

Qi Pyramid

GET MORE FROM YOUR TAI CHI

BY AL SIMON

“I have practised traditional Chen style and Yang style Tai Chi over the years. But I’ve only irregularly felt qi flow. Why?”

I get asked questions like this a lot. It seems that a good number of Tai Chi students struggle with actually sensing and experiencing qi flow in their practise.

Fortunately, the answer to this question is simple.

Unfortunately, it’s not an answer most students – or teachers, for that matter – want to hear.

You see, some people just won’t feel qi flow from Tai Chi, no matter how long or hard they practise. It’s not their fault, though. There is nothing “wrong” with them.

The real problem is in their practise. Because if you want to feel qi flow, you have to realize that Tai Chi may not be the right tool for the job.

THE NATURE OF QI

To understand why this is so, let’s start at the beginning. Let’s look at, think about, and get a feel for the nature of qi.

While many health approaches look primarily at you from a biological and chemical perspective, Qi Development looks at you primarily from an energetic perspective. I think you are aware of this, but oftentimes, people confuse qi with some sort of mystical, magical “energy.” But it’s not. It’s really a little more down to earth and practical.

You can look at qi as the result of all the processes that are happening in and around your body that keep you living. Everything from your DNA, chemical bonding, hormonal secretions and everything at the cellular level, all the way up to your internal organs, your skeletal structure, your skin, how your body moves, your body temperature. Everything that is basically keeping you animated and alive and moving – all of these processes create qi.

But qi is not a “thing.” It’s not “real” in the same sense that your heart is real or your lungs are real. Instead, qi is the result of all these internal processes – everything from the microscopic to the macroscopic – all working together.

YOUR ENERGY SYSTEM “APP”

Let me give you an analogy. Let’s say you own a smart phone. Your smart phone has two parts to it. There’s the physical phone – the actual hardware device you hold in your hand. But there are also the apps you run on your phone. These are the software programs you download to your phone that make it useful.

Now, let’s say you break open your phone’s case and look at the hardware inside. Do you see your apps anywhere in there? No. All you see are circuit boards, chips, your battery, and your network card. Now, it’s true that your apps are stored in magnetic bits on those chips. But even if you break open those chips, you still really can’t “see” your apps there.

Yet, if you power on your phone, you can get all of this hardware to display your apps on the phone’s screen. Once you do that, you can start making calls, sending texts, posting on social media, and everything else you do with your phone.

Well, qi is much like that. If a surgeon cuts you open, he can’t see your qi anywhere. That’s because your qi is more like an app that runs on top of your body’s hardware.

I like to define qi as:

“The result of performing certain activities and observing their results in your body and mind. You can see, feel, hear, and experience qi by performing those activities and observing those processes.”

THE FIVE STEP QI PYRAMID

This definition may seem a bit academic and theoretical, but there’s a practical side here. What happens once you have this more “app-like” definition of qi? Then the question we started with changes.

It’s no longer “Why don’t I feel qi flow?”

It becomes, “What activities do I need to do to feel qi flow?”

Starting in 1997, I began working with my students to answer this exact question. I won’t

take you through the long trial-and-error process that gave us our answers. But within about seven years, we had definitive answers to this question.

We found that a particular “progression” of activities helped immensely with getting our students to generate, feel, and use qi. This qi progression has been one of the biggest reasons for the benefits that our students and instructors have gotten from our Tai Chi and Qigong programmes.

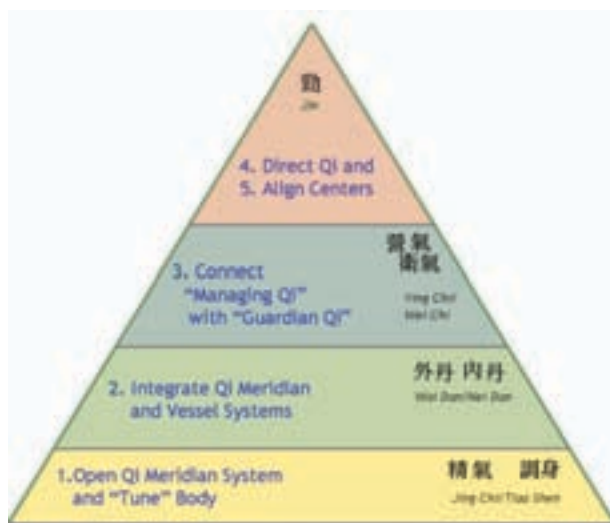
Through working with hundreds of in-person students, and nearly 5,000 online students, we found that there were five groups of activities that gave our students the best experience of qi. We organized these groups into a series of steps.

Those steps are:

1. Open the Qi Meridian System and “Tune” the Body
2. Integrate Qi Meridians with Qi Vessels
3. Connect Managing Qi with Guardian Qi
4. Direct Qi through Four Intentions
5. Harmonize and Align Qi “Super Vessels”

In addition to just listing those steps, I’ve also drawn them out in pyramid fashion.

This gives you a good visual representation of how each step is built on the previous step. I’ve done this to show you that these aren’t five



random steps you can do in any order. There is definitely a progression that needs to be followed, since each step builds the foundation for the steps that follow.

There is actually a lot involved in each of these steps, but let me give you an overview of each one.

After reading this overview, if you’d like to know more about these steps, I have an online video you’ll want to see. It’s of a webinar I gave a while back that explains each step in more detail, along with actual examples from Tai Chi and Qigong. If you’d like access to that online video,

just drop by my website at QiPyramid.co.uk. The video is free to anyone who reads this article.

STEP 1: OPEN THE QI MERIDIAN SYSTEM AND “TUNE” THE BODY

In order to get a complete experience of qi, our first step focuses on developing the qi meridians. These are the pathways in the body that circulate qi.

To that end, we focus on two important skills in this level: (1) learning to circulate qi in the most efficient way possible, with a special focus on compensating for any problems with qi dissipation, and (2) learning to regulate the body according to the practises of tiao shen or “body tuning.”

These two skills are intertwined. Good body tuning helps with qi circulation and prevents dissipating (wasting) qi that you generate during practise. So, to that end, we focus most of our time on tiao shen - a set of skills that teach you how to use the body in an “energy efficient” manner.

To help with these skills, we focus on Waidan Qigong styles. The term waidan (pronounced “why don”) means external elixir.

You can think of the word “elixir” as meaning qi. In this particular context, the word “external” means external to the torso - in other words, the arms and legs. Many important qi meridians are located in the limbs and have access points there. Waidan Qigong styles focus on these meridians, improving the flow of energy through them by focusing on moving the arms and legs.

One reason we chose Waidan Qigong styles for this level is that they are easier to learn. Waidan styles are more like Western-style exercise, as compared to Neidan (“internal elixir” – pronounced “nay don”) styles of Qigong.

In addition, when you combine Waidan styles with body tuning, you often see faster progress up front, especially if you have health problems, illnesses, or injuries.

Neidan styles, the other major division of Qigong alongside Waidan, are more of a “slow build” to health and qi. You’ll see relatively little progress at first, but they provide many long-term benefits. Waidan styles, on the other hand, are often more dramatic up front. While the Waidan benefits do tend to taper off after a time, a majority of students, including the sedentary and physically challenged, see short-term benefits more quickly this way.

STEP 2: INTEGRATE QI MERIDIANS WITH QI VESSELS

The second level focuses more on storing qi in the vessels. If you think of “vessels” like pots, urns, or vases, you get the idea of a container that holds something. That’s what qi vessels are like. You can think of them as “holding tanks” or “reservoirs” for qi. Vessels are pathways where qi is stored, while meridians are pathways where qi is circulated.

To focus more on qi vessels in this level, we use Neidan qigong styles. Neidan, as I mentioned above, means “internal elixir.” “Internal” in this context refers to “inside the torso.” Neidan Qigong styles focus on building up and storing energy in the torso, where most of the vessels are.

In addition to working on storage in this level, we also want to improve connections from the storage vessels to the qi-flow meridians. We do this by using Waidan/Neidan hybrid practises - that is, practises that combine elements from both styles.

By improving qi storage in your vessels, then improving how it is distributed to your meridians, you’ll often create greater internal health, and see long-term improvements and protection against chronic health problems.

The challenge here is that Neidan and Waidan/Neidan hybrid exercises are more complex to practise than Waidan exercises. Practise details become even more important at this stage.

STEP 3: CONNECT MANAGING QI WITH GUARDIAN QI

In the first two steps, we focused on working with qi inside the body. This type of qi is called ying qi in Chinese - which means “managing qi” - because it manages all the functions inside the body.

But we also have qi outside of our body. Specifically, we have a “qi field” that surrounds our body in all directions. This field is called Wei Qi (pronounced “way chee”) in Chinese. That translates to “guardian qi,” because it guards and protects us from pathogens and toxins in our environment. This includes not only physically harmful elements, but also mental and emotional “toxins” from stressful situations and people.

With our external guardian qi, we want to make sure that it can circulate freely and doesn’t stagnate, just like the qi inside our body. We want to prevent blockages and discontinuities,

so one of the main tasks in this step is to sense our external qi field and find ways to keep it circulating. To do that, we learn to extend our internal qi outside of our body and connect it to this external qi.

To that end, we focus in this level on three skills: (1) active rooting, (2) whole body energy threading, and (3) bolstering the guardian Qi field.

STEP 4: DIRECT QI THROUGH FOUR INTENTIONS

By the time you’ve reached step four, you’ve now taken both your internal and external qi to higher levels. Once you’ve done that, it’s time to learn to “do” something with the qi you’ve developed.

That’s what the final two levels are about. In the pyramid drawing, I’ve put steps four and five together, since they are related. But let’s discuss step four first.

If you have read books on Tai Chi, you sometimes come across a Chinese term, jin. It’s often translated as “energy”, but it means something a little different than the word “qi” which also means energy. “Jin” has connotations of “intention” or “focus,” or maybe “directed qi.” I like to use the word “intention,” but you might also call it “energy with a purpose.”

There are dozens of “intentions” in Tai Chi, but most Tai Chi masters agree that there are four primary intentions. These four intentions cover at least 90% and maybe more of what you need to handle any health, stress relief, or Qi Development situations you encounter. These four intentions are based upon the Chinese practise of yin and yang, and specifically of greater yin, lesser yin, lesser yang, and greater yang.

There are Chinese terms for these four intentions (peng, lu, ji, and an), but they don’t translate well into English. Instead we use the Four Elements of earth, water, fire, and air to help you understand the four primary intentions of “directed qi.”

STEP 5: HARMONIZE AND ALIGN QI “SUPER VESSELS”

Over the centuries, various disciplines from both East and West, have identified special energy centres in the body.

The number of these energy centres vary anywhere from three to twelve or more. For example, many Tai Chi and Qigong styles use three centres called dantien. The Hindu yoga

system identifies seven chakra (their name for these centres). Some Buddhist systems and Western systems identify five energy centres.

Keep in mind, there is no “correct” or “true” number of centres here. These are all just models, and you can use three, four, five, six, ten, twelve, or a hundred energy centres - whatever is most useful to what you are trying to accomplish.

For our work, we chose to focus on five energy centres. These five special qi centres are like super vessels as far as qi storage is concerned. But unlike the regular qi vessels that are just inside the body, these five centres include three inside the body and two outside the body.

Through movement, mental concentration, breathing, vocalization, and focus, you can charge, align, and connect these centres to unleash vast amounts of healing energy.



NOT MUCH QI FROM YOUR TAI CHI?

Now that you understand at least the basics of the Qi Development Pyramid, we can answer the question that started all of this off.

The question was: “I have practised traditional Chen style and Yang style Tai Chi over the years. But I’ve only irregularly felt qi flow. Why?”

And the answer?

Keep in mind that “qi flow” generally means

“qi flowing through the meridians.” But think about what this person has practised - Chen and Yang Tai Chi. Like many Tai Chi styles, those two primarily focus on Neidan work for qi storage. They also work on both improving guardian qi and on directing qi through jin.

This person’s styles fit into steps two, three, and four in the pyramid. But what’s missing? You’ve guessed it. Neither style spends much time on meridian work. They don’t work the meridians in step one, nor do they integrate them with the vessel work in step two. What’s missing is this foundational work.

Now, many Tai Chi styles hope that if you work on vessel storage alone, you’ll somehow store enough qi to “overflow” your vessels, and the resulting overflow will benefit your meridians. It’s like they trust meridian work to happen more as a by-product, rather than as a primary focus.

I would say that this “overflow” approach does work, but only for a small percentage of students, say 10% to 20%. For most of us, we can’t get enough storage to happen to make that “overflow” work, especially when we’re beginners.

Instead, if you work on meridian circulation first, even if your storage is low, you’ll see some dramatic improvements in qi flow right away. Later, as you improve your storage with more Neidan influenced practise, you’ll take that sense of qi flow even higher.

So if you find you aren’t getting much qi flow from your current styles and forms, that’s probably why. You haven’t done enough meridian work first.

But it’s never too late. No matter how many years of Tai Chi have gone by, you can always go back to the basics. I like to call this doing a “pyramid restart.” Take this qi pyramid, start at the bottom, and work your way up, step-by-step.

If you are willing to drop what’s NOT working, start over with a “beginner’s mind,” and use this pyramid to restart your practise, I’m certain you’ll be feeling more qi flow in no time.



Al Simon is a Tai Chi and Qigong master with 35+ years of experience, and a three-time inductee into the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame. You can get a free video on the “Qi Pyramid” – with demonstrations of this approach using Tai Chi and Qigong – on this website: QiPyramid.co.uk.