

*There must be some primal force,
But it is difficult to describe or locate.
I believe it exists, but I cannot see it.
I do see its results, I can even feel it, but it has no form.*

Zhuang Zhou, 4th Century BCE

Last month we discussed the nature of Yin and Yang, which now brings us to Master Zhuang Zhou, the author of the quote above—commenting on the nature of Qi—who also said, “Cosmic Yin and Yang are the greatest of Qi.”

The other day I treated an elderly gentleman who had come in to see me about a pain in his knee. A few needles and a couple of minutes later, a puzzled look spread across his face as he moved his leg about. “How’s it feel?” I asked. “It feels great,” he said, still looking confused. “Huh... well, I’ll be darned...” he continued, walking over to my acupuncture chart on the wall. “So, tell me again,” he said, “what’s this chee thing you keep talking about? How does this stuff work?”

What Makes Life Come Alive?

What is Qi (also spelled ch’i or ki, pronounced *chee*), and how does it work? Indeed. That’s the million-dollar question sages and scientists have struggled to explain throughout the ages. It’s much like the question, “what is consciousness?”

The nature of Qi is firmly rooted in the Eastern mindset, but the people of the West often have trouble relating to the possible existence of something that has yet to be proven by western science. The fact is no one has really been able to prove Qi exists—it is invisible and immeasurable. It has no form, and is very difficult to describe. Yet you can feel it, and you certainly can see its results. The most basic “Qi 101” could be described as: If it’s alive, it has Qi. If it’s dead, the Qi is gone.

Qi has been described as a kind of ‘life force,’ or ‘spiritual energy.’ It’s often translated as ‘energy flow,’ ‘air,’ ‘breath,’ ‘life-breath,’ or even as ‘bio-plasma’ or ‘bio-energy.’

Unfortunately, the latter, westernized versions, do not adequately describe the full meaning of Qi, which, when properly nurtured can extend well past the physical body and throughout the Universe.

Zhuang Zhou also gave this telling description of Qi, “When it accumulates there is life. When it dissipates, there is death... There is one Qi that connects and pervades everything in the world.”

The concept of this kind of life-energy inherent in all living things is not reserved for the Chinese, nor to the practice of Chinese Medicine (TCM) and acupuncture. It is a fairly universal concept, showing up across the globe as part of many ancient religions and belief systems. In Polynesian mythology there’s mana (manna); the Hebrews have ruah; the Hindus have prana; in Finnish mythology it shows up as sisu; and in Roman Mythology and Christianity it’s referred to as Spiritus (spirit), just to name a few.

Qi is everywhere and can therefore be considered from the viewpoint of the tiniest atom, to the vastness of the Universe itself. For example, what is that invisible factor holding the protons, electrons and neutrons of an atom together, in perfect balance? Or, what is the gravitational pull made of that holds the sun, moon and earth in orbit within the vacuum of space itself? Perhaps the easiest and most accurate description of Qi is “energy,” or “energetic force.” Qi is the invisible factor that permeates everything, and maintains the harmonic balance.

Somehow, the idea that **something allows life to happen**, is a universal thought—something propels that egg and that sperm together; something animates each cell, making it “alive,” rather than “dead”... What exactly that is, is up for debate, but we call it Qi. It’s a form of energy.

The Role of Qi in Chinese Medicine

The theory of Chinese Medicine asserts that the body consists of natural patterns of Qi, which circulate in channels called meridians. When these channels become blocked, or the flow of Qi is disrupted or unbalanced, or when there’s a deficiency or excess of Yin/Yang Qi, various illnesses and diseases set in. (For more on this, see the July issue.) Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) treats these imbalances by adjusting the circulation of Qi using a variety of therapies, including acupuncture, herbal medicines, moxibustion and massage.

Feel the Qi!

The best way to understand Qi is to experience it for yourself, and the easiest way is by experimenting with this simple hand technique.



Step 1. Sit down (so you won’t lose your balance), then rub your hands together vigorously for about 5 to 10 seconds.



Step 2. Put your hands out in front of you, about shoulder-width apart. Then close your eyes.



Step 3. With your eyes closed, **slowly, very slowly** bring your hands together until you feel a slight pressure between your palms. It may feel as though you have a rubber ball or a piece of dough between your hands.



Step 4. Open your eyes. How far apart are your hands?

Everyone should be able to feel pressure before their palms touch when doing this exercise. Some people’s hands will be perhaps a foot or more apart, whereas others a mere inch or two. The stronger your Qi, the more space you will have between your hands when you feel the resistance.



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