

HACHI DANKEN

Qigong (pronounced Chi Kung) is an ancient system of mind/body energy exercises developed in China over millennia. It is the art and science of using breathing techniques, gentle movement, and meditation to cleanse, strengthen, and circulate the life force energy (Ki). We live in a field of Ki, "vital breath" or "intrinsic life energy." Yet, like a fish in water or a bird in flight, we are unaware of the medium that supports us. Ki can mean air, steam/vapour, or energy. In this context energy refers to life force, if referring to a person. The Chinese character "Gong" represents the effort placed into Ki practice as well as the power gained through such practice.

Hachi Danken is a series of Qigong exercises which help promote and maintain the sensation of Ki in the body. Originating in 12th century China, the exercises are called Ba Duan Jin in Chinese, which means Eight Pieces of Brocade and indicates that it is a system worth promoting and preserving.

The practice of Hachi Danken explores the link between physical body, energetic body and the surrounding environment. It is a system of eight exercises which works on the meridians and the associated muscle and tendon groups using postures and visualisations. It takes time to fully appreciate the intricate subtleties of these exercises. Give it time - every day is best.

Oriental philosophy states that Ki flows in the body through channels or meridians named after the organ they flow through. Channels either start or end at the extremities of the body. When the flow of Ki in one channel reaches its maximum potential it changes and becomes another channel of opposite potential. The meridians flow from one to another in a continuous loop like an energy grid. All meridians are connected to the Tanden/Centre either by their primary channels or by their secondary channels. The Centre is situated in the lower abdomen in an area surrounded by nerves from the autonomic nervous system from where it connects to the central nervous system and the brain. There is no part of the body that Ki does not flow to; it is just stronger in the channels. Usually we focus on points at or near the extremities, because they are stronger and will have more effect, and see how they are connected to the Tanden/Centre.

When we practice we only consider three things – Posture, Breathing (Body), and Focus of Consciousness (Mind). Anything else is extra, we don't need anything extra. Ki has its own intelligence – always maintaining a state of dynamic balance, transforming Yin to Yang and vice versa. It is the natural tendency of Ki to evolve continuously toward higher rates of energy flow and harmony. Matter progresses to energy and energy to spirit.

PREPARATION:

Posture: Place your feet with the insides at hip width. The feet are parallel to each other. This is based on the proportions of your own body and is unique to the individual. Bend your knees and relax, the knees pointing in the direction of the toes. Straighten and relax your spine making it as vertical as possible. Relax your head and neck. The head rests like an upturned bell resting on a wooden sword, which represents the central axis. Raise your consciousness through your spine. Align the highest point on your head (meeting of 100 points/Du20) with the lowest point on your trunk (perineum/Ren1). This should pass through the Tanden /Centre (2-4 finger widths below the navel), so all three points are aligned. Don't rotate the spine; ears and hips should be in line, as are the nose and navel. Relax and open the joints – take time and bring your attention to your shoulders, elbows, wrists, fingers, hips, knees, ankles and toes, relaxing and opening each in turn. Relax your chest and let your centre of gravity sink. Put your tongue to the roof of your mouth. This bridges two energy channels. Gently raise the perineum, this connects these two channels from below. Eyes look straight ahead. Using peripheral vision unfocus your eyes, you should see everything in general and nothing in particular. This is the basic position and can change on instruction. This posture can be seen as the basis for the following exercises, returning to it between exercises. By linking between the exercises the whole can be seen as one meditative stream.

Breathing: The breath is the link between Mind and Body. Focusing on breathing forges a link between Mind and Body, rooting the person in the present. As you breathe in let your abdomen inflate. Don't force anything. Letting your abdomen inflate as you inhale relaxes the diaphragm so the lungs fill with air from the bottom up. This gets more air into the lungs and therefore more oxygen. It also helps massage the internal organs. As you exhale, let your abdomen relax and deflate raising up the diaphragm.

Focus of Consciousness: Just focus on focusing, or maybe visualise yourself doing the movements while you are actually doing them. Let your mind follow what you are doing. Don't rush mentally ahead or drift off in any way. When breathing let your mind follow the breathing. Any movement or postures follow the breathing, not the other way around.



1: Pressing the Heavens with Two Hands

The basic posture (above) provides the basis for all the exercises; all the exercises are built on this foundation. Energetically, the body can be divided into three regions or cavities – the abdominal cavity below the diaphragm, the chest, and the head/throat. Each cavity is regarded as having an energy centre or chakra. The abdomen has Ren 4 (2-4 fingerwidths below navel), the centre for pre-heaven energy or constitutional strength. The chest has Ren 17 (middle of sternum), the centre for post-heaven energy or the energy acquired from the air we breathe and the food we eat. The head has the Yin Tang point or Third Eye/Glabella at a level between the eyebrows, the centre for Shen or Mind. These are not three different types of energy, but one energy in three forms or levels of aggregation. This exercise stimulates the flow of energy between these three energy centres.

Posture as above. Relax. To begin, as you inhale bring the interlocked hands, with the palms facing up, from the lower level at the navel to the middle level at the sternum. As you exhale the palms rotate, and face downwards, and move from the middle level to the lower one. Next inhalation bring the interlocked hands with the palms up from the lower level at the navel to the middle level at the sternum, rotate the hands as you continue inhaling and bring your hands upwards with palms facing up as high as you can go without straining. As you exhale unlock your hands and bring them down the sides of your body as if describing a circle in the air. When raising up with the hands the feeling in the body raises up, when the hands are going down the feeling goes down. Breathing is done through the nose. Breath is as long, slow and continuous as possible, without straining. This exercise may be done using reverse breathing, where you contract your abdomen on inhalation and expand on exhalation. Become familiar with abdominal breathing before going on to reverse breathing, as we don't want to force anything. Remember, movement follows breathing, don't force or rush, and move physically and energetically from the centre to the extremities.



2: Drawing the Bow and Letting the Arrow Fly

This exercise is done in a deeper posture. A deeper posture ensures a better connection of your Ki with the Ki of the earth, provided the joints are open and relaxed. Move the legs about a half step further apart and splay the feet about 45 degrees from front position. As you bend your legs the knees should move in the direction of the toes. This is important to keep the mechanical alignment as well as to avoid injuries. Tilt the pelvis bringing the coccyx forward while opening the knees. (Don't bring the knees past the vertical position; if you want a deeper posture, move the feet further apart). Doing this stretches and emphasises the psoas muscle, which runs from the inside of the thigh, through the pelvic cavity to attach on to the lumbar spine between L2 and L4. There is a major energy point below the second lumbar vertebra called Ming Men (Gate of Life), which connects directly forward to the Tanden/Centre. Physically, this exercise emulates the drawing of a bow and stimulates spiritual energy. A slight variation of this hand mudra is used in the transmission of healing energy. While inhaling, slightly clench or contract the feeling in the hands while raising them together to the chest. Clench the right hand as you move it further to the right as if drawing a bow. At the same time relax and extend the left hand to the left while separating and further extending the index and middle fingers while holding the bent ring and little fingers in place with the thumb. Open and stretch from the Laogong point at the root of the two fingers, near the crease on the palm. The focus is on the extended hand and simultaneously to infinity. Follow the movement of the left hand with the eyes as you bring both hands together to the front and then back down to the starting point. Breathing can be done in one or two cycles. For one cycle, inhale to the mid-point and exhale as you return to the starting position. For two, inhale up to the chest, exhale as you extend and focus, inhale as the hands come back to the mid-line, and exhale as the hands go down. Repeat the exercise on the right side with the right hand extended as the left draws the bow. When finished the exercise, bring your feet back to hip width and parallel.



3: Separating Heaven and Earth

This exercise stimulates Ki by separating left from right, and upper from lower. The left side of the body is controlled by the right brain, and vice versa. By alternating left and right, the flow of information between the two hemispheres is stimulated. In particular, this exercise works on the Stomach and Spleen meridians. These paired organs are responsible for producing usable energy from the food digested. The Spleen is also responsible for raising clear energy to the head. So, this exercise would be good for raising energy if feeling tired, and for lifting the mood. As it improves the energetic function of the Stomach and Spleen meridians, it would improve digestive function with time. The Stomach meridian goes along the outside of the leg, and the Spleen meridian goes along the inside of the leg.

Stand in basic posture. As you inhale, raise up both arms with palms up to chest height. Rotate arms with palms facing downwards. As you exhale lower the arms as you gently compress the air under your hands. When you get to the level of the stomach, inhale as you separate the hands; right hand continues downward while the left hand raises up to go above the head directly above the vertex. As you exhale, the left hand comes down, from above the vertex, down the side of the body. Repeat on other side.



4: Wise Owl Gazes Side to Side

This exercise is for strengthening the internal organs and curing chronic ailments, especially those caused by declining energy or vitality. This exercise moves Ki to move blood in the veins and collaterals. This exercise works on the Kidney meridian, which flows around the heels. The kidneys are the first organ to grow in an embryo and are considered the storehouse of constitutional strength. Begin by inhaling while raising the arms to chest height with palms facing upwards. Rotate your arms as you turn your head slowly to the left and focus the Yi (thought, will, purpose, attention) on the heel of the right foot. Exhale, as you bring your arms down the front line to the starting position. Since your head is turned to the left and you can't see your foot the focus of intention must guide the Ki from the abdomen to the heel (and heel to abdomen as a feedback loop). Inhale as you rotate the hands and raise them up to chest height while turning the head to the right side. Bring the focus from the right heel back to the Tanden and then to the left heel. Exhale as you guide the Ki from centre to the heel. Continue for as many repetitions as desired. To finish, bring the energy back to the centre as the head goes back to the mid-line, exhaling as the hands are lowered to the starting position.



5: Open the Gates

This exercise works to remove stress from the body and mind. Part of its name means to drive fire from the mind, so this exercise is intended to remove frustration smouldering in the mind. If irritation and anger are allowed to continue for a long time they disturb the working of the nervous system and ill health will ensue. This exercise works the Liver meridian, which is the organ that filters the blood as well as the emotions. This channel comes up the inside of the leg, just behind the shin bone, goes through the groin, along the flanks of the body to its home organ.

Take a deep posture. As you inhale, keeping the back and head straight, turn the body to the left and move in a circular motion clockwise using the waist as an axis. Bring the weight on to the left leg, bringing the head in line with the knee. Bend the left arm slightly as you stretch the right arm. Focus on the inside tip of the right big toe. Pause a moment. Exhale as you reverse the movement, going anti-clockwise. Bring the weight on to the right leg, bringing the head in line with the knee. Bend the left arm slightly as you stretch the left arm. Focus on the inside tip of the left big toe. Continue for as many repetitions as desired. This exercise can be done using reverse breathing.



6: Press the Earth, Three Turns and Bow

This exercise massages the internal organs, especially the kidneys, and helps prevent constipation. As it involves lots of stretching it improves the function of the stomach and intestines. This exercise helps the kidney function of keeping out cold and improving low blood pressure. As it works on the legs and kidney energy it will help prevent aging if done over a long period. When performing this exercise care must be taken not to strain, for example, trying to catch the ankles. Flexibility will come with time. Inhale as you raise both arms to shoulder height, with palms down. As you exhale sharply through the mouth relax the arms and let them fall. Repeat four times. Inhale, and with palms up raise both arms up over the head. Using the waist as an axis, move the upper body in a circular motion clockwise keeping the arms in front of the body with a feeling of extension from the Tanden to the fingertips. Take three revolutions, one at upper level, one at middle level and one at a lower level. Exhale as you stretch up and out, back straight and legs straight, moving from the centre bend forward until you grasp the ankles. Remain in this posture for a few moments. Inhale as you come up to begin on the opposite side turning counter-clockwise.



7: Soft Punch with Focused Gaze

This exercise, which is derived from martial arts, is good for increasing vitality and vigour. Its main focus though is to cultivate the spirit (spirit in oriental philosophy indicates vitality, as well as mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing), as well as improve the circulation. If done regularly, and with concentration, this exercise can help to bring down high blood pressure and help prevent hardening of the arteries.

Take a deep posture focusing the attention on the centre. Clench the hands to form loose fists. Inhale as you raise both hands to chest height. The eyes look straight ahead. As you exhale, the left fist moves to the left and slightly forward as the right fist is pulled slightly back. The eyes follow the movement of the left fist. As you inhale, bring both fists to the front. Continue inhaling as you bring both fists over the head. As you exhale bring both arms down the sides of the body as if describing a large circle in the air. Repeat on opposite side. The important thing about this exercise is to keep the upper body as stable and relaxed as possible while stabilising the legs and hips. Keep the eyes wide open in this one, focusing your Ki in the eyes helps to cultivate the spirit.

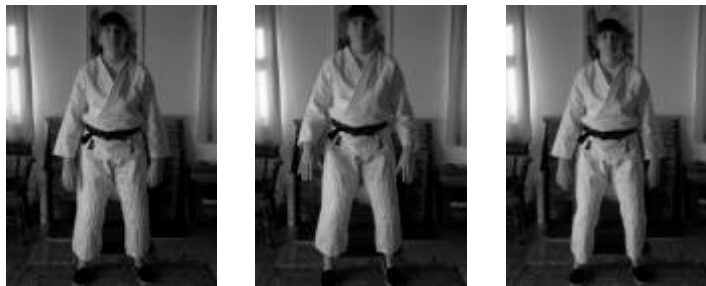


8: Lift Up and Drop Heels

This exercise works on the Kidney/Water element. The kidney element is closely associated with Ki/Vital Energy. Ki is energy, a manifestation of which is vibration. The Water element stores the constitutional strength, which can be increased by cultivating the energy. This exercise may look simpler than the others but is quite far reaching in its aspirations. It can be seen as forming the root of the other exercises as well as keeping them together. As well as governing our development through life, the water element houses the Will Power. If the kidneys are strong, the Will Power will be strong, and the Mind will be focused on goals that it sets itself and will pursue them in a single-minded way. Conversely if the kidneys are weak, the Will Power will be lacking and the Mind will be easily discouraged and swayed from its aims.

This is an exercise of shifting the weight on to the toes on inhaling and relaxing the weight back on to the heels on exhaling. The gentle vibrations, which spread throughout the body, stimulate mind and body (as in Furitama). Don't drop down too hard, as it would be detrimental and have a negative effect.

Stand in the basic posture. As you inhale raise up onto the toes while contracting the anus slightly (if it is possible to express this in a linear scale: <1 out of 10). At the same time send your focus into the palms of the hands, slightly extending them. Hold this posture for a few moments. As you release your posture, gently drop the heels on to the floor as you exhale, also relaxing the hands.



The above exercises contain many variations. It doesn't necessarily follow that more advanced forms lead to more results, hence the saying "it is better to perform a basic form well than an advanced form badly". Practice slowly, gently and regularly, especially when learning or coming back to them after a period of absence. Traditionally it is recommended to practice each day for a hundred days.

Be soft in your practice. Think of the method as a fine silvery stream, not a raging waterfall. Follow the stream, have faith in its course. It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there. It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices. Just follow it. A Zen saying.