

Awareness of the Dan Tian

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Published in *Qi Journal* Winter 2012-2013

I had no business being at the top of Mt. Bachelor. Wind had whipped the snow into Dairy Queen swirls that—up there—looked sinister. The way down was shockingly steep; there were no trees to hang onto; and I was a mediocre skier. I had only one hope—plug into the dan tian and trust it to give me the wherewithal to make it to the bottom in one piece. Five years of T'ai Chi training had at least *begun* to teach me what the dan tian was capable of. So instead of giving my attention to the parts of me that appear to do the skiing—my arms and legs—I focused inward on the dan tian. Outside of practicing T'ai Chi or meditating, this was the first time I deliberately drew on that place in the center of my abdomen. I stayed in my dan tian the whole way down the mountain. My limbs performed with strength and coordination way beyond my normal skill. I made it without falling.

Twenty-eight more years of practicing T'ai Chi have steadily deepened and broadened my appreciation of the powers of the dan tian. But this area of my body was important to me long before I took my first T'ai Chi class. Ever since I was a child, it was clear that my impulses and reactions had their genesis in the middle of my abdomen. They rise up into my brain, which does its best to translate them into conscious thought and words. I have always regarded what I eventually came to know as the dan tian as the source of my intuition or “gut feelings,” the home of my subconscious, and the well from which my dreams spring. When I practice T'ai Chi in the mornings, my intensified connection with the dan tian brings back last night's dreams—dreams I wasn't able to recall earlier with conscious effort.

All the Dan Tians

My original T'ai Chi teacher, Sifu Kao Ching-hua, told me there are five dan tians (principle energy centers) in the body—the primary dan tian in the center of the abdomen, one in the heart, one at the third eye, and two in front of the armpits. All other sources I've encountered agree with the three on the body's centerline, but I've found no other source that mentions the two in front of the armpits. Because T'ai Chi teaching emphasizes keeping the armpits open (“oranges in the armpits”) so energy can flow freely into the upper limbs from the torso, it makes sense to me that there would be energy centers—dan tians—located there.

I have good reason to trust Sifu Kao's knowledge. She learned Wu style T'ai Chi as a girl in pre-Revolutionary China. While in college at National

Central University in Shanghai, she taught T'ai Chi to the women attending nearby St. John's University. In 1948, she was part of a group of athletes that came to the U.S. to get their master's degrees and learn Western sports. Just before she left China, she was made the only honorary female member of the all-male Tai Chi Ch'uan Association of Shanghai and was slated to head the women's physical department in a new college in Chungking when she returned. The Communist Revolution prevented her going back. It was my good luck to study with her for six years in Springfield, Illinois.

When we're nervous and excited, Sifu Kao said, our qi rises into the upper dan tians. When we're relaxed, it sinks into the abdominal dan tian. (This is the one I'm referring to when I talk about "the dan tian.") We can draw our energy downward, thus calming ourselves, simply by mentally "looking" at the dan tian—where our thoughts go, our energy goes.

Belly Breathing

We can heighten this effect, further steadying ourselves mentally and physically, by taking deep, slow breaths into the abdomen—expanding it like a balloon when we breathe in and contracting it when we breathe out. I watch my breath stream in through the nostrils, bypass the lungs, and fill up the abdomen first, then the lungs. To expel the air, I contract the abdomen, followed by the lungs. The expansion and contraction can be felt in the lower back too, where it enlivens an important energy center known as the *ming men* or "gate of life."

This method is known as belly breathing or natural breathing and is the way newborn babies, singers, athletes, and wind instrument musicians breathe. Expanding the abdomen increases our lung capacity by drawing the diaphragm downward, thus freeing up more space for the lungs. Belly breathing activates and strengthens the deep stabilizing muscles that support the lower back. Current thinking is that these muscles are key to preventing and managing lower back pain. Belly breathing also massages the internal organs and stimulates the kidneys. It's the way I breathe while doing T'ai Chi. By now it's the way I breathe when I encounter any challenging situation or simply want to be more tranquil. Clinical trials show that deep, slow breaths send an instant signal to the brain to relax. By forging a connection with my dan tian, abdominal breathing pulls me into a state of *jing* or "quiet mind."

Defining Dan Tian

Sifu Kao translated dan tian as "field of red" and explained it's called that because at any given time, twenty-five percent of the blood in the body is concentrated there as a result of the way the organs are arranged. She stressed the connection between blood and qi. The word qi, according to Sifu Kao, has three literal translations: internal energy, breath, and blood. Blood and qi travel together—where one goes, the other goes. Acupuncturists say "qi pulls blood, blood pushes qi." While practicing T'ai Chi, I can see the redness of my

hands and feel their warmth throbbing in time with my heartbeat. They're infused with both blood and qi.

More commonly, “dan” is translated as “elixir” and “tian” as “field,” the elixir being life- and youth-nourishing essence. Elixir is perhaps another way of saying breath, blood and qi, meaning visible/invisible, physical/metaphysical energy—all the resources that make us vital.

The dan tian is often described as our qi bank and qi pump, and my experience confirms this. Although there's qi moving throughout the body at all times, the dan tian is the main reservoir. The pulsing of the abdomen coupled with our conscious intention enhance the circulation of qi out to the far reaches of the body, even beyond the body, and back to the dan tian. The dan tian is the hub of the human wheel.

Finding the Dan Tian

Sifu Kao simply said the dan tian is located in the center of the abdomen. Some say it's two (or three) finger-breadths below the navel and two (or three) finger-breadths in. Kenneth Cohen, in *Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing*, says “the precise location can vary slightly from individual to individual,” and that it's “the point or region from which the expansion of the abdomen seems to originate.” This seems to me to be the best way to find the dan tian—with the intuition. My T'ai Chi experience is showing me that although there is a single point of origin, it is also a *region*. Dr. Paul Lam describes it as an “area.” All this corroborates the use of the word “field” in its translation. Certainly the entire abdomen, the waist, the hips, the ming men, the *hui yin* (at the perineum where the yin channels of qi converge), and our center of gravity are all included in its immediate and most powerful sphere of influence. They combine to help *make* it influential. While practicing T'ai Chi, the qi is especially tangible when a movement is a gathering gesture (coupled with inhalation) that brings my hands close into the dan tian. I'm adding qi to the storehouse and entering its force field.

The Microcosmic Orbit

There's a circular pathway of qi that takes in the entire torso and head. It's known as the “small heavenly circulation” or “microcosmic orbit.” It begins and ends in the dan tian. The direction of flow is generally thought to proceed from the dan tian to the genitals, to the perineum, to the spine (Governing Channel), over the top of the head, down the front (the Conception Channel), and back to the dan tian.

I can feel this current while meditating. But the direction in me is the opposite—down the back and up the front. I breathe in and energy travels from the crown, down my spine, around the perineum, and into the dan tian. I breathe out and energy flows from the dan tian up the center of my front and

out my nostrils. When I try to visualize it going the opposite way, I get a sloshing feeling of competing currents colliding with each other. One current is, for me, autonomic. The other is responding to my conscious intention. The direction evidently varies from person to person (from male to female?). Perhaps at some time in my life, the direction will reverse.

The Dan Tian in Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation and moving meditation complement and reinforce each other. Sometimes I'm ready to sink directly into the dan tian almost as soon as I sit down. Other times I use breathing patterns and imagery to usher myself into a state of quiet that finally allows me to settle into the dan tian. This is the deepest state, the ultimate goal of my sitting.

Interesting things happen when I occupy that place (whether I'm sitting or practicing T'ai Chi). Emotions that I've been holding in that area—sometimes consciously suppressing or unconsciously repressing, pushing them downward in order to avoid—have to leave. They're displaced. They rise upward, traveling through my heart (where I feel them) and through my brain (where I name them). Conscious and subconscious meet and are knitted together. I get to know myself. The process can bring tears or smiles. It's often an unpleasant stage, but it doesn't last. All that stuff keeps going—it evaporates through the crown of my head.

So residing in the dan tian triggers a clearing-out process. I become empty. What's left is my essential self united with my essential self. There's no room for the inessential. Yet the point that occupies no space is infinitely huge, encompassing the universe. If I sit in meditation or practice T'ai Chi while overlooking Crater Lake, I can contain all that water, all that blue, the rocks of the caldera and the trees clinging to its edges within my dan tian. Eventually what's in that place is a radiant clarity and a transcendent, muscular peace.

Using The Dan Tian in T'ai Chi

T'ai Chi trains me to move from the dan tian. Sifu Kao stressed that we rely on the five big joints—the shoulders, hips, and waist—to give our movements power and ease. Of these joints, the waist is the biggest and most powerful. The waist moves first, she said, and the source of that motion is the dan tian.

"It's as if the dan tian is out in front," she would say, even though you can see that an arm or leg is physically leading. I use the analogy of a rag doll to talk about this in my classes. If you grasp a rag doll at the waist with thumb and index finger and wave the doll's waist around in the air, the floppy arms and legs follow naturally, effortlessly.

In T'ai Chi, the waist is constantly rotating. The transfer of weight united with the turning of the waist put real force into a strike, block, or kick. But the

dan tian doesn't just turn from side to side, it also rotates in three-dimensional vertical and horizontal circles.

In the Wu style that Sifu Kao taught me, virtually everything is round—everything is a circle, half-circle, or S curve. Hands roll up over a sphere (a vertical circle with the impetus coming from the dan tian) or curve away from the body and back in while parallel to the ground (a horizontal circle or half-circle coming from the dan tian). The dan tian reels the limbs outward and then reels them back in. Sometimes I see the dan tian as a ball bearing that can turn in any direction—vertically, horizontally, and everything in between. And I visualize and feel glowing threads of elastic energy linking my torso and limbs to the dan tian, creating a tugging sensation there as I move.

The practice of traditional “silk reeling” exercises helps me locate, settle into, use, and strengthen the dan tian. These are outwardly simple but profound exercises that awaken me to the energy bubbling up through the soles of my feet, filling the dan tian, and streaming out from there to the waist, trunk, legs, and arms. These repetitive movements use and integrate the entire body, focus the mind, and are very calming. My qi sinks into the dan tian and I become accustomed to residing there. The Chinese word for this is “chen.” It's translated literally as “sinking” and refers to qi dropping into the dan tian. But in a practical sense, it means “awareness of the dan tian.” This awareness and the unified movement that it fosters (including breath and eyes) spills over naturally into my T'ai Chi form.

We practice several silk reeling exercises in my classes, including one in which the dan tian describes a modified figure 8 that is very useful in the movement usually known as Wave Hands in the Clouds—it adds stability, power, and dimension. Sifu Kao's Wu style incorporates silk reeling, and individual movements from the sequence— isolated and done repetitively— make excellent silk reeling exercises.

I savor the gathering, retreating, preparing, inhaling movements that pull my attention to the dan tian. There are three movements in Sifu Kao's Wu style that require me to actually touch my waist. These provide a welcome physical reminder of the dan tian and an intensified connection.

A constant awareness of the dan tian improves my balance. There are a number of leg lifts in Sifu Kao's Wu style. They're both slow and fast kicks that are sometimes circular, and sometimes require a continuous midair change of direction. They test my balance. When we practice these in my T'ai Chi classes, my first advice is to sit into the hip. There's a physical sinking that happens—the hip and center of gravity lower slightly as the socket settles securely over the ball or “head” of the femur. The center of gravity shifts so that the weight of the upper body is over the hip. Because the hip is part of the dan tian as an area, hip sitting is a way of maintaining that awareness of the dan tian that is so

useful on every level—physical, mental, and spiritual. I stress sitting into the hip with every transfer of weight.

My second piece of advice to students learning leg lifts is to breathe into and expand the dan tian as the leg is raised (preliminary to sweeping it outward). This brings in new energy and is another way of drawing attention to the dan tian. It gives me a distinct sense that my dan tian is filling up with ballast. It seems to become my foundation and my ground—even more than the earth itself. This stabilizes me so I can more effectively send qi outward. (Some Chen stylists use “reverse breathing,” meaning the abdomen contracts with inhalation and expands with exhalation. They believe this alternate pattern reinforces the intent of sinking qi into the abdomen when balance and stability are most needed—while actually delivering energy in martial moves. Another way to go about it.)

As the leg extends away from me, I breathe out, visualizing qi coursing into my leg to give it strength. Yet simultaneously qi within my body is sinking into the dan tian, rooting me when I most need to be rooted.

This paradox fascinates me. At the same time that I’m delivering energy outward through an arm or leg, qi is accumulating inward—sinking into the dan tian.

Intellectually and experientially it seems obvious that when I inhale and expand the abdomen, I’m pulling in energy from the ocean of qi that surrounds me—from the sky, earth, sun, moon, stars, clouds, birds, trees, plants, grass, air—all of it. When I exhale and contract the abdomen, I’m pushing qi outward. The two components of breathing ensure a continuous cycle of cleansing and renewing. Humans nourish themselves this way. Using our minds (conscious intention) and movement (the T’ai Chi sequence and belly breathing) we magnify the effect.

But there’s more. I can also feel qi sinking into my dan tian when I exhale. That well of qi provides the strength and stability needed to throw qi outward. The more qi I deliver away from my dan tian, the more I need *in* the dan tian. Having noticed this while practicing, I added intention to augment it. This is an excellent example of how broad the awareness is during T’ai Chi. It incorporates so much—including consciously sinking qi into the dan tian while sending it out through a limb. As I get better at enhancing the natural dropping of qi into the dan tian during an exhalation, my outward movements gain power. This is most obvious in the leg lifts, but it’s operating with every breath and every transfer of weight from one leg to another.

Most of us—whether we practice T’ai Chi or not—have noticed that we’re stronger and more capable in every way when we’re relaxed. Tension inhibits the flow of energy and shuts down our senses. Naturally the exhalation (“the sigh of relief”), the sinking of qi into the dan tian, and the relaxed state that

comes with it would allow us to be more astute, more coordinated, and more powerful.

Like blood, qi is everywhere in the body at all times. A kick, strike, or block accompanied by an exhalation sends a river of qi to a particular part of the body—or beyond it. But this doesn't mean the rest of the body is drained or depleted. One possible way to look at it is that exhaling releases pressure in the abdomen and this more relaxed state allows the body's qi to flow into it, providing the necessary, fortified base for launching energy outward.

And here another fundamental T'ai Chi concept comes in—*song*. Song refers to the joints and is often translated as “loosening” or “relaxing.” But I think the words “expanding from within” best express this idea. When we're relaxed, we're naturally in a state of song—unconstricted and spacious. We can enhance this by deliberately looking at joints and seeing the bones, muscles, ligaments, tendons, nerves, and skin softening, opening up, and spreading outward particle by particle—releasing, relaxing, and letting go. I'm convinced I can do this to any *one* joint in my body and every joint follows suit. Opening up all this space creates a vacuum. Nature abhors a vacuum; qi flows in to fill it. So if we're in a state of song while practicing T'ai Chi, we're open to the influx of qi—through all our joints and energy centers—at the same time that we're sending it outward. I become very porous and absorbent when I practice T'ai Chi. My normal boundaries dissolve and the more qi that goes out, the more comes in.

I'm reminded of the law of physics—every action has an equal and opposite reaction. I've experienced another example of this. Sometimes I stand outside and breathe in as I raise my wide-open palms to the sky, gathering qi; then I lower my palms and let it pour downward from the crown of my head, through my body, and into the ground through the soles of my feet. It surprised me when I felt the downward current matched by an upward current springing from the earth. The two currents don't collide. They travel as if sharing a two-lane highway. Energy down = energy up; energy in = energy out.

Trunk

I live among big trees. Often, before practicing T'ai Chi in the morning, I stand at the base of a massive redwood and place my palms on its trunk. I feel the hum and buzz of its rising energy. I look down at the roots coiling out of the ground and diving back in, spreading wide and clutching the dirt. I look up at the branches spraying, spiraling outward and curving downward to embrace me. The earth's vitality bubbles up through the centers of my feet, flows through my body, and enters the tree through the centers of my palms. I am a tributary of the tree. We contribute to each other and it has let me know that it's glad I'm there. Hands on trunk, feet on ground, I'm another root for the tree and I merge with its river. The first time I felt the movement of qi in my palms, I jerked my

hands away, thinking there were wriggling caterpillars underneath. Hands, feet, and body feel the vibration of the shared current.

I've embodied the tree. I see myself as the tree while doing T'ai Chi. My moving leg and arms are branches; the supporting leg and torso are the trunk. And the core of my trunk is the dan tian. Power resides there, sinking and growing even as energy is projected outward via the leg, arms, eyes, and breath. The source of the power and stability in a kick, strike, or block is a strong dan tian, a strong trunk. The tree image works for me.

Although most of my classes are held inside, I only practice outside. My affinity for T'ai Chi partly comes from the fact that it gives me an excuse to be outside every morning, essentially staying in one lovely place, and just absorbing everything around me. My "tree hugging" fits in with the Daoist origins of T'ai Chi and their emphasis on harmonizing with nature. The outer natural world and my inner nature mirror each other. I learn about one by looking at the other.

Closing

When we learn T'ai Chi, we begin by focusing on the outside—with the mechanics of the arms and legs. Once we're familiar with the general outlines of movements, we can go inward to concentrate on the five big joints—the shoulders, hips, and waist. Our movements are both stronger and easier coming from there. Next we incorporate eyes and breath. Eyes move energy the same as arms and legs do; moving breath is moving qi (I equate the two). And mentally tracking the breath as it comes and goes from the abdomen pulls our attention all the way into the dan tian. Finally the dan tian becomes the source of all movement and awareness. That's T'ai Chi at its deepest.

During T'ai Chi, my awareness is very broad and inclusive. While tending minutely to all the disparately moving parts of the body, I'm maintaining a continuous connection with the dan tian and the energy it's circulating. (One of my students calls this "metatasking.") It's the dan tian that conducts the orchestra. It gathers and magnifies all my resources and smoothly integrates them. It clears my mind, steadies me, increases my coordination and strength, and heightens my senses (I become infatuated with colors I didn't even notice before starting the sequence). When I'm in touch with my dan tian, I'm in touch with my entire self—on every level. Everything is pulled in, nothing is left out, and all is exquisitely *balanced*.

One of my students who plays first flute in an orchestra is "jazzed" by the effect of maintaining an awareness of the dan tian during performances. It soothes jitteriness and loosens her arthritic shoulders and fingers. She plays better when she's in her dan tian. "After all," she told me, "that's where the music comes from."

Getting quiet and focusing on the dan tian—over years—encourages it to strengthen and grow. Or maybe I'm just gradually peeling the lid off, releasing it, and allowing it to merge with my mind and body—my upper levels of consciousness. From a point of origin it spreads out to the body's core and gradually the entire body. I have the sense of moving inside a very elastic bubble that responds to every movement and intention. I was interested to see a similar observation in Jou Tsung Hwa's book *The Tao of Tai-Chi Chuan*: "...one learns to think of oneself as a sphere with the Tan-Tien as the center."

Each of us will have our own way of visualizing the dan tian. I believe it's simultaneously a point and an area, so my perception of it varies according to which of these two ways I'm using it. And the images metamorphose over the months and years.

I sometimes see it as a radiant, revolving sphere that lives inside the larger sphere of my abdomen, and it spins out glowing threads to move all the parts of my body, starting with my waist. Sometimes it's a luminous, champagne-colored comet with a tail that traces its movement (the movement of my center) through space. Sometimes the waist, hips, abdomen, ming men, and hui yin are all one incandescent ball. And sometimes it grows large enough to include my whole body. During different parts of the sequence I'll see it in different ways.

My most profound T'ai Chi experience comes when I think about nothing, focus on nothing, other than the dan tian. It's a leap of faith (like my plunge down Mt. Bachelor). Everything else will do what it needs to do to take me through the sequence. It's so simple. I just sink into that central place, guided by instinct. It takes up no space, and it doesn't look like anything. It's a wordless, thoughtless place. I coalesce into a holistic balance that makes me all one thing. A sensation that often accompanies this melding with the dan tian is hard to find words for—the closest I can get is "thrilling." At the same time, I dip into a state of utter peace, and for that I am exceedingly grateful.

Just as the dan tian is both point and area, I am simultaneously an individual and the universe. I see the dan tian as my umbilical cord to the universe. Through it I gain access to all life force, awareness, knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration. I take in what I can. A student just asked me if, after thirty-three years of practice, I'm constantly "in" my dan tian. That would be nice, wouldn't it? Maybe some have achieved that; I haven't. (Although when I'm in majestic natural settings like my sacred place—Crater Lake—it seems I *am* my dan tian.) Deliberately tapping into my dan tian is second nature to me now. I draw on it while doing T'ai Chi and meditating and in any challenging circumstances—physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. It responds eagerly. I can tell that it's always ready, waiting to be acknowledged and used. It is the dao within me.