

# The Cauldron and the Horse

## *Internal Cultivation and Yijing*



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Qigong (also known as Taijiquan) has a deep relationship with *Yijing*, the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*. Taijiquan is a model for expressing the Dao through movement and according to tradition the *Yijing* is "the gate to the truth of the Dao." As a result, most, if not all, of the principles inherent in the movements of classical Qigong or taijiquan may be understood by utilizing the symbolic knowledge first presented in the *Yijing*. The basic feature of *Yijing* is symbolism, via its sixty-four hexagrams, which form a digest of symbols. Understanding these symbols and their relationship to your movements and postures can enhance and promote a deepening of your practice.

What follows is a reflection on the vital relationship between one of the *Yijing* hexagrams and a basic Qigong or martial arts move, the horse stance, a standing position commonly used for internal cultivation. Using this stance, practitioners can build strong *Dantian Qi* - the life force, vital energy and martial power of the elixir field. In a splendid parallel, the Cauldron, Hexagram 50 ☵ of the *Yijing*, can give us insight into the horse stance.

## Symbolism of the Horse Stance

The posture of the horse stance imitates the structure of the universe. The ancient classics state *DaDaLiJi* 大戴礼记 - "Heaven is circular and Earth is square." The Chinese sages believed that the universe resembled an egg and that the planets orbited in a circular fashion within the egg. In contrast to the circle, the square signifies stability and immobility. Because of these qualities, the "square" Earth was attributed with the ability to carry "the 10,000 things." Chapter 41 the *Daodejing* states, "The great square has no corners." It uses the expression "the great square" as a synonym for Earth. Although the sages understood that the earth moved much in the same way as other celestial objects, it was the subjective sensation of the human observer - stillness and stability - that they captured in their energetic assessment of Earth.

In terms of ancient cosmology, the universe is a macrocosm, and the human body is viewed as a microcosm that mirrors the structure and the qualities of the larger whole. To stand in a "stable" way means to stand like the earth. As the earth supports and carries all her beings, the legs support and carry our bodies. The upper body is considered to embody the characteristics of heaven. Heaven is emptiness, suppleness, and represents the free flow of qi. These sensations can be perceived when practicing the position of the horse stance correctly. Just as earth is below and heaven is above, the practitioner can feel a strong sense of stability in the legs (below) and an uninhibited expansion of Qi in the arms, head, and torso (above). The practice of "riding the horse" (assuming the horse stance) is one of the exercises that truly

qualifies as walking the Dao, the path of cultivation.

The horse stance takes the shape of a person riding a horse. One stands with feet parallel, shoulder width apart, gripping the ground with the toes and letting the body sink down into the earth. Knees are bent slightly and opened so that the thighs and crotch form an arch. The chest is open and the shoulders are back and down. Both arms are dropped and hanging at the sides. The abdomen is low, and breathing is smooth and deep. The neck is straight and the head and upper body are always in an upright position in empty relaxation.

The horse stance consists of three key elements: stable posture, stable heart /mind/spirit, and stable breath. By combining these three elements, the practitioner's union with Heaven and Earth can be achieved. By engaging in a process of rigorous horse stance practice, *Jing* will transform to Qi, and Qi will transform to *Shen*. Finally, the spirit (*Shen*) returns to a state of emptiness, the Dao itself. By following the Dao, one can be in command of one's destiny rather than succumbing to fate. It is an important Daoist concept that life is not controlled by fate alone but that true humanity strives for the element of autonomy and self-reliance ("*WoMingZai WoBu ZaiTian*" 我命在我不在天).

## **The Cauldron**

"*Ding*" 鼎 is best translated as cauldron or alchemical vessel. Bronze *dings* from over 2500 years ago can be seen in the Chinese art collections of many museums.

Both the character *ding* and the lines of Hexagram 50 reveal other qualities of the horse stance. The *ding* was a precious vessel with three legs and two handles (the "ears"), and according to the second-century dictionary *ShuoWenJieZi* 说文解字, was use to "harmonize the five flavors." Metaphorically, this expression refers to the act of cooking, which is really about this process of harmonizing different flavors.

The term *ding* also stands as a symbol for ancient China. It is told that the founder of the Xia Dynasty, Emperor DaYu, saved China from a great flood by digging an elaborate system of waterways more than 4,000 years ago. He divided China into nine states and then cast nine cauldrons to represent each state. Since mythical times, every new emperor of China cast a fresh *ding* at the beginning of each dynasty as a way to mark and symbolize the new era. The word *ding* also came to signify power.

The three legs of the cauldron are a symbol for stability. From a Daoist perspective, three is the number of creation and accomplishment. Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* states, "The Dao gave birth to the One, the One gave birth to the Two, the Two gave birth to the Three, and the Three gave birth to the 10,000 things." The *ShuoWenJieZi* explains "three" as being the heavenly triad - "the Dao of Heaven, Earth and Humanity."

These three layers are each made up of three components. Heaven has three lights: the sun, the moon and the stars. Earth has three sources: water, fire and wind. Humans have three treasures: *Jing* (essence), *Qi* (vital energy), and *Shen* (spirit). According to the sages, by communicating with the three heavenly lights and the

three sources of Earth energy, one can strengthen one's own *Jing*, *Qi*, and *Shen*. If one understands the Dao of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity and follows the Dao, one will live a long, peaceful and harmonious life.

Using the analogy of the cauldron as the pot in which the five flavors are cooked and harmonized, the five organ networks are activated within the body to nourish the human spirit. The head is said to be the "palace of *Shen*." Comparing the image of the cauldron to the human body, it appears that in both cases the ears assume the highest position on the body. The ears of the cauldron are the handles. One can hold and move the cauldron with them. The Confucian classic, Spring and Autumn Annals (*ChunQiu*), states that the ears are the symbolic representation of the heart. The first century encyclopedia, the *White Tiger Manual (BaiHuTong)*, notes that the ears are the symbolic representation of the kidneys. According to classical Chinese Five Element theory, water represents the kidney and the function of storing *Jing*. Fire represents the heart and the storing of *Shen*. For the ancient sages fire and water were the most important factors of life on earth. They believed the phenomenon of life could not exist without the either one of them.

The Chinese character for ear contains many layers of meaning. From a modern Chinese medical perspective, the ear is the external orifice of the kidney. From an ancient perspective, Chapter 36 of the Classical Book of Difficulties (*Nanjing*) explains that the ear may be associated with both the kidney and heart. According to this work, there are two aspects of the kidneys. The left is called the Kidney (*Shen*) and relates to the watery root of prenatal qi. The right one is called the Gate of Life (*Mingmen*), and is described as the home of *Jing* and *Shen*. The Gate of Life is

associated with fire - the fire of life. Thus the kidneys contain both the water and the fire elements.

Further symbolic meaning associates with the ear with wisdom. Its shape looks like that of a fetus. As a hologram, the ear represents the whole body, the microcosm for the macrocosm of the body.

## **Cauldron and Horse**

When observing the horse stance position, one notices that the ideal state of this stance presents the stability of the alchemical cauldron. In this stance, the body is like a nation, and the mind is like its emperor. Of all the organs, the heart is considered the emperor. To acknowledge the heart as emperor, it is proper to assume the position of the heart being in the mind. This may be realized by bringing one's attention to the breath and encouraging slow, smooth, deep and even respirations. With each movement of air, one enters deeper into the body, moving down into the heart, then further down into the belly, down to the coccyx, and finally rooting the breath in one's heels.

In internal cultivation terminology, this process is referred to as "reforming the country" (*GeXin HuanDai* 革新换代) One of the commentary sections in the *Yijing*, the Ten Wings (*XuGua* 序卦), states that there is no object that better embodies the principle of transformation and reformation than the *ding*. (It is interesting to note

that from a Chinese perspective the mind resides in the region of the heart and not in the head as in the West.)

Initial practice of the horse stance causes new and revolutionary changes in the body. The beginner may feel pain from the standing regimen. At the same time, however, the practitioner feels enlivened, surrounded and refreshed by universal Qi. The potential trembling of body tissues or the shaking of the thighs are nothing but reminders that Qi exists. These phenomena are special and in a way, indicate the beginning of a new and transformed life. They demonstrate the disposition of the cauldron as the "receiver of the new," another description of *ding* from the *Yijing*.

As the practitioner transitions through this initial period of effort and renewal, he or she learns to control the "horse" with greater ease. The horse now symbolizes posture, mind, and breath.

If the body posture is correct and the breath is adjusted to be soft and deep, then the lower abdomen, *Dantian*, changes in temperature from warm to hot. The *Dantian* is described as the internal space underneath the navel and between the kidneys. This *Dantian* - literally the "alchemical smelting field" occupying the lower belly - is the source of life energy. Most practitioners are not aware of this crucial spot before taking up a consistent qigong routine. In the terminology of internal alchemy, the warmth and the heat perceived in this location is the "fire" of the body.

Naturally, the *Dantian* is associated with the alchemical vessel, *ding*, which is used to stew various substances and blend them together to produce the elixir of life. The

function of the *Dantian* fire resembles this process of cooking. In ancient China, cooking was not an easy feat. The cooks of prehistory had to constantly adjust the fire with wind from a bellows. A great leader was often compared to being a great cook. Chapter 60 of the *Daodejing* states, for instance, "Ruling a large country is like cooking a small fish." This means that conscious beings distinguish themselves by taking great care to safeguard their Qi. A person or a country's source energy, the sages believed, could be wasted as quickly and easily as carelessly mashing a small fish in a cooking pot.

The deepening of the horse stance, moreover, can be likened to the work of a cook who settles the cauldron (posture) and regulates the fire (mental focus) by adjusting the wind from the bellows (breath). When all of this is done correctly, the "country" of the body is governed perfectly.

One of the ancient commentaries, *Xiang* 象, from the *Yijing* that focuses on the symbolic meaning of the hexagrams explains that in hexagram 50 "There is fire over wood. It is the picture of *ding*. This is like a person calming the mind, steadying the breath and condensing the life energy."

Hexagram 50 consists of the trigrams *Li* 离 above and *Xun* 巽 below. *Li* is the symbol for fire, the feature of which is brightness. It represents light, heat, heart, mind, spirit, emperor, intelligence and wisdom. *Xun* is the symbol for wind. Wind belongs to the element of wood. The attribute of wind is the ability to proceed and to propagate gently. It manifests Qi, breath, romantic love, news, order and discipline.

In Hexagram 50, wood, a symbol for vitality and life energy, has a strong momentum. Through its association with the wood element, life energy is also related to the directional energy of east. Chapter 76 of the *Yellow Emperor's Classical Book of Medicine* states that wind is produced in the east. In the realm of heaven, the presence of spirit expresses and manifests itself in the form of wind. On the Earth, spirit expresses itself in the lushness and aliveness of wood (plants). The quality of wood is warm, fluffy, and expansive. The virtue of wood is peace and harmony. The eminent Tang Dynasty physician-scholar, Wan Bing, noted that the virtue of wood is to gently push and advance the expansion of harmonious Qi. As wood emerges, fire gets stronger, and water, symbolic for *Jing* essence, transforms to vapor (Qi).

In the horse stance, the practitioner feels the Qi rise and flow in and through the body. The "five flavors" (the five phase elements of the five organ networks) combine in harmony and rise up to nourish the spirit. The mind and spirit are calm, peaceful, and bright, like the lantern of the full moon in the night sky. And the body, quite literally, becomes "enlightened," full of light.

Additional classical commentary on the meaning of the hexagrams elucidates the deeper connotations of *ding* in similar terms: "*Ding* - the sage or emperor is preparing sacrificial offerings in order to communicate with the lords of heaven and to imbue all people with the qualities of wisdom and virtue. The ears are clear; the eyes are bright, so that there is a thorough grasp of any situation. By softly advancing and rising, one enters into the central position. From this central core one has the ability to negotiate and deal with all events, even if they turn out to be hard." This passage serves as our instruction manual for high-level practice of the horse stance. I conclude

that this is the definition of true "wealth."

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