CREATIVITY ON DEMAND

How to Ignite and Sustain the Fire of Genius

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PART 1

MASTERING CREATIVE ENERGY

Genius is mainly an affair of energy.
Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), English poet

Creativity is the mother of all energies,” explains Judith Orloff, MD, author of Positive Energy. Orloff adds that creativity “is the nurturer of your most alive self. It charges up every part of you. When you’re plugged in, a spontaneous combustion occurs that ‘artists’ don’t have a monopoly on.”

Yes, there is a boundless source of energy in the universe from which springs all creation and all creativity. Every rock, plant, and animal, including Homo sapiens, is a manifestation of its infinite power. Over the course of millennia, humans have been studying how to get directly plugged in to the source of this energy to empower martial prowess, health, and creativity. The oldest record of qi cultivation is an image of a figure, practicing one of the exercises that you will soon learn, on a vase unearthed in China estimated to be more than five thousand years old.

The practices that I will share all originated at a time when the rhythms of nature had much more influence on daily life than they do today. People rose at dawn and retired at sunset. They planted and
harvested in harmony with the change of seasons and the movements of the moon and planets.

They watched a heron stalk and then catch a fish.
They observed the praying mantis capturing a fly.
Bears, snakes, monkeys, and cats were their teachers.
They studied the rising and setting of the sun, the waxing and waning of the moon, the flow of water and the patterns of the wind.
They asked: How can I be like the heron and the mantis? What are the secrets of the bear, snake, monkey, and cat? What can I learn from the sun, the moon, the waves, and the wind?
They played. Explored. Danced. Breathed. They experienced qi in all its manifestations and recognized it as their most important natural resource. They experimented to discover how to access, store, and utilize it. Thus, the art of qi cultivation was born.

But these practices arose from more than just shamanic spiritual exploration. These were very practical people. They dug in the earth, stacked hay, moved stones, fought battles. They needed strength and stamina. They had to recover quickly if they were sick or wounded. So they took what they learned from their observations of the natural world and asked: How can we use this to heal? How can we use this to vanquish opponents?
Thus, the healing and martial arts came into being.
And then they contemplated the source of the power behind all creation, and they asked: How can we use this to create?

**Feel Qi Now**

I am the taste of pure water and the radiance of the sun and moon. I am the sacred word and the sound heard in the air and the courage of human beings. I am the sweet fragrance in the earth and the radiance of fire.

*Bhagavad Gita*
Qi is an essential element of our everyday experience. You may notice the flow of qi within you when you enjoy a good yawn or a big belly laugh, or when you experience a sense of refreshment after a shower. You can begin exploring your sensitivity to qi with these two simple practices.

The Effect of Extrinsic Phenomena on Your Qi

Our qi is affected by external stimuli, for better or worse, every day. If you compare the aroma and taste of a fresh apple with a rotten one you’d immediately, instinctively discern that the fresh one will impart positive life energy while the rotten one might make you sick. Animals in the wild seek out flowing water to drink and avoid stagnant pools for the same reason.

The sonic equivalent of rotten stagnation is expressed masterfully in the album *Metal Machine Music* by Lou Reed (1942–2013). A quick search on your Internet browser will allow you to listen to it. Try any track for as long as you can bear it. Notice the sensations in your body as you listen. Prominent on most lists of the all-time worst music by great artists, this noise will reliably interfere with the qi flow of any sentient being.

Music historians are unsure whether Reed, of Velvet Underground fame, made this album as a joke or as a commentary on the dehumanizing aspects of contemporary life. But it’s intriguing to note that before his recent passing, Reed was a devoted student of qi cultivation through tai chi. As he told *Kung Fu Magazine*, “I find tai chi to be philosophically, aesthetically, physically and spiritually fascinating.”

Now listen to Reed’s classic hit from 1972, “Walk on the Wild Side.” Notice the sensations in your body as you listen. Most people report a much more pleasant, uplifting feeling. What is it that depresses or uplifts you when you listen?
The Effect of Intrinsic Phenomena on Your Qi

Besides the food we eat and the sights and sounds we experience, the way we use our body and mind profoundly affects our qi.

Sit in a chair and slump down as though you were depressed. Breathe shallowly through your mouth. Think about something depressing, like Congress, pollution, or income taxes. One minute is more than enough for most people to begin to feel that this posture and attitude impede the normal flow of qi.

Now stand up with your feet shoulder width apart. Align your body around a vertical axis. Smile. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, and as you exhale, make an extended ahhh sound or a sigh.

Then, keeping your feet firmly on the floor, begin gently shaking your whole body by rhythmically bending and straightening (without locking) your knees. Let your arms flop around as you bounce in a playful and childlike way. Allow your head to move like a buoy bobbing gently on the surface of water.

As you shake, imagine golden light washing through your body, cleansing you of all stress and impurities from head to toe.

After only one minute, almost everyone begins to feel a pleasant tingling sensation. This is a simple way to experience the enlivening of your qi.

Qi Is the Fire of Genius

There is an electric fire in human nature tending to purify—so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of new heroism.

John Keats (1795-1821), English Romantic poet

The common version of the Chinese character for qi is a combination of the symbol for rice and the symbol for steam. For the Chinese, rice has long been a primary source of nourishment, and the steam represents
the ineffable essence or life force of this sustaining food. But I’ve always suspected that this was a relatively superficial explanation.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to ask Ken Cohen about the real meaning of qi. A master of qi cultivation with more than forty-five years’ experience, Ken is also a scholar of Chinese language and culture. He explains that the meaning of the term *qi* is expressed more accurately and profoundly in the character that appears in ancient Taoist texts. This character is a combination of the symbol meaning “without” and the symbol for “fire.” Ken explains that “without fire” has been misinterpreted to suggest that one must be free from passion to experience enlightenment. Rather, he emphasizes, *qi* is best understood as “the formless fire of life.”

Ken explains that cultivating this “formless fire” is, according to ancient Chinese wisdom, the key to creativity in calligraphy, painting, dance, poetry, and music. He says that qi development will make you “a better poet, artist, or performer.” He adds, “It also makes you a better, more creative business person.”

**Qi Is the Real Secret of Creativity**

Tune yourself with the creative power of Spirit. You will be in contact with the Infinite Intelligence that is able to guide you and to solve all problems. Power from the dynamic Source of your being will flow uninterruptedly so that you will be able to perform creatively in any sphere of activity.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*

Dance legend Martha Graham (1894–1991) was a creative genius. She revolutionized modern dance and influenced many great terpsichoreans, including Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp. Graham captured a profound truth about the essence of creativity when she said, “There is a vitality, a life force, an
energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique.” She added, “[I]f you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. . . . It is not your business to determine how good it is . . . nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.”

The vitality, life force, energy, quickening that you translate into action is qi. And it’s not hard to recognize.

Consider a work of art that has moved you deeply. Whether it’s a play, a musical composition, a painting, or a dance, chances are that, more than the words, notes, colors, or choreography, you were affected most by the energy of the piece. As musician and teacher of “Qi for Creativity” John Voigt explains, “What makes any art great is the use and communication of the energy of life. Most listeners, viewers, readers only subliminally sense this vitality. They do not know it in the verbal part of their minds, but they demand it from any art they choose to experience. Without that life energy—what we call qi—any art is lifeless, academic, weak.”

In traditional Chinese landscape painting, artists aimed to convey the experience of this vivifying force. Osvald Sirén (1879–1966), author of The Chinese on the Art of Painting, explains that the power of qi is “something that links the works of the individual artist with a cosmic principle.” He adds that it is “active in the artist before it becomes manifest in his works; it is like an echo from the divine part of his creative genius reverberating in lines and shapes which he draws with his hand. . . . [I]t manifests unconsciously and spreads like a flash over the picture.”

In his history of heroes of the imagination, entitled The Creators, Daniel J. Boorstin (1914–2004) cites T’ang Hou, an ancient Chinese philosopher of art who explains that the artist must align with “the shaping powers of Nature” so that “the charm of inexhaustible transformation
is unfailingly visible.” T’ang Hou adds, “If you yourself do not possess that grand wavelike vastness of mountain and valley within your heart and mind, you will be unable to capture it with ease in your painting.”

You were born from “grand wavelike vastness”; it is your true nature, and reconnecting with it will revivify your creativity in all areas of life. Besides being the secret of great art, vibrant qi is the key to a delicious meal, an engaging presentation, a fulfilling experience of making love, and a successful entrepreneurial venture.

This insight into the source of creativity isn’t solely the province of the East. American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) describes a secret learned by every wise individual: “[B]eyond the energy of his . . . conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy by abandonment to the nature of things; that, beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power, on which he can draw, by unlocking his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him: then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law.”

Emerson advises us to discover new energy by “abandonment to the nature of things,” by “unlocking our human doors” and allowing “the ethereal tides to roll and circulate” within, to participate more fully in the life of the universe. If we do, our “thought is law”—in other words, what we envision is created.

The ability to roll and circulate the ethereal tides, to keep the channel open, to move and direct the flow of qi, and to experience the charm of inexhaustible transformation is the secret of great art and a creative life.

**Creators on Qi**

*Carol Rose Brown*

Through my exploration of qi cultivation I’ve met many exceptionally creative people. I’ve asked many of them what qi means and how it informs their creative process. I’ve included some of the responses
throughout the book, in sidebars entitled “Creators on Qi.” Here’s one from an artist in my Santa Fe qi-cultivation class. Carol Rose Brown is a gifted painter of the natural world and has a special talent for expressing the numinous quality in her subjects. She took a long time to respond to my question about the way qi informs her art because like many true creators she is genuinely humble and on some level knows that she is more of a conduit than a source. Carol eventually wrote:

I began practicing meditation, tai chi, and other methods for nourishing qi a long time ago, and the longer I do it the more I feel there’s nothing I can say about it. I don’t know much about it. I’ve been reading about qi since I was in college and first picked up *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, the Chinese guide for painters that urged them to become the tree before they put the brush to the scroll.

The only thing I can say is: when I draw something—say the aspens turning on the mountain—and the landscape just whooshes through my eyes into the pencil onto the paper, and I just sit there watching the drawing happening but not doing anything, that’s when I feel I’ve connected with qi.\textsuperscript{13}

**Basic Qi Principles**

Let’s consider a few basic insights that will help you get the most from the qi-cultivation practices in this book.

**Your Body Is an Antenna for Qi**

I love to think of nature as having unlimited broadcasting stations, through which God speaks to us every day, every hour and every moment of our lives, if we will only tune in.

George Washington Carver (1864–1943), American scientist\textsuperscript{14}
Your body is an antenna for qi, and your mind can direct the antenna to get better reception. As George Washington Carver counsels, all we need to do is tune in and listen to the broadcast. The qi-cultivation practices you will learn in this book will put you on the right creative wavelength.

**Qi Responds to Your Intention and Imagination**

Indeed, the power of imagination makes us infinite.

John Muir (1838–1914),
Scottish-American naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club

Creative visualization is a well-documented way to improve performance in a wide range of activities, from martial arts to free-throw shooting. In a recent study entitled “Mind Over Matter: Mental Training Increases Physical Strength,” Erin M. Shackell and Lionel G. Standing demonstrated that “mental practice” resulted in significant gains in strength for their subjects who were college athletes. Moreover, their survey of hundreds of research papers in the field led them to conclude, “mental practice produces measurable gains in skilled performance.”

The same thing is true with qi. Just as you can strengthen your muscles or improve your free-throw shooting by using your imagination creatively, you can also access, circulate, and store qi by directing it with your intention and imagination.

**Qi Flows Naturally and Effortlessly**

Don’t push the river; it flows by itself.

Ancient proverb

The primary focus of the practices you will learn is letting go of interference with the natural flow of qi. Like wind blowing around a mountain or water flowing toward the ocean, qi follows the path of least resistance. As you harmonize with and encourage the natural movements of qi, you experience greater ease and flow in all of your activities.
Graceful Movements Invite the Energy of Grace

Grace is the beauty of form under the influence of freedom.

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), German philosopher and poet

Awkward, violent, and crass movements activate energies that are awkward, violent, and crass. Graceful movements invite the flow of grace. Perform the movements with a sense of flow, ease, and joy and you will get the most benefit. And you can dramatically enhance the flow of qi in your daily life by bringing more poise and grace to your everyday movements.

When doing movement practices, invest special attention to the transition between one movement and another. When you bring mindfulness to the space between movements, you create an energetic continuity that enhances the pleasure and the benefits.

You Don’t Have to Believe the Metaphysics to Get the Benefits of Qi

I don’t believe in anything you have to believe in.

Fran Lebowitz, American author and critic

You don’t need to believe in qi to get the benefits of the practices. All you need is an open mind. If you experiment with the practices, you will almost certainly feel better. If you prefer, you can think of them as poetic choreography designed to facilitate an experience of creative empowerment. And if you follow a religious or spiritual path, you can customize the practices to reinforce and support that path.

Devoting Your Full Attention to the Qi Practices Makes Them Work

Living in the now will be the wave of the future.

Swami Beydonananda, American humorist

The practices that you will learn can all be done in twenty minutes or less. They will all give you the maximum experience of qi in the shortest