

Questions and Answers

A selection of questions and answers over the years from John's classes, workshops, and e-mails. These may be informative regardless of training with John or his Teachers. Please see available books and other web sites for greater depth and more information.

Chi Kung

1. *What is Chi Kung?*

Chi Kung literally means Chi- vitality/energy Kung -work/effort/skill. It describes methods to work with the bodies vitality.

2. *Do you have to be fit to learn it, or is that unnecessary?*

No you don't, nor young. Please see a similar question in the tai chi questions section for more detail.

3. *Some Chi Kung Masters seem to be into lengthening there lives and trying to stay young, others not. They seem to be indifferent to it even anti life in some case. I don't understand isn't all chi kung the same kind?.*

No unfortunately or fortunately, its not.

For instance, think of it this way, there are many kinds of bread, but its just water, yeast and flour- isn't it? Different countries create different flavours and styles from very much the same ingredients. Its the same with us. We all have a body -how come so much can be created from it and done with it? Chi Kung is an particular out pouring of human development, begun thousands of years ago. These geniuses down the ages and those still here, had and have insights and abilities most can't even imagine. We can though learn some or it.

In Chi Kung different methods, objectives, religions, philosophies, and personality types created methods originally. As such people can be drawn then to different methods which suit their personalities and intent. Various schools have and had different approaches, and seems to be the same situation now as hundreds if not thousands of years ago. Foolish to say is 'one size fits all' in Chi Kung, as some profess. Basically there are five kinds of Chi Kung as I understand it. A relevant sub section to all

these styles is 'Quiescent and 'Dynamic' approaches, that is Yin or Yang methods, moving or still postures. One posture for example can be done in two or more different ways creating entirely different effects. Also Chi Kung can be performed standing, sitting, lying down, and during deep experiences for instance such as sexual activity.

Spiritual/Religious -training factors that lead to varying degrees of 'enlightenment'. That is a profound insight into the nature of reality, being human, the cosmos and interstellar bodies, and even a possible relationship with a Divine aspect. This could be with Buddhist, Confucian, or Taoist influences, in part or total. These types of Chi Kung can be quite a pure strain, or a right old hodge podge of beliefs and approaches. The new age of mixing things up willy nilly from all over the place is nothing new. Big boom in this kind smorgasbord of chi kung in recent years.

Scholarly/Academic -training factors that enable great literary and/or artistic achievements. What one needs to deal with the stresses of an over used brain and central nervous system. Scribes, Librarians, Artists etc . Today's computer users really need this kind of thing. Most Chi Kung systems it seems though can help or be modified for this particular type of individual need.

Martial- training factors that lead to Martial ability with or without health benefits. Mostly originally not, especially with Shaolin practices which often destroyed the mind and body, and didn't provide long life or a very good old age. Not dissimilar to the way western sports people especially boxers often have awful old ages.

Achievement over longevity is a part of many Buddhist approaches even in just meditation systems. Systems can have Buddhist and/or Taoist influence in part or total. It should be noted although Taoism preaches not to destroy the body in pursuit of martial or spiritual gain, it doesn't always achieve this lofty ideal, or it has to be said anything much at all. Buddhist systems are often critical of them and vice versa. 'Taoist' or 'Buddhist', like anything than contains an element of marketing, didn't and doesn't always mean high quality content. Systems degenerated like much many things good do, and became a marketing ploy even in the imperial palace. All kinds of rubbish was attempted and practiced in the name of both Buddhism and Taoism unfortunately. This is happening sadly again in China today, as it makes money.

Buddhist based Systems e.g. Iron Shirt, Golden Bell etc. are well known.

Health training factors that lead to general good health with little or no real medical, martial or spiritual content. Even the most low quality Chi Kung old or modern will achieve some improvement in health and well being. This is one good reason for practicing Chi Kung what ever type you can find.

Most of the Chi kung available nowadays is under this category .e.g. Eight Pieces of Brocade, in a myriad of styles

Medical training factors that heal particular health problems. Successful Cancer therapy has been a big part of the genre since the 1960's at least. Chi Kung for sports injuries rehab and a lot more. Big boom in this in the 80's. Modern and ancient approaches e.g. Dragon and Tiger Chi kung.

So you can see then the Chi Kung field is wide as is it is varied. Personally my teachers have ranged from the mystics, 'the body is dust' types {impermanence of physical life}, to achieving 'ever lasting spring' types {abundant youth like health and/or physical or spiritual immortality}, to the very down to earth 'have a beer in the pub afterwards' types. Martially the others I've known, from virtual psychopaths to nice guys with warrior attributes. Two extremes on the same scales, much as different political parties exist within a framework of a single culture.

As in even within Taoism and Buddhism different approaches exist, and as with politics, often heated disagreement on methodology and approach prevails.

Its a bit of a supermarket out there now with so much available, hard to choose wisely with all the marketing and packaging going on. As BKF says 'Cola' is cola, its the bottle, the image you often buy. Choose the drink not the label. Have to agree.

4. I don't understand why there is all this hitting with wire and sticks in Iron Shirt? Sounds a bit masochistic to me! Are there are other ways of doing it?

Yeah, does seem daft . As the saying goes ' more than one way to skin a cat' Seriously though yes there are other methods. Traditional Taoist practices mainly use the mind and chi flow and in fact don't call it traditionally 'Iron Shirt' or 'Golden Bell Cover'.{ Please see Mantak Chia's book for more details on his methods of Iron Shirt.} That's a purely Buddhist term. Buddhist practitioners use the hitting methods and other external methods {massage herbs etc} as they see it brings faster results, and easier to understand and practice. Ones mind can convince us of anything if you are trying to guide chi purely with the mind. The internal methods are very hard and require great sensitivity, the external do not. Both though have two basic outcomes-success or failure. Its no coincidence that 'formulas' like recipe's are talked of in esoteric practice. Its just the 'ingredients' are mostly ourselves and our Jing, Chi and Shen, or simply put our vitality, health, and minds. Some people have high quality ingredients to start with, some not. Its the skill of combining that either produces a great or mediocre result. However some people are definitely poisoned by their practices, and Id venture to say some practice's are poisonous to start with. It takes great skill to turn those into something positive.

As for other methods. Well all seem to agree that 'Abide by the Tan Tien' is a must. That is send and store your Chi/Vitality within the lower Tai Tien. Then when Chi is in surplus send it back out and bathe the body {'marrow washing' terminology} returning at the end of the practice session. Its always been tempting for the Chi Kung practitioner just to enjoy the heightened power and expend in a variety of healthy or 'unhealthy' pastimes. Storing can safe guard against this as long as there is moral training too.

Imagining it though at any of the three Tan Tiens, or moving anywhere, is pretty futile, even problematic. We can all imagine anything we like- for instance thinking you have won the lottery doesn't make it necessarily so. Just check your bank account after you have imagined it. One ideally needs to REALLY feel chi/sensation first. You'll know its working if you feel it and look healthier, feel calmer, more stamina, and develop some insight. Some do get it and very powerful, they can end up though just exaggerated versions of their untrained selves previous to the training-warts and all very much magnified. This usually when they don't access the middle tan tien or heart centre and correct all their failings there. Many masters have gone a stray at this junction in their training. Some pretend to be there but are just cloaking their true positions, trapped powerfully by their egos in their vastly expanded lower natures.

Feeling oneself 'expand' in size is another simple method{the expansiveness is chi not physical tissue}, as too withdrawing Chi from the extremities{muscles sense organs and brain}to the interior{spine, internal organs lower or middle tan tien {partly referred to as the 'yellow yard' in some works please see Yang Jwing Ming's translations}. Again you know its working if you feel it, look healthier, feel calmer and have increasing insight. Same precautions.

As with all this kind of training learn from a teacher not a book etc, use that for research only. Cant stress that enough, really. And of course get away from the teachers exhibiting very erratic behaviour regardless of their professed skills. These people are toxic, a phrase used a lot now in describing any unhealthy relationship.

As i get older I prefer the more internal mind lead procedures, but I couldn't have got that without the other more external. That's not unusual, but not always necessary. I was just pretty dead inside and had a lot of physical strength and energy so it suited me at that time.

Mind training and feeling your own chi all sounds great, but i didn't get it for years and only discuss those parts i did. Many never feel a thing regarding there or anyone else's chi, but still have a great and fruitful practice. So for those the more external methods can often be a better option.

5. The beating methods in the marrow washing exercises make me feel very relaxed and often sleepy? Is that ok, shouldn't i feel powerful and strong?

It all depends {please see the similar question in the Tai Chi Questions section.} Feelings of power and strength are not always good, even though that's what most are after. Can cause real problems both physically and mentally if the sense of power becomes intoxicating and an 'always must have' feeling. That's addiction. Hence 'mad with power' is an euphemism in many fields of expertise, including chi kung and martial arts.

For instance In some circles the demise of Bruce Lee was down to his constant want/need/search to feel powerful and strong. Its very one sided unrealistic training, depleting the yang reserves of the body body. In other words he destroyed his own health. There's no clear indication that he did aspects of Marrow Washing or Tendon Changing exercises but there is rumour and speculation about so much of his life. He knew a lot he didn't share and as as been pointed out while he went in one direction he pointed others in another, as with his students. That he knew parts from various sources, but incompletely is a possibility as he exhibited some of the plus and negative aspects of such training, hence why I mention him in this question. He was one of my first heroes, so I say this with all due respect but not some misguided reverence. He tried to fit so much in one body and one life experience. That did inspire me.

These methods{whether external or internal} drive/lead chi into the organs and bones, 'washing' the blood and fluids, also make the chi travel deep into the organs away from the senses, including particular brain functions we use to interact outwardly with the world. We then use these resources to dive inwardly to unify all we find, clearing up our own internal demons, and upgrade our how systems operate. Im purely a student at this juncture so I wont say more in fear of sounding like I know everything about the subject

Its quite usual to feel tired, especially at the beginning, and if middle aged and older. Mind you few start before 30 or 40. Not usually necessary. I started in my twenties, but it was just my interest and part of my study. Just go with the bodies needs. And don't over do it or train without regular personal supervision. Learning from books also is rife with problems so get it from an instructor. Please follow that tip at least. Many don't and they can get really mucked up.

6. You talked about feeling 'Fat' as a good sign in Chi Kung {as well as Tai Chi and Yoga} practice. Can you explain more about what you mean?

This question has been asked elsewhere so i'll just cut and paste the reply.

'Fat' the word as i use it, describes an expansive healthy energetic state, abundant chi - also a sense of emotionally unbound boundaries, and an open expanded awareness, not any of this feeling fixed, bound, small, limited, or contracted, . That is a state of 'thinness'.

'Big' personalities aren't always in big bodies, nor 'presence' isn't determined by body size. It is determined by vitality and the degree the person is alive in themselves and their body. The majority of adults are very locked down, or really don't know what to do with their vitality, if and here's the biggy, if they have any left. Many sadly are really quite feeble after the age of 40. For others its a huge prob where there is no healthy release, especially sexual. Religious types try temperance or even chastity, but you can see that's had a really 'bad rap', and few can do either really well. We need to 'transform' our vitality {once we have it or haven't lost it} in to something useable. That's what religions started off as, ways to cultivate the spirit and the energy of the person to a positive end. Not empty complex alienating ritual that now prevails {of course not everywhere or with every follower} doing nothing but causing division and misunderstanding. Secular Society on the other hand though provides few really healthy outlets, not that im saying there aren't people who are balanced and getting a lot from their way of life. Often though they don't the science of why they do what they do, and how it works. Good practices teach 'why' 'how' and 'when' to the practitioner.

This feeling of abundance is necessary as much in Yoga, and Tai Chi. Typically as in Tai Chi, physical shape in Yoga usually falls in too very skinny or very big, but always with lots of vitality if the person is well developed in their art. Many can over do aspects of yoga though and get to energetically 'thin' and create real problems. I've met a lot of teachers who have this.

For women who obsess about feeling thin, often 'throw away' consistently their vitality to feel contracted, tight, and even boney. This may be through diet and or exercise. At the extreme Anorexia is form of chi depletion causing and caused by derangement of perception and reality. We don't see with our eyes remember we see with our brains. This organ is not infallible, and is easily mucked up.

So to sum up. Ones abundance from training should cause an expansion of expansive state, hence I call it 'Fat', and not because were physically getting bigger. Most are not- they may think they are getting a lot bigger, but they are just getting more vitality. I suggest they weight themselves to prove not. Often they have actually lost weight!

Health is not about contraction and tightness, its a freedom of the body limber and relaxed, strong yet gentle, a sense of

embracing 'shapelessness', but its not listless, a sagginess of mind and body, its a round ness that can feel as big as the room or more. Its the same feeling we notice of person with huge presence enter a room. They occupy the space, the 'wall flower' does not, they are lost in the wallpaper. Tell me who is having a better time!

So get chi 'fat' not chi 'thin'! Hope that waffle was clear.

7. Can you explain more about relaxing the chi down the body and the techniques. I felt really relaxed and at peace after our private session, it was wonderful, but I want to be able to duplicate it on my own! I know that may not be possible but I d like to try.

I got asked at a workshop recently where I got the ability to do this in others. First of all its nothing much. Certainly when I couldn't do it it seemed impossible. Once you learn it, its pretty easy to do to ones self, and then later to others. My teachers have it to a degree that's beautiful and beyond mine, without them I'd never learnt it.

Please see BKF's book 'Relax into your Being' and the 'Great Stillness' for the a large part of what we were doing. Second to that is be clear on sense of releasing downwards. Knowing the channels and or meridians you're releasing gently downwards through can help but is not entirely necessary. For instance the 'nine flowers' points on the nipple line work very well on getting people to drop the chi out of their brains. I have to say though for me it was a lot of work, especially times when my instruction was poor and I was trying to work it out myself. As many do as they evolve in their practice, I orientate my life so i have enough time to train, somethings therefore have to take second place, especially if were learning something new. Prioritising is not easy and some things we might not like to give up we have to.

Meditation and chi kung have aided my ability to play with first the yin yang state of my body through either dynamic or gentle 'coaxing', and thus others. I suggest that route is a good one . Devotional practices and prayer are also great for this kind of letting go, as they can be very yin, but they aren't everyone's cup of tea.

8. What's the best Chi Kung to practice?

As there are thousands of them out there I don't know I've only trained in a few. Of the ones I learnt over the years, eventually it seems it comes down to the simplest method but practiced well and regularly can often offer the most. However It depends what you want or need at a given time, and how long you can honestly devote to training. For most with limited time and who just

want to improve their health the 'six organ sounds' are great and easy to remember. They have stood the test of time since they were invented around the Ming Dynasty, if not before. For the beginner 'Dragon and Tiger' {D&T} is great as you get a lot in return without having to understand a lot about what you're doing nor feel Chi. Many find the 'Eight Pieces of Brocade' easier to learn first, and its possible that D&T predates and influenced this style. For many simply standing in the three circles stance {'Holding a Ball' its often called} does it for them. Most Yang Style Tai Chi'ists do this one even though its most popular in I Chuan and Hsing I.

Careful of those who say they practice the 'best method of all' or offer it to you. They practice Ego Chi Kung!

9. I have injured my leg in a fall, can I continue Chi Kung, and if so how?

I highly recommend you do. I always continue training even with injuries, or if just ill. I always get better, and a lot quicker than expected. Tai Chi and Chi Kung are one the few systems that can be modified to ill health. Even can do holding the ball posture lying down, its easier in fact, but it will still affect chi circulation in the legs, will just have to hold it longer.

Please see BKF s book on Dragon and Tiger Chi kung for details on modifications on lying down and leg problems.

10. What is the 'Yang Style Tai Chi Chi Kung'?

The Chi Kung practiced by the Yang Family and some exponents of Yang style Tai Chi. Its seems to been developed/introduced by Yang Luchan's son Chien Hou, its unlikely to be that practiced by his father but I may be wrong. The style has some resemblance's to styles of the Eight Pieces of Brocade, and is therefore sometimes referred to as 'Yang Tai Chi Eight Pieces of Brocade' or similar. Richard Dunn, whom I trained with a few times, who trained with the Tians of Shanghai {disciples of Yang Family Tai Chi} said the style contains those techniques and stretches that were taken out of the form when Chien Hou changed his fathers form.

The Chi Kung also comes in a number of different versions. Pre and Post Yang Cheng Fu. I learnt the shorter and easier YCF version in five parts each designated an element, starting with 'earth' and ending with 'fire'. { Please see the article on '*Yang Style Tai Chi Chi Kung*' for more info}

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