Group 4 (Exercises 9-10)

Exercise 9: Breathing Empowerment of the Central Meridian

Exercise 10: Awakening Awareness

The second objective of Stage 1 is to introduce you to the four Essential Practices we learned in Part 3: Exercising the Four Golden Wheels. These four exercises make up the Secondary Practices of Stage 1. Each week you will focus on one of the practices and cycle sequentially through all of them over the course of the month.

In Week 1 you will begin with the Three Treasures Standing Meditation (TTSM); in Week 2 you will move on to the Four Golden Wheels Exercise (FGWE); in Week 3 you will do the Lotus Meditation (LM); and in Week 4 you will practice Connecting Universe (CU). By the end of the first four weeks, you will have practiced each of the Essential Practices a total of seven times.

Some practitioners find it easier to learn Qigong exercises by following an instructional video or recording rather than just by reading a book, so in anticipation of that

need I have created a series of companion DVDs and CDs to help guide you along. Both series match the format of the exercises described in this book, and they convey some of the subtleties that are hard to capture in print. The exercises are also set to music especially designed to create an appropriate mood. For more information about these instructional aids, please consult the Additional Resources section at the end of this book.

Below is the month-long calendar of daily practice for Stage 1:

The First Month of Practice

Week 1	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Primary Practice	Group 1	Group 1	Group 1	Group 1	Group 1	Group 1	Group 1
Secondary Practice	TISM	TISM	TISM	TISM	TISM	TISM	TISM

Week 2	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Primary Practice	Group 2	Group 2	Group 2	Group 2	Group 2	Group 2	Group 2
Secondary Practice	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE

Week 3	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Primary Practice	Group 3	Group 3	Group 3	Group 3	Group 3	Group 3	Group 3
Secondary Practice	LM	LM	LM	LM	LM	LM	LM

Week 4	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Primary Practice	Group 4	Group 4	Group 4	Group 4	Group 4	Group 4	Group 4
Secondary Practice	CU	CU	CU	CU	CU	CU	CU

TISM=Three Treasures Standing Meditation; FGWE=Four Golden Wheels Exercise;
LM=Lotus Meditation; CU=Connecting Universe.

Stage 2: Striving for Life Changes

The second stage of practice lasts for one year. The focus of this stage is the mastery of the Essential Practices. By the time your yearlong practice is complete, you should notice marked, positive changes in your life and experience more flow and happiness in your daily affairs.

The yearlong time frame of Stage 2 is divided into four three-month quarters. In each quarter, you select one of the four Essential Practices as your Primary Practice, and then repeat that practice every day for three months before moving on to another Essential Practice. Over the course of the year, you will cycle through all four of the exercises.

For example, if you select Connecting Universe as your Primary Practice in the 1st Quarter, you repeat that exercise every day for the next three months. Then when the 2nd Quarter begins, you choose one of the other three remaining Essential Practices. If you choose Three Treasure Standing Meditation as your Primary Practice, you repeat that exercise every day for the next three months. Then when the 3rd Quarter begins, you select one of the other two remaining Essential Practices. If you choose Four Golden Wheels Exercise as your Primary Practice, you repeat that exercise each day for the next three months, and during the 4th Quarter you then repeat Lotus Meditation every day to finish up the year.

The choice for your Secondary Practice is entirely up to you. You may choose any of the four Essential Practices, or, if you wish to refine the Four Golden Wheels, you may practice any of the four groups of exercises described in Stage 1. I recommend practicing the Essential Practices about 80 percent of the time and doing the empowerment practices of Part 2 around 20 percent of the time.

Below is the yearlong calendar of daily practice for Stage 2:

1st Quarter	Month 1–3
Primary Practice	Any one of the four Essential Practices
Secondary Practice	Any practice

2nd Quarter	Month 4–6
Primary Practice	Any one of the three remaining Essential Practices
Secondary Practice	Any practice

3rd Quarter	Month 7–9
Primary Practice	Either one of the two remaining Essential Practices
Secondary practice	Any practice

4th Quarter	Month 10–12
Primary Practice	The last remaining Essential Practice
Secondary Practice	Any practice

The First Year of Practice

Below is an illustration of what a weeklong practice session for Stage 2 could look like. In this instance the Primary Practice is the Four Golden Wheels Exercise, but I could have selected any of the other three. The selection of the Secondary Practices is completely arbitrary and follows no particular pattern:

Weekly Cycle	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Primary Practice	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE	FGWE
Secondary Practice	LM	TTSM	FGWE	LM	Group 4	CU	CU

FGWE=Four Golden Wheels Exercise; LM=Lotus Meditation; TTSM=Three Treasures Standing Meditation; CU=Connecting Universe.

Stage 3: Choosing Wisely

Stage 3 has no time frame and no specific guidelines. It extends indefinitely into the future. Here you are free to pick

any practice as your Primary Practice and also any practice as your Secondary Practice.

On Any Given Day	
Primary Practice	Any Practice
Secondary Practice	Any Practice

Stage 3: Do Any Practice

Does this freedom of choice mean that you should simply toss a coin and leave the selection process to random chance, or that you should perhaps come up with a rigid program with set rules to determine which exercise to practice on any given day? Theoretically you could take either course, but if you did, you wouldn't be deriving the full benefit of a Qigong practice session.

I recommend that you apply discernment in the choices you make. The following three-step process for selecting both Primary and Secondary practices during Stages 2 and 3 can help you determine which exercise is most relevant, given the specific issues you may currently be facing. When you match your Qigong practice to the practice of real life, your daily practice becomes more meaningful and vastly more effective. So choose wisely by following this three-step process:

1. Determine your time frame. For instance, if you are choosing a Primary Practice during Stage 2, your time frame is three months. If you are choosing a Secondary Practice for Stage 2, your time frame is one day. If you are choosing a Primary or Secondary practice for Stage 3, the time frame is completely within your control.
2. Pinpoint your issues. Ask yourself, *what aspects of my life are in most need of improvement over these time frames in order for me to be happier?* Identify

two personal issues—one long term and one short term—that you would like to resolve within those two spans of time. Those two issues will guide you to the right Primary and Secondary practices. For example, if your long-term challenge includes attracting a new love interest and your short-term challenge includes prepping for a job interview later in the day, then you would select Lotus Meditation—to help you open your heart more fully—as your Primary Practice and commit to doing it daily for an extended period of time, and then select Three Treasures Standing Meditation—to help you become more focused—as your Secondary Practice just for today.

3. Select the right practice. When deciding which practice to choose, use the following criteria to help you identify the exercise that is best suited to meet your specific needs.

When to Choose the Hologram Palm and Central Meridian Empowerments

Keywords: wisdom, love, vitality, balance, integration

Choose these practices when you feel: confused, rejected, tired, or imbalanced.

The needs that this practice addresses: the need to sharpen your experience of the Four Golden Wheels and strengthen the foundation for the Essential Practices

Changes to notice over time: you will develop a greater capacity for wisdom, love, and vitality, and achieve more balance and integration.

When to Choose the Three Treasures Standing Meditation

Keywords: willpower, focus, perseverance, continuity, control, intention

Choose this practice when you feel: distracted, scattered, uncertain, or absent-minded.

The needs that this practice addresses: the need to stand on your own two feet; hold your ground; stop being pushed around or bullied; follow through more thoroughly on plans; stop procrastinating; assert a stronger leadership role; initiate change; or build resolve to overcome a difficult situation

Changes to notice over time: you will develop the ability to remain focused and more in control under pressure; concentrate and meet deadlines better; set goals and reach objectives; stand up for yourself more confidently; get more respect from others; and make changes happen when you set a strong intention.

When to Choose the Four Golden Wheels Exercise

Keywords: movement, communication, calm, embodiment, presence, flow

Choose this practice when you feel: stuck, lazy, disembodied, invisible, misunderstood, disconnected, or inauthentic.

The needs that this practice addresses: the need to become more embodied; develop a stronger presence; improve communication skills; overcome stagnation; awaken bodily sensations; feel more connected to nature; flow more smoothly; or feel more alive

Changes to notice over time: you will develop the ability to feel more comfortable in your own body; have healthier skin and a more radiant face; have more graceful movement; be better able to navigate through uncertainty; have greater resilience; feel more authentic; and embody a more elegant presence.

When to Choose Lotus Meditation

Keywords: nurture, care, tenderness, sweetness, universal love, compassion

Choose this practice when you feel: frightened, rejected, unloved, hurt, depressed, lonely, stone-hearted, hateful, vengeful, cruel, or cynical.

The needs that this practice addresses: the need to attract a love partner; resolve pointless conflict; become more agreeable, tolerant, and trusting; purify the body; open up to vulnerability; or be a kinder person

Changes to notice over time: you will develop more understanding for others, greater emotional resilience, and greater generosity and compassion; experience the world as divine; and become a more lovable person.

When to Choose Connecting Universe

Keywords: positive, blessed, sacred, faith, connected, protected, guarded, truth, beauty, good

Choose this practice when you feel: negative, “cursed,” malevolent, abandoned, cut off, dark, egotistical, narcissistic, selfish, disingenuous, cruel, or violent.

Needs that this practice addresses: to become good; connect to God or the universe; overcome the shadow; resist the impulse for evil; or overcome darkness

Changes to notice over time: you will develop an increased lightness of being; have more faith in God or the universe; radiate more heavenly energy; embody truth, beauty, and goodness; develop the ability to resist negative impulses; and feel blessed and forgiven.

The Practice beyond Practice

Practice time is over. Now what? Does your spiritual practice end once you complete your daily practice session? Of course not. The energies you cultivate during Qigong practice are stored in the Three Dantians for you to use in your daily life. Applying those energies throughout the day is *also* part of your Qigong practice. And since the quality of

your life reflects the quality of your Qi, your daily reality will improve as you upgrade them.

How soon will you begin to detect positive changes? After you complete Stage 1, you should already feel a noticeable difference in your overall capacity for wisdom, love, and vitality while achieving more balance and integration. By the time you complete the 1st Quarter of Stage 2, you should experience a marked shift around the long-term issue associated with your Primary Practice. And by the time you complete Stage 2, you can expect significant changes all around. During Stage 3 you will develop the energy reserves to adapt smoothly to the ups and downs of daily life, and you should experience even more dynamic happiness in all domains.

Besides the formal exercises presented in this book, there is also a simple adjustment you can make that will amplify the benefits of a Qigong practice. This adjustment is subtle, but its repercussions are dramatic: *relate to every moment of the day as an opportunity to practice Awakening Awareness and, whenever possible, nourish your Qi.*

For example, after my morning practice is over, I eat breakfast. Today I'll have fruit and vegetable juice. I gather apples, carrots, grapes, celery, ginger, and a lemon together and juice them, then pour the liquid into a tall glass. I raise the glass to my mouth slowly, with Awakened Awareness. This simple act of mindfulness has already transformed my experience. Even before I sip the drink, I can already feel the vital energy of the liquefied fruit flowing from the glass into my arm. I take a sip with my eyes closed. As I swallow, Fruit and Vegetable Juice Qi spreads through my whole body. Even my toes can "taste" the drink! When I finish, I nourish my Qi. *I am in Qi; Qi is in me.*

When I approach breakfast mindfully, a simple glass of juice becomes the source of great happiness, and you can invite this attitude into all your activities. For example, as you walk in the forest you can become aware of the trees,

absorb their energy, and be nourished by the Tree Qi. As you stroll along a busy city sidewalk you can become aware of the sun, absorb its energy, and be nourished by the Sun Qi. And at night you can gaze up at the sky with appreciative wonder and soak up the nourishment of the Star Qi.

The natural world is a vast reservoir of energy, and when we embrace it with awareness, it becomes a delightful feast that we can relish endlessly. The dessert of that feast is our energy exchange with other human beings, and especially if that other person is our love partner. A sexually charged, intimate relationship built over a spiritual base with another person can be a source of incomparable happiness and joy.

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Relationships and Intimacy

Awakening Relationships

The youngest child in a Chinese family stands on the lowest rung of the social ladder. In my family I held that honor. As a little boy I was subject to the will of my elders, which included almost everyone I knew. I often found myself on the receiving end of a constant rush of instructions and warnings. Sometimes these orders were issued sweetly, and sometimes as a stern rebuke, but either way, a distinct willfulness came through in all adults' dealings with me.

But there was one adult who related to me differently from all the others: Xiao Yao. From the very beginning, the kind man who became my master addressed me with his undivided, wholehearted attention and expressed himself in a gentle manner that was free of coercion and unspoken demands. As an adult he was entitled to boss me around and rely on his social leverage to control my actions, but he never did.

Being in my master's presence was always an illuminating experience. The space that opened up around us felt vibrant and full of beautiful energy that was charged with magical possibilities. His personality was like a fine mist that lifted out of a calm, peaceful sea, and each time he expressed himself, our relationship space brightened. That space was continually awake, alive, and teeming with

spiritual powers that brought out the best in me. I loved being around him.

One of the most important lessons I learned from Xiao Yao was the value of awakening relationships. Growing up as a student, and then as a teacher, I discovered that any time two people interact in a relationship illuminated by awareness, they develop an instant connection and feel unified and whole. Those individuals can be two strangers discussing the weather, two friends sharing a joke, or a bride and groom exchanging their wedding vows. In all three scenarios they would each feel the same liberating openness, flow, and peacefulness permeating the space around them.

In contrast, when two people interact in an “unawakened” relationship, they each feel inherently divided, separate, and apart, even if they like or love each other very much. That gap is usually bridged by endless chatter, the buzz of constant activities, and especially by avoiding silence, because once the talking stops, both people become self-conscious and begin to drift apart like two icebergs in an ever-widening sea.

There is a simple test that we can perform to determine whether a relationship is awakened: *the test of silence*. In the midst of a conversation unexpected moments of silence arise. In an awakened relationship those pauses are comfortable moments that we settle into with ease, and we are then able to maintain a satisfying connection throughout the silence. On the other hand, when an extended pause arises in an unawakened relationship, we grow uncomfortable, so we feel compelled to fill the void of silence with mindless words or superficial activity.

Consider the most important relationship in your own life. Does silence unify you with that other person or divide you from one another? Can you identify any relationship in which silence thrives? If so, that relationship probably stands out as special.

Modern culture doesn't condition us to relate to each other with Awakened Awareness, so the notion of grounding a relationship in silence may sound odd or even rude. Perhaps you have never actually experienced an awakened relationship. Or perhaps you already possess an awakened nature, so holding silence in relationships comes naturally to you. Either way, intentionally awakening a relationship is a skill that can be learned and refined.

So how do we awaken a relationship? We usually don't pay much attention to silence as it arises in a conversation—any more than we notice the space between the notes when we listen to music. But the way to start is by paying attention to those pauses and seeding them with awareness. Simply become aware of your own awareness for a fraction of a second each time a conversation comes to a natural resting place. Then, after a while, Awakened Awareness will naturally expand beyond the pauses and envelop one or two words, and then a whole sentence. Eventually, the light of awareness will illuminate the entire conversation. There is no need to tell the other person what you are doing. Allow the process to unfold organically.

How can you tell that you are on the right track? You become more centered and peaceful; the space around you opens up; you are able to channel more wisdom, love, and vitality into that space; and everything you say and do now becomes more meaningful. The overall quality of the relationship improves greatly as well.

When *both* people interact with Awakened Awareness, awareness is intensified like two mirrors facing each other, reflecting the same light. In that mutually illuminated space even the slightest gesture of kindness or appreciation, both given and received, becomes a divine act. Such a relationship then becomes a shared, mystical experience that transforms normal social discourse into a sacred ritual.

Nowhere does the glistening purity of a mutually awakened relationship become more evident than in the

context of a love interest. In fact, when we fall in love we naturally awaken awareness. That's what makes falling in love so special. No effort is required for that relationship space to awaken in mutuality. The process unfolds organically. In the presence of the beloved we slip into timeless moments of dreamy silence, we take pleasure in nothingness, and when a single word or the slightest gesture ripples through that peacefulness, we revel in divine joy.

The one instance in which most people living a modern lifestyle are likely to glimpse that type of enlightenment is when they fall in love. Indeed, popular culture treats the experience of falling in love with the same reverence traditional societies once reserved for spiritual illumination. Ironically, these two experiences are quite similar, the main difference being that in one case we awaken alone, while in the other we awaken in mutuality.

The mystery of love has become the path to salvation in the modern world. No longer do we project paradise into the afterlife as past generations did; we project it into a relationship. We pursue a love interest with religious fervor and envision our relationships in terms that were once used to describe Heaven. But all too often, what begins as a journey to paradise ends up as a voyage into Hell.

We place high hopes on finding eternal happiness through love, but our quest is elusive. The love songs and romantic movies we adore serve the same functions as religious scriptures once did. And these "Gospels of Relationships" warn us that love is fickle and temperamental—that just as easily as we can fall in love, love can also fade away.

Several generations ago our ancestors lived in a more traditional culture that did not place the same high hopes that we do on love and relationships. Therefore, we can't lean on the past for guidance on ways to cultivate an intimate relationship in which the promise of love is kept

alive through time. So it is up to us to create a new model to sustain love in a relationship, one that can accommodate the divinity we secretly yearn to kindle through love.

Keeping Love Alive

Falling in love is easy; staying in love is hard. Despite the heavenly hopes we place on a relationship early on, we are often let down. Our partners don't live up to our expectations. Our relationship needs are not satisfied. Sometimes we end one relationship and then move on to the next, sometimes we stay in a numbing relationship by force of habit, and sometimes we are trapped in a relationship nightmare with seemingly no way out.

These unsavory outcomes are often the consequence of a relationship between two people who are energetically imbalanced. When we lack spiritual integration—when our Four Golden Wheels are imbalanced—we tend to attract partners who complement our energetic “lopsidedness.” Initially this feels good to both partners, who each fill their respective energetic deficiencies like two matching pieces of a puzzle, and so the relationship makes them feel more happy and complete.

But this kind of happiness is artificial and temporary. At some point the stresses of daily living will buckle that relationship. And given enough pressure, the two puzzle pieces will snap apart, and both partners' Four Golden Wheels will return to their original imbalanced condition. When that happens, the “Garden of Love” often transforms into a murky swamp of malevolence, resentment, and hate.

Let's illustrate this process with a concrete example. Imagine a man with a relatively strong Upper Dantian and a relatively weak Middle Dantian. He is wise and insightful, but he lacks emotional depth. At a party he meets a woman who complements his energetic profile. She has a relatively strong Middle Dantian and a relatively weak Upper Dantian.

She is loving and kind but lacks discernment and vision. As the evening progresses, a strong energetic attraction builds. He asks her out. She accepts.

On their first date, he helps her sort out complications she is experiencing at work with some good advice. She appreciates his guidance and reciprocates with genuine gratitude, which makes him feel good. Energetically, through that exchange, they compensated for each other's most basic needs. He gave her wisdom and she gave him love. This exchange made them both feel integrated and whole. By the end of the evening they have grown close and both are feeling the glimmer of love.

Now fast-forward five years. The couple is married and the energetic pattern that was seeded on their first date is now deeply engrained. The husband has become the pillar of his wife's wisdom, and the wife has become the source of her husband's love. While this relationship provides them both with a sense of stability, it also limits their individual expression. He can't relate to her as an equal in matters associated with the Upper Dantian, and she can't relate to him as an equal in matters associated with the Middle Dantian. Inwardly he is mentally frustrated with her, and she, too, is emotionally unsatisfied with him.

At this stage in the relationship, love and resentment coexist. Both partners appreciate the relationship for what it has to offer, but they also both simultaneously begrudge its limitations. But for better or worse, they stay together.

Six months pass. Then the man's business suffers unexpected losses and goes bankrupt. He is disoriented and unsure what to do next. As the wife senses her husband's Upper Dantian confusion, she panics and becomes emotionally distraught. The husband senses the contraction of his wife's Middle Dantian, and his own heart tightens in response.

During this time of crisis, their innermost needs go unmet. He can't provide her with guidance, and she can't

provide him with love. They bicker and grow further apart. Slowly, the energetic bonds that first held them together unfasten.

The situation worsens, and one day a terrible fight breaks out. Hurtful words are spoken and each walks away feeling betrayed by the other. The happiness that once bonded them together has now turned into malicious hate.

But what might have happened in this same situation if *both* partners awakened and empowered their own Four Golden Wheels? Imagine the same couple, only this time both individuals are spiritually integrated. He is wise, loving, and vital and so is she. Before they meet, each person is already happy and whole. Then they meet at that same party, begin to date, and marry. Their relationship unfolds in awakened space, and they fill that space with an abundance of uplifting spiritual energy.

They develop mutual respect for each other's opinions, and they come together to solve problems. They develop deep care for their mutual feelings and work through emotional issues with mutual understanding, sensitivity, and patience. They support each other's ambitions with enthusiastic vitality and inspire one another to manifest their dreams.

Then the same crisis breaks out and the husband's business falters. But instead of panicking, the wife is now able to support him emotionally and offers him good, sound guidance without making demands or losing faith. Together they figure out a way to ride through the storm, and eventually they are guided to another business opportunity. As a result of overcoming this challenge, their mutual trust deepens and their relationship blossoms.

In a relationship between two energetically balanced individuals, adversity often strengthens the bond of love. But that's not the end of the story. If we wish to dramatically increase the chances of a relationship thriving over the long

term, we also need to consider the element of sexual intimacy.

Sex, Lovemaking, Sacred Bliss, and Cosmic Ecstasy

Mention the word *sex* and eyes widen and ears perk up. The strong reaction the subject arouses reflects the spicy nature of sexual energy. We may be at the gym feeling tired and depleted, but if someone we find attractive starts working out next to us, our energy level is suddenly boosted. That energetic intensification represents the activation of our Lower Dantian, which holds our sexual energy in reserve.

Pure sexual energy is as unstable as dynamite and just as explosive. It can transport us to sublime states of bliss and delight or cast us into the darkest pits of anguish, terror, and depravity. The volatile and wild nature of sexual energy convinced some religious traditions to view it as an impediment to spiritual development, and to some degree this belief still continues to perpetuate in the popular imagination because of the confusion, heartache, and pain that sexual intimacy can cause.

To demonstrate this, rank the following three words from the most to the least spiritual: *wisdom, love, sex*. If we took a poll, the top position might be a toss-up between wisdom and love, but without a doubt sex would rank last on the list. No one questions the connection between spirituality and love or spirituality and wisdom. But the link between spirituality and sexuality is a harder sell.

From the Qigong perspective, however, the notion that sexuality and spirituality are antithetical is misguided because sexual energy forms one of the cornerstones of happiness. If we ever hope to secure long-lasting happiness in a loving relationship, we must heal our socially conditioned distortions about sexuality. We must erase the invisible line we draw with our minds around our beltlines, above which lies the greater part of human nature and

below which lies the lesser. In essence, we must spiritualize sex.

But how do we redeem sexuality and elevate it to the spiritual status it deserves? How do we reconcile the square of sex with the circle of spirit when sexual pleasure is often responsible for so much shame, trauma, and pain? One place to begin searching for an answer to these questions lies in identifying the fundamental, seemingly irreconcilable differences between male and female sexuality. Those differences swiftly become apparent in the bedroom.

Stereotypically, male sexual energy flares up and is exhausted quickly, like a match, while female sexual energy boils slowly and remains hot for a long time, like a pot of boiling water. These different tempos are a source of shame for men who climax too fast and frustration for women who may not climax at all. This problem is then compounded by the notorious fact that when male sexual energy is activated men often become emotionally unavailable, and the other notorious fact that the female sexual experience is often laden with sentimentalism that men normally can't relate to.

Most of us will recognize that the male and female sexual organs dance to different rhythms, and that disharmony between them often results in misunderstandings and disappointment. But why would nature engineer genitals that are physically complementary yet psychologically and energetically at odds? An answer to this question begins to emerge when we envision the sexual dynamics of protohumans in the context of their natural habitat.

Imagine the East African grasslands, springtime, three million years ago. The mating call of an elephant splinters the silence. In a fertile valley with budding trees and flowers, a small scattering of bipedal hominids that look like walking chimpanzees are also participating in their yearly mating rituals. We zoom in on an ovulating female on a grassy patch. A male spots her. She signals her interest, and he chases her around playfully. They frolic on the grass and

then he mounts her. While they are sexually active, the male, in the dominant position, remains alert and attuned to any disturbing signs of danger such as an unusual sound or the scent of a lion. Within a few minutes the male climaxes and scurries off into the shrubbery. To ensure conception, the female repeats the same scenario with different partners. Summertime arrives. The female gives birth and affectionately nurses her newborn. Another link in the chain of life has been successfully forged.

Now let's examine the evolutionary basis for the differences between male and female sexual instincts in the light of this illustration. In an environment teeming with dangerous predators, male sexuality evolved a speedy climax and emotional detachment for a practical reason: to ensure survival. Females, on the other hand, evolved the capacity to remain sexually receptive indefinitely in order to increase the odds of conceiving, and they evolved a strong emotional bond to ensure the survival of their offspring. Plausibly, male sexuality evolved to safeguard the survival of the *self*, while female sexuality evolved to safeguard the survival of the *other*. These two complementary survival strategies were perfectly matched to life conditions in the evolutionary past. They got us to "here" successfully. But our life conditions have changed. We no longer need to worry about wild predators stalking us during intimacy. As mature human beings, we seek a more intimate and meaningful form of sexuality, one that transcends instinctual biological drives aimed solely at procreation. A modern woman desires to be satisfied both physically and emotionally by her partner, and ideally, a modern man desires to live up to those expectations. But how do we overcome the limitation of sexual drives that were designed to serve a narrow purpose? How do we reconcile million-year-old sexual hardwiring with our modern values?

Obviously, we can't alter our sexual instincts. What we can do, however, is use spiritual practice to overcome the

limitations imposed by nature on our sexuality. In fact, we can transform the inherent mismatch between male and female sexuality into an incredible opportunity for spiritual growth.

Let's begin by considering the way Qigong can help a man harness his sexual energy. When male sexual energy is aroused, it intensifies locally around the genitals and quickly flows out of the body. That is the natural pattern of male sexual energy. But men can learn to *reverse* that flow and direct their sexual essence upward, toward the Middle Dantian. By doing so, a man accomplishes two goals. First, he diminishes the urge to ejaculate, and second, as sexual energy rises to his heart, passion blends with love and tenderness. A man who masters this skill is able to prolong intercourse indefinitely and deepen his emotional connection during lovemaking.

When female sexual energy is aroused, it naturally flows inward and upward from the genitals toward the heart. Stimulation of the breasts further activates the Middle Dantian and reinforces an emotional response. Unlike men, women don't need to practice Qigong to integrate their sexual vitality with their love. These qualities mingle naturally, and in this respect, female sexuality is inherently more integrated.

But through spiritual practice both women and men can learn to integrate their sexual energy to even higher levels. Sexual vitality can be directed upward from the heart to the top of the head, where it becomes infused with the blissful quality of sacredness. And from there, sexual vitality can be circulated through the Central Meridian into the sky, where it is experienced as heavenly ecstasy.

The spectrum of intimacy that extends from sex, to lovemaking, to sacred intimacy, to cosmic ecstasy maps out perfectly on the Four Golden Wheels in the following way. Sexuality that centers on the genitals and the *Lower Dantian* corresponds to *passionate sex*. Sexuality that

integrates the sexual vitality of the *Lower Dantian* with the heart-centered energy of the *Middle Dantian* corresponds to *intense lovemaking*. Sexuality that integrates *all three dantians* corresponds to *blissful sacred love*. And sexuality that integrates the *all three dantians and the Central Meridian* corresponds to *cosmic ecstasy*.

Cosmic ecstasy is vastly more intense, pleasurable, and meaningful than even the most passionate sex. Comparing the two is like contrasting a bathtub with the ocean.

The topic of Qigong and human sexuality is a broad and sensitive subject that deserves in-depth discussion. But if you wish, after mastering the exercises in this book, you can awaken your inner spiritual lover and start your journey toward cosmic ecstasy by practicing a modified version of Exercise 9: Breathing Empowerment of the Central Meridian. Here are the practice guidelines:

Begin the exercise in a state of light sexual arousal. To trigger that state, activate your sexual vitality by focusing on your genitals either mentally or through self-stimulation. Once you feel your sexual vitality percolating, direct this energy to your Lower Dantian to awaken your passion.

Next, direct this energy to your Middle Dantian. Blend passion and love to awaken the energy of lovemaking. Circulate this energy back and forth between the Lower Dantian and Middle Dantian nine times to strengthen the energetic charge.

Next, direct this new energetic blend to your Upper Dantian. Blend passion, love, and the feeling of sacredness to awaken the energy of blissful sacred love. Circulate this energy back and forth between the three Dantians nine times.

Next, direct this new energetic blend through the Central Meridian up into the sky and deep down into the earth. Blend passion, love, and sacredness with the feeling of being one with the universe to awaken cosmic ecstasy.

Circulate this energy up and down your Central Meridian nine times.

When you finish, collect the energy you cultivated and store it in your Lower Dantian. Draw on this reserve when you want to enliven your presence and empower your relationship. If you and your partner both practice this exercise, shared space becomes a wellspring of unending delight, and intimacy becomes a source of blessing for your home.

There is no surer way to bring long-lasting happiness into an intimate relationship than to ground it in enduring bliss.

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The Evolving Human Universe

Matter, Life, and Human Consciousness

Of all our relationships, one stands apart in its ability to inspire and mystify—our relationship to the universe—but most of the time we remain as unaware of the star-speckled space enveloping us as the wallpaper in our living room.

The universe is the pillar that sustains everything in existence, including all our relationships, but despite the pivotal role it plays, we hardly notice it at all. We identify passionately with our private property, neighborhood, country, or even the whole planet, but tend to remain oblivious to the boundless depth of starry space that stretches out endlessly in all directions around us.

But if you stood under the vaulted heavens on a crisp summer night, gazed up, and became aware of the shimmering planets, stars, and galaxies that pixilate the vastness of space, what would you experience? Would you feel like a detached, insignificant spectator standing on a lonesome planet observing a meaningless mass of twirling matter from the fringes? Or would you feel a deep, personal, and heartfelt connection with those sparkling lights?

How do you really feel about the universe? Do you feel at “home” in it, or are you just a “homeless drifter” passing through?

And if you imagined the universe as a giant being staring back at you as you gazed out at it, how do you imagine this

being might feel about *you*? Does the universe relate to you with a sense of wonder, mystery, and awe, or as a meaningless mite on a planetary mote swirling in a galactic cauldron lost in immeasurable time?

As a rule, many of our deepest personal issues derive from our own early home environments. If we felt safe in our homes and were closely bonded to our kin, we are more likely to fully express ourselves in healthy ways as adults. But if our home life was fraught with fear, apathy, or uncertainty, we are more likely to shut down and close off in our dealings with the world later on. This rule also applies to the way we relate to the universe, our greater home, but on a larger scale.

The entire spiritual enterprise is founded on the notion that you matter to the universe more than you can ever imagine. In the broadest sense the universe *is* your mother, the stars *are* your ancestors, and space *is* your home, literally! The universe is your primordial family. Against the wildest odds, you won the cosmic lottery by being born a human being—a prize of inestimable value that is precious beyond all conceivable measure—and for this reason the universe cherishes you as dearly as the most nurturing parent adores their child. This family loves you; this “home” welcomes you.

When we develop a loving, trusting relationship with Father Sky and Mother Earth, we awaken a *universal love* in our hearts that spans the breadth of the cosmos. We can then plug the network of all our human relations—even those that are flawed—right into that source and let them bask in the healing energy. In the process of developing a loving relationship with the universe, we inadvertently heal many of our own childhood traumas.

Ancient cultures instinctively understood the healing power of universal love. Across the globe societies oriented themselves to the universe through creation stories that personalized the cosmos and filled their lives with a sense of

cosmic significance. Only modern culture lacks a compelling, meaningful creation story relating us personally to the universe; consequently we envision space as a barren wilderness that surrounds our little manicured planet.

Ironically, the modern world has developed a narrative that traces the evolution of the universe that is even *more* incredible than the most spectacular creation story harkening from the ancient past. However, this narrative is usually presented in a cold, detached, scientific tone that inspires as much love, hope, and optimism as a technical computer manual does. Our indifference toward the universe reflects this heartless perspective. Sadly, we pay a dear price for this apathy: the alienation we experience between ourselves and the rest of the cosmos leads us to believe that our lives are ultimately random, accidental, and meaningless.

The human species has progressed in many ways, but we have not outgrown the elemental need to integrate our existence in a meaningful way with the rest of the universe. To feed that need we are now called upon to develop a new creation story—one that embraces the rational, sophisticated, modern worldview but also kindles our hearts and enlivens the sky.

Fortunately, science and history can be integrated with spirituality to create a narrative that revitalizes a meaningful relationship between the universe and humankind. The following account presents a fresh vision of the unique connection that you share with a universe that is ultimately rooted in the same great mystery of existence as you are. It is, more than anything, an epic tale of wonder, self-discovery, and timeless love ...

Thirteen and a half billion years ago, a mysterious pinprick, unimaginably dense and incomprehensibly hot, appeared out of the void of spaceless and timeless infinity and exploded with uncontainable force, creating space, time,

energy, and matter in the process. This “Big Bang” ignited the engine of creation, and in that very instant our whole universe was born. The varied tapestry of everything that exists today—including you and me—was already present, though undifferentiated like a mound of unspun fiber.

The newborn universe expanded trillions of miles, the average temperature dropped millions of degrees, and matter congealed into subatomic particles—all of this within seconds of hatching. Then over the next few hundreds of thousands of years, the universe became cool enough for stable hydrogen atoms to form and spread like a gaseous mantle across the blackness of space. The denser pockets of this stray matter swirled into spiraling galaxies strewn with countless star nurseries that looked like billowing skyscrapers.

As these plumes of concentrated hydrogen became denser, gravity increased, and more matter was sucked in toward the core of these thick, now hot, expanding spheres. Local temperatures rose millions of degrees and nuclear reactions began to take place inside these cauldrons of blazing plasma. Hydrogen was “cooked” into helium, nitrogen, carbon, and oxygen—the building blocks of organic life. The reactions inside these fiery furnaces released powerful bursts of electromagnetic radiation, and suddenly the darkness of space was flooded with starlight.

Some of the larger stars were hot enough to cook heavier elements like sodium, magnesium, potassium, and calcium. The really big stars cooked all the elements of the periodic table up to iron. The iron in the blood pulsing through our veins was first forged this way inside a star.

But when a star produces iron, it quickly becomes unstable. Its core collapses, resulting in a violent implosion followed by an explosion of dazzling brilliance called a supernova, which signals the death of the star. During this cataclysmic event, all elements of the periodic table heavier than iron are created.

The pulverized body of the star spews out across space like volcanic ash. Second-generation stars and planets are then formed from these stellar cinders. Our sun and our beloved Earth were fashioned from this type of debris around four and a half billion years ago.

Within five hundred million years later, conditions on the searing crust of our world became favorable for the emergence of life. Chemical reactions inside a sterile ocean beaded molecules into the protein building blocks of life, and then, at some wondrous point, the universe crossed a new evolutionary threshold as meshworks of chemical chains “animated” and the first life forms emerged on Earth.

For a billion years unicellular organisms ruled the planet, and then these singular cells coalesced into multicellular organisms that evolved into exotic sea plants and sea creatures.

Four hundred million years ago, sharks cruised the oceans, and a hundred million years later bony fish, insects, and amphibians emerged. Then, within a relatively brief span of geological time, the first reptiles set foot on dry land. These creatures evolved into the nimble, ferocious dinosaurs that ruled the planet between two hundred and eighty and sixty-five million years ago until a large meteor crashed into the Yucatan Peninsula, sending a huge cloud of dust into the atmosphere that blocked sunlight for years. Temperatures dropped and the climate shift swiftly doomed the dinosaurs.

Early mammals emerged around two hundred million years ago, but it was only after the reign of the dinosaurs ended that these animals thrived. The first primates evolved fifty-five million years ago. Then monkeys appeared around thirty million years ago, and the first apes around twenty million years ago.

The first bipedal apes emerged between four and five million years ago, and the first recognizable archaic humans arrived on the scene about two million years ago. That

evolutionary line split several times before leading to the emergence of our species, *Homo sapiens*, around two hundred thousand years ago.

The history of our species spans only ten thousand generations, if we use a measure of twenty years for each one. For the first three quarters of that time frame, we lived a lifestyle similar to that of archaic humans, relying primarily on only the simplest stone tools, fire, and our own sharp reflexes to survive. But fifty thousand years ago a dramatic change took place on the planet that altered the course of human evolution. Another bitter Ice Age set in. Life conditions worsened, and our species was almost wiped out.

A handful of humans coped with the challenges of the Ice Age by developing a revolutionary innovation: *symbolic thinking*. Earlier, presymbolic thinking humans were bound to their immediate environment primarily by their acute physical senses. Their world was circumscribed by the physical horizon and the present moment. But symbolic thinking led to the development of complex language, which transformed those boundaries of time and space.

Complex language liberated the human mind from the constraints of the physical environment by emancipating the imagination, which was now free to conceive new solutions to address the new problems humans were facing. Genetic evidence indicates that every human alive today descends directly from these mavericks. Just fifty thousand years ago, we were all brothers and sisters.

The unintended consequences of symbolic thinking were abundant: names were assigned to people and tribes; stories were created to explain the inexplicable; rites of passage were honored with rituals, music, and ornamentation; body art and taboos were enforced; and most importantly, the accumulated knowledge of one generation was transmitted down to the next. Thus, collective intelligence grew and cultures emerged.

Our ancestors also projected symbolic thinking onto physical objects and created complex tools. Weapons such as the bow and arrow, the spear thrower, and the fishhook transformed our species into fearsome predators in the sky, on land, and in the water. Our new way of life proved to be a huge success, and despite the wretched weather, we managed to adapt to new life conditions and quickly spread into new habitats across the face of the planet.

Our ancestors also projected symbolic thinking into the mysteries of life. As far back as twenty thousand years ago, they became aware of the connection between the moon's lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle, as well as the sun's solar cycle and the seasons. The order that existed between the microcosm and the macrocosm inspired a keen spiritual awareness. People carved bone calendars to track the moon and painted exquisite star maps on monumental cave walls to note the seasonal movement of the stars.

Twelve thousand years ago—or six hundred generations ago—the Ice Age finally ended. Temperatures rose and the food supply increased. Tribal hunter-gatherers settled down in villages and thrived. Agriculture and animal husbandry were developed to sustain the growing population. Then five thousand years ago—or two hundred and fifty generations ago—irrigation techniques and metallurgy were developed, which enabled the establishment of the first river-valley civilizations along the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus, and Yellow rivers.

With the dawn of civilization, we enter the period of recorded history and come across the characters and plots that make up the first chapters of our own story. While the events those ancient archives describe seem far removed from our current vantage point at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in generational terms they are relatively recent.

To put it in perspective, think about it this way: King Hammurabi ruled over Babylon only one hundred and

eighty-eight generations ago; David became king one hundred and fifty generations ago; the Buddha sat under the Bodhi Tree one hundred and thirty generations ago; Jesus was born one hundred and two generations ago; the Roman Empire disintegrated seventy-six generations ago; Christopher Columbus discovered the New World twenty-five generations ago; the Declaration of Independence was signed eleven generations ago; Abraham Lincoln was elected president seven generations ago; World War II was fought three generations ago; and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon only two generations ago.

In the span of just one thousand generations, our species went from worshipping the moon to walking on it. How did we manage that leap? The remarkable advances our species made in such a short time frame cannot be attributed simply to our biology, which has actually remained more or less the same over this stretch of time. Gravity can't account for Newton's laws, nor can James Watson and Francis Crick's genes account for their discovery of DNA.

The laws that regulate the evolution of matter and life cannot account for the astonishing and unparalleled achievements of the human race over the past fifty thousand years. That odyssey makes sense only in the context of a new form of emergence within a new evolutionary domain subject to its own guiding principles: *consciousness*.

Today we stand at the leading edge of the third great evolutionary offshoot the universe has undertaken since the Big Bang. For the first eleven billion years, evolution tracked the development of matter from subatomic particles to complex molecular chains; then for the next three and a half billion years, evolution tracked the development of life from unicellular organisms to apes; and then evolution continued through our human emergence, from the magical worldview of tribal societies, to the mythic worldview of agricultural societies, to the classical worldview of antiquity, to the

modern worldview of industrialized nations, to the postmodern worldview of digital societies, and finally to the miracles and wonders that await us now even beyond that stage of development.

The Awakened Universe

It has taken the universe thirteen and a half billion years to awaken as living matter endowed with the capacity to reflect back on itself. We are the end of a long evolutionary thread that leads all the way back to the Big Bang, and by pulling on that thread from both ends, we establish the limits of our fullest identity.

Our insatiable urge to learn more about matter, life, and human nature represents the universe's desire to know itself. Through our hands and eyes the universe finally developed the ability to hold up a mirror and see its many faces. When an astronomer points a telescope at the starry canvas of space, the universe is admiring itself; when a biologist stumbles on a new species, the universe discovers another part of its body; when a philosopher elucidates the human condition, the universe becomes more knowledgeable about itself; and whenever a spiritual practitioner becomes enlightened, the universe realizes its own primordial nature.

Through us the universe has grown arms and legs and has become self-aware. Through us evolution has become self-directed. The rest of the animal kingdom is propelled into the future by the blind momentum of its evolutionary past, but we are not pushed forward from behind. We can conceive realities that do not yet exist and steer our own futures toward them—we *control* our destiny.

In pursuing our human destiny we offer the universe meaning, and through our fulfillment we bring it happiness. But the universe also wallows in our sorrows. While striving to actualize a purposeful life, we stumble and fall

repeatedly. We collect physical bruises and emotional scars that bleed and ache, sometimes for an entire lifetime.

In the midst of that pain it is not unusual to forget who we truly are and feel stuck out in the middle of nowhere, without a clear sense of direction, overwhelmed by the hugeness of the cosmos and the seemingly insignificant space that we occupy in it.

Of all the species inhabiting the planet, only one can claim existential anguish as one of its defining characteristics: human beings. Elephants don't suffer sleepless nights contemplating their purpose in life. Birds don't need to read self-help books to discover their rightful place in the natural order. Crocodiles don't require years of therapy to heal their broken hopes and dreams.

At its low point, the human condition becomes like a Greek tragedy in which the protagonist is blessed with a gift that is also a curse. That gift is our higher consciousness and the promise of the meaningful, fulfilling life that it can bring. But when we lack a sense of destiny or the energy to pursue it, then life becomes an unending nightmare from which we can't wake up. That is the curse of being born human.

Despite the high hopes we place on finding happiness at some point in our future, the sad truth is that many of us leave this Earth still waiting to find it. But having a spiritual practice can help you avert that dismal fate. Your life can become a joyful, meaningful journey—if you understand the rules of the game.

Long ago some humans figured out those rules, codified their findings, and devised practical methods to help others tilt the scales of happiness in their favor. You now hold a piece of that wisdom in your hands, and it is now up to you to master those principles and apply them in your life to make the most out of it.

As Xiao Yao, my beloved master, taught me:

Awaken the Four Golden Wheels. Become wiser, more loving, and more capable of taking action in the face of the unknown. Remain centered, balanced, and in a state of open flow. When the four wheels are turning smoothly, you find yourself in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing, with the right people. A clearing appears before you. This path is your destiny, and with every step you take you are happy and the whole world rejoices.

And in parting, I would add:

Your eyes are the eyes of the universe. Your heart is the heart of the universe. Your body is the body of the universe. When you move, the universe stirs. When you sing, the universe dances, and when you cry, the universe sheds a tear. The universe has awaited eons to awaken in you. It continues to evolve through you, right here and right now. As you sow seeds of creativity in the flowering garden of the world, realize that, frail creature that you are, you also soar as a god.

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Epilogue

The Six “No-Worries”

It was the summer of 1981, and a year had passed since I completed my fast in the dark chamber. I had just finished my junior year of high school. I hadn't seen my master since winter break, and that visit had lasted only ten cold days. I was looking forward to spending my third summer at Jiuyi Temple—this time above ground—so three days after school ended, I stuffed my satchel with a few items and headed for the train station. In my bag I carried a pair of underwear, an extra T-shirt, a pair of pants, sandals, a pair of socks, and a toothbrush. I nudged the heaviest item in last: an abridged edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. On my way to the train station I bought dried lychees and sugared kumquats, both wrapped in crinkly brown paper. These were gifts for Xiao Yao.

I boarded the overnight train. The next day I rode the bus through the remote backcountry roads and hiked along the balmy forest trail. When I finally saw the temple's main gate through the treetops, I quickened my pace. The courtyard was a beehive of activity. Bald heads and shirtless mountaineers buzzed everywhere.

A few men were roofing the main hall while another cluster of laborers was refurbishing the Buddha statues beneath. Half the icons glistened with a bright gold patina and the rest were dressed in the crackled paint of timeworn,

honeyed hues. The large Buddha at the center of all the activity was dressed in a fresh coat of gold. He looked knowingly into the distance as he always did, unmoved by the commotion around him.

I greeted familiar faces. Friends waved to me and I waved back. I placed my belongings in Xiao Yao's room and went to find my master. He was holding a meeting. Liu Bo, the administrator of the monastery, was in attendance, as well as a few other monks I recognized and some newer members of the community I didn't know.

Xiao Yao was speaking while the others listened attentively. The door was cracked open, so I peeked in and waved. He smiled and waved back as he continued talking. I returned to the courtyard and assisted one of the masons who was making cement. When he was finished with his task, I went into the main hall, grabbed a paintbrush, dipped it into a can of paint, and coated one of the temple walls bright red. A few leisurely hours passed. As the activity was dying down, a young monk told me that Xiao Yao was waiting for me in his room. I put down my paintbrush, washed my hands clean, and dashed across the courtyard.

"Jihui, how are you?" my master asked. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed.

"I am well, Shifu," I answered. I reached into my bag and handed him my gifts.

"Buddha bless you," he said as he sliced a kumquat with a sharp knife. He poured some ginger tea from a thermos into two white porcelain cups and dropped the fruit in as a sweetener. I savored the aroma as we both sipped the tea.

"How is your family?" Xiao Yao inquired with sincere interest.

"We are all doing well. My parents send you their greetings," I replied.

"And how is your school work coming along?"

"My studies are going well. The schoolmaster's daughter has become a good friend. She is also studying English.

There are about seven of us who want to major in the subject and we're getting special attention from her mother, who has hired the finest teachers in Xiangtan."

"Next year you'll be taking your university entrance exam."

"I know. I took a practice exam a few weeks ago."

"How did you do?"

"I did well enough, and I have one more year to improve my score."

"I am happy to hear that."

We chatted and emptied our teacups. A young monk knocked on the door. Xiao Yao was needed elsewhere. My master was very busy. I spent the rest of the day wandering up and down the mountain trails, running around and splashing in a clear stream, smelling wildflowers, and basking on a warm, flat rock as I watched the sunset.

The following day Xiao Yao asked me to assist him with the healing treatments he performed at the temple. Although the monastery was hard to reach, villagers from the valley and beyond would frequently make the long journey for a healing treatment with my master. When I was at the temple assisting him, he often used hands-on healing methods that I could help him with. We worked together as a healing team. He asked me to direct Qi to various parts of a patient's body and activate specific energy points while he worked on their Four Golden Wheels. While I emitted Qi into them, I could feel my master's potent energy flowing into their Four Golden Wheels, especially into their Central Meridian.

One morning a few days after I arrived, I heard a raucous cry by the main gate. Four mountaineers were carrying a fifth man on a makeshift stretcher made out of two rough-cut branches and a blanket. The patient was moaning. My master and I ran toward them. One of the men explained that the man on the stretcher had been bitten on the ankle by a poisonous snake. He showed Xiao Yao his foot. It was

discolored and as swollen as a big sweet bun. The skin was stretched and glossy, and it looked like a balloon about to burst. The two puncture marks were clearly visible and rivulets of black blood oozed out from both of them. The rest of his leg was turning dark with an ominous red streak that extended from his ankle all the way up his right thigh. There is a well-known Qigong saying that says that if that red line reaches the heart, the patient will die. It was already more than halfway there.

“Bring him to my room,” Xiao Yao ordered the men.

They did, setting the mountaineer down on my master’s bed. The man was well-built with meaty legs. The pain was intense, and he was going in and out of consciousness.

Xiao Yao brought out a bottle of dark liquor that he kept in his room. He quickly empowered it with his Qi and helped the man gulp down a few swallows. Then my master filled his own mouth with the alcohol and sprayed it over the snake bite.

“Press the top of his head and empower his Central Meridian,” he told me.

I activated the energy point and sent energy from the top of his head straight down. The energy in his Central Meridian was dissipating. It felt scattered and weak. Xiao Yao activated various points on the mountaineer’s leg and spent a long time pressing hard on his Lower Dantian.

The healing energy in the room thickened and the mountaineer coughed.

Xiao Yao used his Sword Finger to direct energy from the man’s Lower Dantian along the long red line back down to the snakebite. Blood trickled out from the two dark holes and then it began to stream. He continued to direct the Qi and reverse the flow of the poison. More blood pumped out. The bed was soon stained dark red. Then the color of the blood lightened, and within fifteen minutes it looked normal. The red line had faded and the swelling was nearly gone.

Xiao Yao washed the wound with fresh water and gave the man another cup of liquor to drink.

"You are fine now. Go home and rest," he told him.

The mountaineer sat up and moved his leg. He was fully conscious and nearly pain free. He stood up slowly and tested his balance. Then he slowly knelt down and bowed three times to show Xiao Yao his gratitude. The mountaineer walked out of the room without any help. Less than half an hour had passed since he had been brought in.

A few days later, a military officer arrived at the monastery and asked to speak to Xiao Yao.

"I was dispatched by the chief administrator of the military hospital from my base," he said. "We have a problem and we need your urgent help. A high-ranking official from Beijing is visiting us. His name is General Han. He is very sick. The doctors did all they could, but he is still ill and must return soon to the capital on important business. The administrator heard about you. He wants you to come back with me to the base to heal the general."

"What is the matter with General Han?" Xiao Yao asked.

"He has a urinary infection. He is in much pain."

"I'm sorry," Xiao Yao replied, "but I'm very busy working with other patients right now. I can't leave the monastery."

The officer looked startled.

"Don't worry. I'm not sending you back empty handed. My disciple will return to the base with you." Xiao Yao glanced over in my direction. "He will heal the general."

"Me?" I replied. I had never healed anyone on my own, and the thought of working on a high-ranking military officer terrified me.

"Yes, Jihui," he said, calling me by my Chinese name. "Follow the officer back to the base and do what you can to help the general."

I was speechless. A flurry of fear and anger fell over me, and I stared at the floor to hide my emotions. A high-ranking Chinese general was a powerful man whose disfavor could

jeopardize my future. In a flash, I envisioned my failure and his displeasure. I imagined him barring my admission to a university, harassing my family, locking me up in jail, and even shooting me with his gun. My anxiety deepened, as did the resentment I felt toward my master for putting me in this predicament.

"Don't worry," Xiao Yao said. "Do what you feel is right. *You have my full confidence.*"

The officer and I crossed the courtyard. As we passed under the front gate, I wondered whether I would ever return. We walked down Snowy Peak Mountain in tense silence. There was a military Jeep waiting for us down below. When I saw it, I nearly panicked. I wanted to run into the forest and hide.

The ride lasted two hours. We drove past a checkpoint and entered the base. The officer pulled up to the entrance of the military hospital. The chief administrator of the hospital was waiting for us. When he saw me, he cringed. My youth embarrassed him. An anxious frown indicated his apprehension that the general would blame *him* for my incompetence.

"General Han must get back to Beijing tomorrow," he said. His voice was steely and cold. "But he can't walk. The pain is intense. In my professional opinion, he won't be able to leave for at least another week."

"I understand, sir. I will try my best to help General Han," I answered.

The chief administrator eyed me blankly. My sincerity did not impress him. Despite his reservations, he led me to the general's room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a weak voice said.

I entered, followed by the administrator. General Han was a wiry, gray-haired man in his seventies. He was lying flat on his back. He propped himself up slightly and smiled through the pain.

"Welcome, young man. I am General Han. Thank you for coming," he said. His friendly voice eased some of the tension I had been storing since I left the monastery.

"It's nothing serious, really, just a little problem with my sewage system."

The administrator forced a chuckle.

The general pointed at him, "He's too worried about me. I don't want you to worry. You just do your thing. *You have my full confidence.*"

To my astonishment, the general repeated the *exact* same phrase spoken to me by Xiao Yao.

"Yes sir. I promise to do my best," I said, feeling a little more confident.

I scanned the general's Lower Dantian energetically. I felt a burning sensation, like I was holding scalding charcoal in my palm. He had a bad infection. I empowered his Central Meridian, and I activated two energy points on the soles of his feet. I cleared his kidney and urinary bladder meridians and pumped fresh Qi into his kidneys. Periodically, I scanned his Lower Dantian. When I finished the treatment, the burning sensation was nearly gone.

"Hmm ..." The general's breathing was slow and deep and his eyes were closed. He seemed relieved.

"Sir, I think I may need to work on you again tomorrow," I said.

"Hmm ..." the general responded as his head sunk into the pillow.

I spent the evening at the base. A hearty meal was prepared for me, but I hardly touched it. I tossed in bed, unable to shake off my apprehension. Early the next morning, a hard knock woke me from my shallow sleep.

The door opened and a young soldier slightly older than I peeked in. "General Han would like to see you," he said.

"How is he feeling?" I asked.

"I don't know."

I dressed quickly and followed the soldier back to the hospital. My legs grew heavier each step of the way. We entered the building and walked straight to the general's room.

The soldier rapped on the door.

"Come in!" General Han's voice boomed.

I entered. The general was wearing his military uniform. He stood up straight and his eyes were sharp and alert. He shook my hand vigorously. "The pain is all gone, and I feel more energetic than I have in many years. You are an excellent plumber, young man," he said.

Everyone in the room laughed, including me.

I worked on the general for a short while again. I empowered him and balanced his energy, and before leaving for Beijing later that day, General Han summoned me back to his room.

"I really appreciate what you did for me," he said. He unfastened his stainless steel watch and handed it to me. "Take this as a token of my appreciation. Thank you."

Watches were precious commodities in those days, and the gift overwhelmed me. I admired the timepiece, not even daring to try it on.

The chief administrator organized a private tour of the camp. At dinner I tasted lobster for the first time. Afterward, I was invited to the screening of a film in a tiny plush cinema usually reserved only for high-ranking officers and officials.

The next day another officer drove me back to the temple. The trek up the winding trail was a joyous occasion, and I reached the monastery in record time. I couldn't wait to share the good news with Xiao Yao.

"I deliberately sent you to heal General Han alone," he told me. "I could have done it myself or I could have accompanied you and let you work on him, but I wanted you to realize that after all these years of training you really are a Qigong healer. You are qualified to heal on your own. I

could have told you so, but you wouldn't have believed me deep inside. I want you to remember that horrible feeling you felt before you left. Whenever you come across that sensation again, push through it and another world will open up."

"Shifu, I'd like you to have this," I said, and offered him the watch.

"Keep it. I'm a monk. I have no use for a watch. Besides, you earned it."

He took the watch and strapped it around my wrist and said, "We are all human beings. No matter how much worldly power a person has, we all share the same vulnerabilities, especially when we are ill. Treat an emperor and a peasant with the same respect and you will never be intimidated by someone's title or position."

The following morning, before daybreak, I followed my master along the dewy purple trail that led from the temple to the Rainbow Tree. Xiao Yao was in a talkative mood.

"Spiritual cultivation is simple and the fruits are sweet. Practice daily and you will harvest the Six No-Worries," he said.

As I walked behind him, he repeated the Six No-Worries in the strong, familiar accent that had endeared him to me for so long.

"No worry eating. When your Qi flows smoothly, the plainest meal tastes delicious. *No worry sleeping.* When your Qi flows smoothly, you sleep like a baby. *No worry toilet.* When your Qi flows smoothly, you won't experience digestive problems. *No worry energy.* When your Qi flows smoothly, you have ample vitality to deal with whatever arises. *No worry sex.* When your Qi flows smoothly, your sexual energy enhances your life. *No worry emotions.* When your Qi flows smoothly, your emotions are calm and you rarely get sick."

The nascent morning sun reflected off the pine needles that carpeted our path.

“When your Qi flows smoothly, there are no worries. You live like a *shenxian*—an immortal in fairyland,” he added.

We reached the Rainbow Tree and practiced Qigong in the iridescent morning mist. The rising sun nourished us as we meditated on the cliff’s edge facing the wide-open expanse. I opened my eyes and looked at my master.

Xiao Yao was glowing with kindness and peace. It was hard to believe that he was nearly a century old. His aura radiated a beautiful, clear light. Above us was a large double rainbow with one end resting on the mountain and the other end resting in midair. It embraced Heaven and Earth, cradling us between them like a pair of benevolent arms.

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Additional Resources

For those practitioners interested in additional support, I have created a five-CD and a four-DVD companion set to *The Master Key: Qigong Secrets For Vitality, Love, and Wisdom*.

The CDs and DVDs include the main exercises described in this book, allowing you to easily flip back and forth between the media. And if you would like to deepen your study of Qigong, I welcome your participation in one of my workshops. The two courses I teach, called Empowerments and Happiness Qigong, cover the material featured in the book.

In addition, I teach various other classes that might interest you. Harmony Qigong trains your body, mind, and spirit to become supple like a willow tree and flow like water. Guardian Qigong boosts your internal power to new levels.

I also teach a set of “hard” Qigong practices designed to transform the most vulnerable parts of your body into an “iron shirt.” Yi Jin Jing tonifies connective tissue while 12 Cycles Yang and 12 Cycles Yin strengthen your internal organs and bones. For those interested, I also offer a yearlong course called How to Become a Qigong Healer.

To purchase the CDs and DVDs, visit SoundsTrue.com. For information about my teaching schedule, please visit my website, robertpeng.com. I hope our paths cross again someday, and until then, I wish you Good Qi!

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Companion Resources

The Master Key Video Series

Robert Peng presents four DVDs of instruction in powerful Chinese energy practices to enhance our health, sustain our happiness, and bring us into effortless alignment with the flow of life. Recorded in beautiful settings and enhanced with computer animations, this series brings viewers a comprehensive progression of Qigong's most valuable teachings.

The Master Key Audio Series

An invaluable resource of Qigong practices that reawaken our inner fountain of youth, balance the forces within and without for harmonious living, and open clear and abundant channels for life energy to flow. Created to support the practices taught in Robert Peng's book and DVDs—with a special emphasis on visualizing and directing the flows of subtle energy.

Qigong Ecstasy

The energy of joy lifts our spirits, opens our hearts, and fills us with enthusiasm for life. This 45-minute practice gently activates the three dantians—the major energy centers of the body—dissolving stagnant energy that impedes the flow of life-giving Qi. A complete training video in a powerful practice to amplify our capacity for joyous living—infusing

us with an inner radiance that carries us effortlessly through the day.

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About the Authors

Robert Peng is a world-renowned Qigong master who apprenticed secretly under a spiritually accomplished monk named Xiao Yao during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Robert began by learning the martial arts and then the healing arts. As part of his training during his teen years, he spent a hundred days in a dark underground chamber without food.

During this period Xiao Yao visited him daily and instructed him in advanced practices intended to accelerate his spiritual development. As a result of doing the hundred-day fast and numerous other practices, Robert awakened extraordinary powers, including the ability to discharge a concentrated form of Qi, or bioenergy, that feels like a strong electric current.

Xiao Yao encouraged Robert to pursue an academic degree, and while Robert practiced Qigong with his master behind closed doors, he also focused on his schoolwork. After completing high school, he pursued a degree in English literature at Zhongnan University, where he stayed on as a teacher after his graduation, ultimately becoming an assistant professor.

Robert's reputation as a Qigong healer and teacher spread while he taught English, and in 1992 he resigned his post at the university to teach Qigong publicly on Hainan Island in southern China, which was the gateway to the West at the time. He opened the first Qigong healing clinic

on the island along with another Qigong healer. Within a five-year span they taught Qigong to more than 150,000 students and did Qigong healing treatments on many prominent figures from the Western world.

In the mid-1990s, Robert was invited by the family of former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke to Sydney, where he eventually relocated. Seven years later he moved again, this time to New York City, where he currently teaches Qigong and lives with his wife, Dongmei. Visit robertpeng.com.

Rafael Nasser, as a teenager, developed an interest in Asian martial arts and a fascination with the “mysterious” energy known as Qi. Shortly after graduating from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, he began to study Qigong while pursuing a career in real estate and finance.

After he narrowly escaped one of the doomed flights of September 11, 2001, Rafael’s life took a sharp turn. He dedicated himself to the exploration of consciousness, particularly through the study of Integral Theory and a model of human and cultural development known as Spiral Dynamics. He spent two years working with a team of Americans, Israelis, and Arabs applying the principles of these systems to promote human emergence in the Middle East.

In 2005, Rafael signed up for a healing session with Robert Peng. That experience inspired a monumental paradigm shift. He became Robert’s student, and the two struck up a close friendship. His collaboration with Robert on *The Master Key* developed from that connection.

Rafael is a licensed massage therapist who graduated from the massage program at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in New York City. He integrates both Eastern and Western modalities in his practice along with the energy

work he continues to cultivate under Robert's guidance. He lives in Manhattan. Visit rafaelnasser.com.

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About the Illustrator

Tobin Dorn is an internationally acclaimed sport designer whose innovative work has been featured on the television show *60 Minutes*. A graduate from the New World School of the Arts in Miami and the Pratt Institute, he began a career as a footwear designer for Fila and later Puma where he created boot concepts for the film *X-Men* (2000) and designed sportswear for Olympic athletes.

In 2001 Tobin moved from New York to Brazil where he launched the New Level Design Studio (newleveldesign.com), a company that specializes in sportswear, footwear design, and branding.

Tobin is a Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt, and in recent years his artwork has been recognized by leading figures in the mixed martial arts world. He has created official logos for UFC champions such as Anderson Silva and Mauricio Shogun Rua. Tobin currently lives in Curitiba with his wife, Isabela, and family.

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