

Emergence from the Hidden Treasury

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

Reaching the extreme of emptiness, keeping utterly still, as the ten thousand things all move together, I watch them return. All these things, each returning to its root. That root is called stillness.

– Lao Zi, Chapter 16

THE SWORD TIP caught the first rays of the rising sun, distracting me for an instant. The sword itself however was flying through the air towards me with the whole

mass of the fat Daoist behind. A shaky pivot on my right foot just managed to turn my body out of the way. I parried downward with my own blade, then stepped across and countered upward toward his wrist. He lifted himself to one leg, withdrew his wrist just far enough for me to miss, then struck back towards my head.

The moves were quick and vicious, but not unexpected. They were part of a sword

set called the *San Cai Jian* – the Three Powers Sword. This set could be performed either by a single person in two sections, or by two persons taking one section each and facing the other. It was elegantly designed, and relatively quick to learn.

It took longer to match it perfectly to the other performer, however.

“That is all part of learning about distance, timing and angle,” the fat Daoist said when I observed this later, massaging a sore wrist. “You move in concert with the other person, setting up a rhythm, and then – if it was a real fight – you would change the rhythm suddenly, and take that opportunity to strike” He wiped the metal blade with a cloth before sheathing it, then leant the sword against a rock. “Most of the old training routines were quite carefully designed to contain what you needed to know, and the better you got at them, the more they would release that knowledge.”

He gestured to my torso. “But it is a body-knowledge, you know. Not words in your head.”

The rising sun, having consumed the mist, lit the clouds above the lake with a variety of shades from pink to crimson, and we stood for awhile, silently admiring the view.

“It is nicer now that the weather is not so cold,” I said, finally. “It has been hard to get out and practise, these last few months of winter.”

“The changes of season all have their own rules,” the fat monk said, softly, as if speaking to himself.

“Rules for what?”

“Hmm?” He turned to me. “Sorry, I was thinking of something my teacher always drummed into us.” His voice changed timbre, imitating his teacher’s. “‘You have to learn to harmonise with the natural laws.’” He chuckled, then lifted four chubby fingers and counted off, reciting: “*Chun fa*, *xia fang*, *qiu shou*, and *dong cang*.” He put down his hand and looked at me, smiling. “That is particularly true when you train in the internal martial arts”

I did not have to say anything, my face spoke for me. He laughed, and picked up a stick, then drew in the mud these characters, placing them in a circle, starting on the left and proceeding clockwise:

Xia fang
夏放

Chun fa 春发

秋收 *Qiu shou*

冬藏
Dong cang



When you practise, you have to focus on your internal qi and internal power and make it glow, make it vigorous.

He used the stick to point to each one in turn.

“春发 *Chun fa*, open in springtime.”

“夏放 *Xia fang*, release in summer.”

“秋收 *Qiu shou*, withdraw in autumn.”

“冬藏 *Dong cang*, store in winter.”

“Why did you put them in a circle like that?”

He had been smiling, but the smile faded as he stared at me for a moment, then closed his eyes. After a moment he took a deep breath. “You know,” he said, eyelids still shut, “sometimes I can just about see why she likes you. But then again,” he continued, opening his eyes and staring at me, “it is all too easy to see why she usually feels like strangling you.”

“Who?”

He gave me a long look, eyebrows drawing together. I grew alarmed.

“Never mind,” I said, and gestured towards the circle. “It is something to do with yin and yang, right?”

“Yes,” he said with heavy sarcasm. “Something.”

“So, ok, how does that apply to martial arts training?”

He looked into the distance, sighed. “Open in springtime,” he said finally, “means that earth is awakening, the plants sprouting and growing.” He gestured around us. “Like right now.”

“But what does that have to do with practising internal martial arts?”

“It means that when you practise, you have to focus on your internal qi and internal power and make it glow, make it vigorous.”

He lowered himself into a stance, and performed the taichi form called *Ye Ma Fen Zhong*: Parting Wild Horse’s Mane.

■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe is a wandering correspondent for The Lantern.



In spring you also want to gently stretch your tendons and ligaments, and while practising, pay special attention to making your moves large and expansive, so that you can open up the spaces between the joints.

■ The famous internal martial artist Dong Zi-Ying in the Dragon posture of Xingyi Quan.



His whole body moved in concert with his arms, slow, steady and powerful. The vigour of his internal qi was palpable. The movement seemed to bring him back to his usual affable self.

Straightening up, he continued: “But at the same time, your moves should be relaxed and leisurely, and if you *fa jing* or use strength it should be gentle.”

He demonstrated with the Chen style move *Jin Gang Dao Zhui*, Strike the Golden Hammer, which involved several circling steps, and concluding with a stamp coordinated with a solid strike of his fist downward into the palm of the other hand. While I could feel the power of the stamp through the ground, it was done without any obvious exertion of strength.

“In spring,” he went on, “you also want to gently stretch your tendons and ligaments, and while practising, pay special attention to making your moves large and expansive, so that you can open up the spaces between the joints.” He gestured to his shoulder while stretching the other arm out. “If you look at those old practitioners from the previous generations, they trained themselves to open these spaces, not only the shoulder, say, but also the very spaces between the vertebrae in the back, so that they could stretch forward like a dragon.”

WE PICKED UP our swords again and began the walk back down the hill to the halls of the *Guan*.

“OK, so that is spring,” I said. “What about the other seasons? What did you say? *Xia fang* or something?”

“Yes, that’s it,” he said. “Summer releasing’ refers to how all plant life flourishes in the height of summer, and it is the same with us: our bony framework has loosened as our ligaments and tendons lengthen. Our muscles and even skin have all expanded and opened. When you practise in the summer you can exert strength and practise explosive power with no problem.”

We were still half-way up the hill behind the *Guan*, and could see the roof of each building down below, patches of light grey on the east side where the early sun had dried the dew, dark grey on the western side away from the sun. The dark green crowns of the old pines between the halls made a pleasant contrast, their scent reaching up to us on the morning air.

He went on, “Summer yang qi has expanded to its extreme. But after summer comes autumn. *Qiu shou* means ‘to withdraw in autumn’. By the time summer is ending and we are getting into autumn, the plants have had it. They’ve begun to wither and die off. Body-wise, too, you need to start to rein yourself in around this time.”

He was silent for a few steps where the path passed over several slippery rocks, then continued, “Later on, in mid and late autumn, you should only rarely use explosive power or any great strength in practice; you should be reserving it internally, drawing it in.”

As we reached the bottom of the path, in the shade of the buildings towards the rear section of the *Guan*, he said back over his shoulder, “By winter, everything appears dead, but in fact nourishment is being stored for the spring that will arrive next. Thus ‘winter stores and conceals’. Plants and even some animals are dormant.”

“So we should practise our sleeping *gong*?” I joked.

He laughed. “Actually our Daoist classic the *Huang Di Nei Jing* insists that we should indeed sleep more in winter, going to bed earlier, waking up later.”

“Daoist classic? I thought it was a medical text.”

“Well, it is part of our Daoist canon, too. Medicine has always been a major part of

our research into the total mystery of the human experience.”

I said nothing. When he showed signs of wishing to wax lyrical, it was best to be silent. This time, however, it did no good.

“The more you live your experience, the more you realise the mystery, and the more you know that something within that mystery, within that experience, is trying to teach you.” He gestured towards my heart. “Learning to listen to *that* teacher is your first real step.”

I knew he did not mean my emotions – we’d been through that before – but if allowed, a deeper sense, a small silent knowing, would inform one. It was habitually not allowed.

Something against yin qi

We placed our swords and other practice equipment in a small alcove by the food hall, then joined the queue of Daoist monks that had formed, some young, some old, but all hungry. I reached the door first, but he held my arm and turned me around so that he could finish his sentence. As he was speaking, holding me in place, I could see the queue behind him grow. Even more, as he spoke I could see it grow restless, grumbling and complaining. They couldn’t go around, it was too tight. He’d picked the perfect place to be the most annoying, the most obstructive. The monk immediately behind him, small and inoffensive with glasses, was pushed into the fat monk’s back; the fat monk seemed not to notice. He kept his eyes focused on me, his face calm, his expression matching his words.

The pushing grew to shoving from behind, but he stood firm, saying, “We Daoists look at all aspects of the human embodiment. What does it mean ...” here he shifted his shoulders a bit as the pushing threatened to unbalance him “that we have a body” he turned his waist slightly “and that we are conscious of our” he dropped his weight “embodiment?”

Just then the line of monks appeared to coordinate their force into one big shove that would sweep the noxious obstruction – the fat monk and I – away. But when it came, the fat monk just shrugged his whole back, taking a tiny step forward and rolling his shoulders slightly to the left. The whole

line of monks fell forward, some catching themselves in time, others sprawling onto the paving stones. I expected curses but as we stepped leisurely into the hall all I heard were chuckles and the brushing of clothes.

Not the least from the fat Daoist. The small monk adjusted his glasses.

I took a tray and helped myself from the bain-marie selection of various vegetable dishes including sprouts and preserved *pao cai*. My friend continued behind me as if nothing had transpired whatsoever.

He looked disdainfully at the food on offer. “I hate to say it, but since Cook has been gone the food is so much less nourishing.”

“Looks the same to me.”

“It is not the look, or the taste, but the effect. Whatever his other faults, Cook always put his heart, mind and soul into his food preparation. You could say, to use emotional language, that Cook created his food with love, no matter how simple the ingredients.” He spooned some rice onto his tray. “Food made like that is deeply nourishing, and not just physically.”

We found a place and sat down, and began our breakfast in silence.

“So what about practising in winter?” I asked after several minutes, trying to get him back on topic. He had just selected a piece of chillied cabbage and put it in his mouth.

He finished chewing it, swallowed, then put down his chopsticks before saying in a low voice, “In winter, you should conceal your strength even more than in autumn. You don’t use explosive power, for example. And the reason you don’t use explosive power in winter is basically self-preservation. Your bones, tendons, muscles and even skin have all tightened up, and it’s just too easy to injure your bones or joints.”

Now I was confused. As I scraped up the last of my rice, I asked “So you are saying that we shouldn’t practise at all in autumn or winter? I’ve seen you practising in the snow!”

He grinned and shook his head. “No, even though winter belongs to yin, it is never absolutely and completely yin, just like summer is never absolutely yang. It is not that you must absolutely never use strength



You could say, to use emotional language, that Cook created his food with love, no matter how simple the ingredients. Food made like that is deeply nourishing, and not just physically.

or express explosive power, but you should increase your yang first.”

“How do you do that?”

“Gently warm up, stretch well, and practise very gently for a period of time first, then later in the session you can use strength. Before that, early in the session, all your bones, ligaments, muscles and skin are contracted and tight, with less of an ability to loosen compared to summertime. Even your skin is less elastic. Once you’ve warmed up, this yang activity communicates itself to the whole body, and you won’t injure yourself.”

We ate in silence for a time. As I finished my meal, though, something else had occurred to me. I said “OK, so I have also heard that the best time of day to practise is really early, like 4 am, since this reflects the very early growth of yang energy.”

“Again, you might get away with it in late spring or summer,” he said as we stood up and took our trays over to the large sink to rinse and stack them, “but during the late autumn and winter it is not so good.” He waved and grinned at a couple of the other monks as we left the hall.

“Why not?”

“Well, the very fact that it is only the very beginning of emerging yang for the day shows that the yin qi is predominant at that time of the morning.” Retrieving our swords and practice gear, he continued, “So since yin qi is still pretty strong around that time, if you wait until yang is about to manifest, say, at sunrise, that is best. Later on, when the yang qi of the year is already in ascendance, such as it is in late spring and summer, then that helps balance the excessive yin in the morning, and you can benefit from very early morning martial arts practice.”

We strolled between the buildings and under the shade of those ancient tall pines that we had seen from the path above the *Guan*. We were heading for the library. Each courtyard separating hall from hall had at least one tree. And in every courtyard was a large rectangular incense burner, inscribed with golden characters on black background. Each was lit, the smoke curling up the pillars that supported its small peaked roof.

“Sounds like you have something against

yin qi,” I said, finally.

He laughed, and said, “Not at all. But in this context you need the yang to balance the season. Yang qi is clear and fine, warm and energising. Yin qi is murky, cold, and congealing, so it is not great for the joints, without having to mention anything else.”

The *Xing Ming Gui Zhi* and the desire of primal qi

We reached the heavy wooden door of the library. He lifted the bar, set it aside, opened the door, and we went in. He bustled around setting things out. I arranged a couple of low chairs around the small upturned barrel he used for a table.

He stopped just inside the door, holding a water kettle, and said “So, how is your study of the *Xing Ming Gui Zhi* going?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but he was gone.

He returned a few moments later. Water dripped from the bottom of the kettle. He set the kettle, still dripping, on the lit *feng lu* stove; the flames hissed.

“Pretty well,” I said. “I’ve basically been writing it out in my own words, gathering the main ideas. Of course there must be subtleties that I might miss this way, but it gives me a way in. Want to hear what I’ve done?”

“Do I have to? I was really looking for a short answer.”

Ignoring him, I pulled out my notebook.

“We looked at the first chapter before, over at Shijie’s. This is from the second chapter, called *Discussion of the Great Dao*.” I cleared my throat. “It starts off with ‘What is Dao?’ and then has a long list of things that can be called Dao. Basically, everything, and more. In the end, the book says, it can be subsumed in one word. Guess what that word is?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Hey, *you* asked *me* how I was going. Anyway, remember when you asked me to research that character for *qi*, the one with the fire radical underneath and the character for ‘nothing’ on top?”

He grunted.

“Well, that’s the one. That’s the one single thing that sums up the whole long list of equivalents for the Great Dao.”



The reason you don't use explosive power in winter is basically self-preservation. Your bones, tendons, muscles and even skin have all tightened up, and it's just too easy to injure your bones or joints.



The sense of male and female attraction ... starts to take everything out of chaos by creating purposeful movement, two things moving towards each other.

The water boiled. Using a cloth, the Daoist lifted the kettle off the stove and held it for a moment, allowing it to cool slightly before pouring it into the teapot he had prepared. We waited in silence for the tea to steep.

As he poured it out, the fat monk said “Did you ever figure out why it is written like that?”

炁

“I think it is explained here. Listen.”

I narrated from my translation notes. “This qi is murky, unfathomable, the beginningless beginning. The beginning of Heaven and Earth lies in the subtle movement of that qi. Empty nothingness opens and closes ...”

He interrupted “But where is the explanation?”

“I’m getting to it. Here it is. ‘... A sense of male and female attraction appears, black and white are mixed and congeal, something and nothingness interact. All is murky, indistinct, containing primalness, implying efficacy ... All this is the start of beginning, called the primal beginning.’”

“Is that it?”

“Well, you have the word *wu*, nothingness (无) there.”

“You do? Well, never mind that for a moment. What about the fire underneath?”

“I think the fire could represent desire, you know, *the sense of male and female attraction*. That attraction starts to take everything out of chaos by creating purposeful movement, two things moving towards each other.” I paused, awaiting his response.

He grunted again, in apparent approval.

Yes! I smiled. I had him now. My trap was about to be sprung.

Then he lifted his eyes and looked at me. “But you have missed something.”

My heart sank. “What?”

“There is an extra stroke on the *wu* (无), so that it looks like this: 炁.” He dipped his finger in tea and wrote on the tabletop. “How do you explain that?”

Damn. Hoist by my own petard.

That was exactly what I’d been going to challenge *him* with. I could only say, in a resigned tone, “That is the word *jì* (炁).”

I paused, then went on. “According to the oldest dictionaries that I could find, it seems to mean ‘unable to get a breath after eating something.’”

It was devastating. Both my trap and my whole elegant case for philosophical etymology had fallen to bits.

He laughed at the expression on my face.

“Don’t look so upset,” he said. “I think you don’t give the early authors enough credit. In my opinion the argument you made before is valid; the meaning of *wu* nothingness and the fire are certainly there. The *jì* character provides the sound for the character *qì*, and a little something else.”

“What?”

“A bit of suggestiveness. Imagine to yourself the feeling of something stuck after eating, stuck just there in your chest.” He pointed to his heart. “Now perhaps you have not experienced it, but that feeling in itself recalls the sensation of the activated heart which occurs at a certain stage of meditation.” Tapping his chest, he continued “But instead of a stuck feeling, it is a swelling of the heart, protesting against its corporeal constraints.”

There he goes again, I thought. “What are you talking about?” I really had no idea what he meant.

“Like I said, it is a certain stage, and you know it when you know it.” He chuckled. “It is not a particularly high stage, by the way, and it is temporary, as all stages are.”

The Daoist stood up and went over to the book case, stretched for something on the top shelf and brought down a book bound in red leather. It looked old.

“But I think it is important for you to know that the two characters for *qì*, the 炁 and the 氣, both appear in the same texts, but are used for slightly different meanings.” He opened the book. “Basically 炁 refers to original primal qi, while 氣 refers to post-birth qi. From my reading, even the really early texts like the *Can Tong Qi* (Triplex Unity)” here he held up the red book “and Ge Hong’s *Bao Pu Zi* use them that way pretty consistently.”

I had my doubts that an expert in ancient Chinese philology would agree with either of our conclusions regarding the old *qi* character, but as the Daoist had told me in the past, a technique of dissecting and

recombining characters was simply one of many expedient means for developing a particular close and focused reading of important texts.

The fumble factor

I was silent for a while. As I sipped my tea, feelings of frustration grew. The fat monk and I had talked and practised, I thought, but I seemed to be just as far from understanding as before. “Not a particularly high stage,” he had said, but I was apparently far from close even to that. When was I going to make some tangible progress?

When I said all this he nodded.

“Not everyone is created equal, despite the popularity of the notion. You are just a bit less equal than most, capacity wise.”

I reddened. He ignored it.

“However, you do make up for that in interest and sincerity, if not in application.” He leaned forward and fixed me with his eyes. “Have you actually taken up and applied *any* of the suggestions I have been making ever since we first met?”

He frowned at me, then held up fat fingers, ticking off points as he spoke.

“We spoke of pitfalls of learning ...” one finger.

“And the need to accumulate *de*, the energy that allows you to change...” another finger.

“I have showed you how to gather the *qi* that can supply a foundation for *de* by paying attention to your breath, so your *yuan qi* does not continually just drain off ...” third finger.

“And we have repeatedly discussed the importance of balancing the cultivation of essence and the refinement of life, and how the two things complement each other. This involved learning about essence, how to cultivate it, store it, and prevent it from leaking away constantly.” This left a closed fist with an extended thumb, which he pointed at me with a fierce look. “How much of this have you actually applied?”

“But you never told me exactly what to do!” I lamented.

“That’s how it works. It’s the same way in all the real traditions I know of: you start. You fumble. You learn a little something, not much, but that provides a basis for one

more step. If you are lucky enough to have a teacher, they watch. If they are really good they let you make all your own mistakes, and only if you are going badly wrong do they make any major intervention. They do perform other functions in this regard, but that is none of your concern at the moment.”

I started to say something but he interrupted. “Yes, I know.” He sighed. “There are many systems that lay out in great detail a course of study that is purported to suit everyone no matter what.”

He was right. I frowned. That was exactly what I had been going to say.

“But use your common sense. If you went to a doctor who gave every patient exactly the same treatment, no matter what the disease, you wouldn’t get anywhere.”

“I’d get farther than if the doctor insisted that I figure out my own treatment!” I felt that I had scored a point.

“Unless the treatment *is* to make those efforts. We are talking about a complex of mental, physical *and* what you could call ‘cosmological’ influences here, it is a delicate balance. But there is something within you that knows and can guide you toward that balance ...” he pointed at my heart again “*if* you accumulate the energy that allows it to wake up a bit, that allows it to begin to clarify, *and* you provide the direction of attention that allows it to work, and for you to become aware of it. That is what we have been calling *turning the light around*.”

He stood up and, uncharacteristically, began pacing. “One of your biggest problems is that you do not make the effort to see beyond your habitual categories of thought. Confucius said, ‘If I expose a corner, and he can’t go from this to the other three corners, I won’t teach him any more.’”^a

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at what we were talking about earlier. *Chun fa*, *xia fang*, *qiu shou* and *dong cang*. I spoke of it in terms of physical training, but you should be able to see that it applies to far more than that.”

He took out a pen and drew a rough yin-yang symbol on a piece of scrap paper with



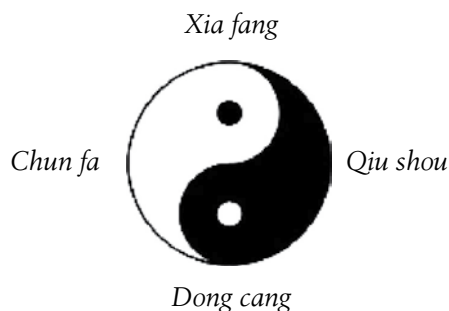
It applies to something as short as a breath ... No! as short as a thought! ... to the course of a day, or the course of a month, or the course of your life. It comprises the whole course of the human race, or that of the existence of the earth, or the galaxy.

a. “举一隅，不以三隅反，则不复也”

《论语·述而》

the words arranged around it.

"Any process goes through all of these stages, from inception – *chun fa* – to full expression – *xia fang* – to contraction – *qiu shou* – to return to quiescence – *dong cang*."



"Remember though that 'cang' in *dong cang* means storage, and is used for a treasury, but it also means 'hidden'. So when things return to quiescence they are often imperceptible."

He tapped the paper at each of the four points.

"The cycle proceeds from apparent nothingness, emerging into existence, fully expressing itself, then contracts and finally returns to nothingness."

He gave me a long serious look. "It applies to something as short as a breath ... No! as short as a thought! ... to the course of a day, or the course of a month, or the course of your life. It comprises the whole course of the human race, or that of the existence of the earth, or the galaxy. All go through these stages. And if you know the cycle, and where you are in it, then ..."

Just at that instant, the door creaked open. We looked up. The Daoist's face became a mask of terror.

■ To be continued ...

Xing Ming Gui Zhi The Centred Mind Illustration

This illustration directly points to the human mind, the aperture of the spiritually effective void that is never obscured. It also indicates that this aperture is expansive, limitless, marvellous and unfathomable; from its origin it is unified without bias; from its origin it is pure and utterly good, one without admixture. Shining brightly there, it is fundamentally round, clear, thoroughly limpid and unobstructed. If you take it as existing, you cannot see it or hear it, though it links to everything; if you take it as non-existing, it is utterly effective and miraculous: how could it not exist?

Existing or non-existing, it has neither beginning nor end. There before the beginning of heaven and earth, it was already originally like this; after heaven and earth pass away, it will still be just like this. Totally non-existent yet totally existent, existent yet non-existent, it is in fact the spiritual body of *Qian* (☰) and *Kun* (☷), the original transformation of the mysterious pivot, and the root source of essence and life in each and

every person, the great basis of all things and all happenings under heaven. When the two principles [yin and yang] emerged from the primal chaos, and gave birth to the four images [*tai yang*, *shao yang*, *tai yin* and *shao yin*] and the eight trigrams, all of them emerged from this [mind aperture]. The great Shun called it "the Centre," Confucius called it "the One," the emperors and kings called it "giving and receiving," and wise men and sages passed it on. To know this [mind aperture] is to acquire the ability to comprehend great virtue [meaning 'virtue' as 'power']. To know this is to know the Changes, to see this is to see the Dao. To establish this is to establish the great basis under heaven. If you open this [mind aperture], you yourself can finish the work on essence, and you yourself can establish Life: creative transformation is totally in your control.

此圖直指人心，虛靈不昧一竅。而



說這個竅，元是廓然無際，神妙莫測的；元是渾然大中，不偏不倚的；元是粹然至善，純一不雜的。昭昭乎，本是圓明洞澈而無礙。以為有，不睹不聞，奚所有也；以為無，至靈至神，未嘗無也。方無方所，亦無始終。未有天地萬物之先，這個元是如此；既有天地萬物之後，這個元是如此。至無至有，至有至無，乃乾坤之靈體，元化之玄樞，人人性命之本原，天下萬物萬世之大本。太易所謂太極四象八卦，皆由此出。大舜之謂中，孔子之謂一，帝王之謂授受，聖賢之相傳，明此便是克明峻德，知此便是知易，見此便是見道，立此便是立天下之大本，通此，性由我盡，命由我立，造化盡在我矣。