

Chicken Soup (Postures) for Daoist Alchemy

by Ron Catabia

Both stationary and moving postures had many functions in ancient systems of Daoism. The various functions of postures included healing the body, increasing energy flow through the meridians, providing a foundation for non-conceptual meditative experiences, aligning the body/mind with universal qi flow, and helping the body/mind refine different forms of energy during the process of internal alchemy. Valuable evidence pointing to the existence of these systems was discovered in 1973 when the excavation of King Ma's tomb, near the city of Changsha in Hunan Province, China, revealed a piece of silk showing 44 postures. The date of the silk scroll is estimated to be around 168 BCE. The captions accompanying some of these postures indicated they were used for health disorders. Other postures were related to animal movements.

Postures play an important role in internal alchemy. There are many different Daoist methods and techniques of using postures in the internal alchemical process. The purpose of this paper is to show how postures can transform energy for alchemy. Postures are essential to the transformational process because they can direct, guide, and develop specific forms of energy. This essay will focus on postures related to Five-Element energy. The postures used as an example are from *Kuksundo*, an ancient Daoist yoga system native to Korea.

Postures influence the processing of energy in the three dan-tiens. The first alchemical stage, transforming jing into qi, takes place in the lower dan-tien. One Daoist method of beginning the internal alchemical process is to strengthen and build *central energy* in the lower dan-tien which prepares the body/mind for the process of transforming jing into qi. *Central energy*, in this paper, refers to the earth energy that evolves and forms from the Five-Element Cosmological Sequence.

The Five-Element Cosmological energy sequence is the earliest reference to the five elements and is different from the constructive and controlling five-element energy cycles used in acupuncture and acupressure. "The 5 elements symbolize five different directions of movement of natural phenomena. Wood represents expansive, outward movement in all directions. Metal represents contractive, inward movement. Water represents downward movement, Fire represents upward movement, and Earth represents neutrality or stability."¹ "Water is the beginning, the foundation of the other elements."²

The Five-Element Cosmological energy sequence is water, fire, wood, metal, earth. This sequence differs from the Five-Element Constructive Cycle (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and Controlling Cycle (wood, earth, water, fire, metal). When practicing the cosmological sequence, water energy in the body is activated first. Water energy flows downward and functions as an energy seed. It puts down roots and provides the foundation from which other energies will evolve.

Fire energy grows from the seed and moves upward. It is like a stem that grows from the root and reaches toward heaven.

Wood energy evolves out of fire energy and spreads outward in all directions because of its 'wind' quality. Wood energy is the blossoming of fire energy into full growth.

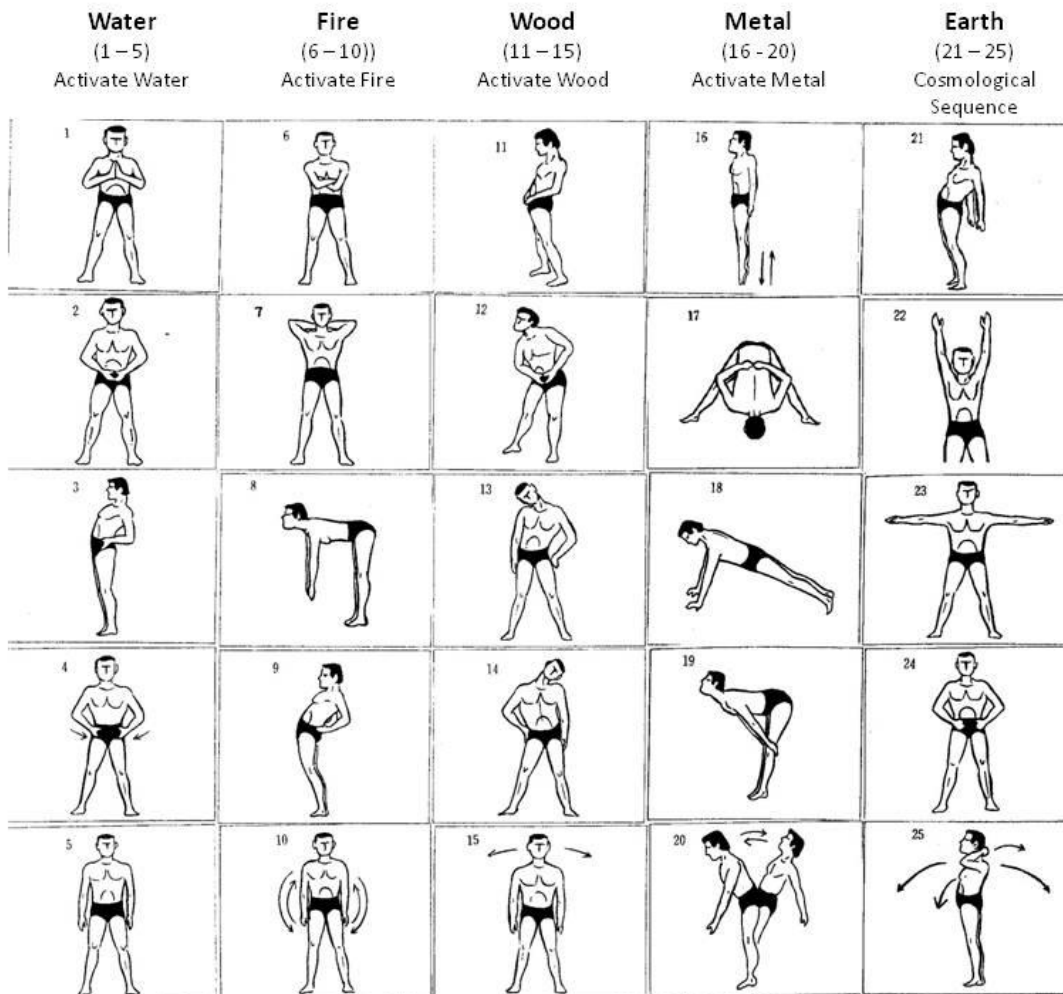
Metal energy forms by gathering the expanding wood energy and pulling it together so that it becomes concentrated. Metal energy is the fruit that is born from the blossoming of wood.

Earth energy, a combination of water, fire, wood, and metal energies, forms last in the evolutionary cosmological sequence. Earth energy has a strong centering and grounding effect. Postures play a significant role in the evolution and formation of earth energy when the cosmological sequence is activated by the human body/mind.

The first set of postures in the *Kuksundo* system, shown below, contains 50 postures and is a philosophical expression and practice of the Five Element Cosmological Sequence. Most of the postures are stationary and ten are moving. Practicing the postures in the numbered sequence is necessary for earth energy to form.

All postures are performed while simultaneously breathing into the lower dan-tien. A posture awakens and activates some form of energy somewhere in the body. Doing dan-tien breathing and visualizing the lower dan-tien while simultaneously performing the posture causes some of the awakened energy to move to the lower dan-tien. A connection is established between the lower dan-tien and the body area being awakened. A posture gets its authenticity when the mind/body is focused on the lower dan-tien while it is performed.

Postures 1-25 are mostly standing (non-sitting) and have the purpose of activating earth (central) energy into a *forming* stage.



Postures 1-5, done sequentially, direct energy into the kidneys and activate water energy. They also establish a connection between the kidneys and the lower dan-tien. Postures 6-10, 11-15, and 16-20, done sequentially, direct qi to the heart, liver, and lungs respectively and activate fire (heart), wood (liver), and metal (lung) energies. These postures also establish a connection between those organs and the lower dan-tien.

Postures 21-25 are the actualization of the cosmological sequence in which earth energy evolves out of the progression from water to fire to wood to metal. Posture 21 (water) nourishes water energy in the kidneys preparing it to be the seed or root for the cosmological sequence. Posture 22 (fire) connects the kidneys and heart. This connection establishes fire energy as the stem that grows from the seed supplied by the kidneys. Posture 23 (wood) takes fire energy from the stem and spreads qi throughout the body/mind.

This spreading effect (wind) is the growth or blossoming of water and fire into wood energy. Posture 24 (metal) gathers the wood energy circulating throughout the body/mind and concentrates it into the lower dan-tien. The contraction of wood energy into the lower dan-tien is the function of metal energy and can be thought of as the fruit that results from the blossoming process carried out by wood. Posture 25 (earth) is performed standing with the feet stationary. The upper body, with the lower dan-tien as the fulcrum, moves back, forward, left, and right. This posture combines energy from the kidneys, heart, liver, and lungs to activate the spleen. When posture 25 is completed, earth energy is forming.

Postures 26-50 are practiced while sitting or lying and have the function of *completing* earth (central) energy. The sitting and lying positions are more yin and nourishing than the standing (yang) positions and the resultant energies reach the stage of completion (rather than forming).



Postures 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, and 41-45, done sequentially, complete the formation of water, fire, wood, and metal energies in the kidneys, heart, liver, and lungs respectively. These groups of postures tonify their associated organs and connect them to the lower dan-tien.

Postures 46-50 are specific for actualizing the cosmological sequence. They are similar to postures 21-25 because each one functions to carry out the cosmological sequence. Posture 46 (water) nourishes the kidneys to complete the formation of water energy which will be the seed of the cosmological sequence. Posture 47 (fire) connects the kidneys and heart and creates fire energy as the stem that anchors water and fire.

Posture 48 (wood) allows fire energy to travel to all parts of the body/mind. The spreading energy transforms into wood. Posture 49 (metal) gathers the expanding wood energy, condenses it into metal energy and directs it to the lower dan-tien.

Posture 50 (earth) is the lotus. The lotus is a versatile, all-purpose posture that can work with many different forms of energy. The lotus always has a strong centering and grounding effect on the body/mind. In this case, the lotus's centering and grounding effect influences water, fire, wood, and metal to evolve into earth energy. Earth energy activates the spleen and, through dan-tien breathing, is also stored in the lower dan-tien.

The sequence of 50 postures is always practiced simultaneously with dan-tien breathing. The postures create water, fire, wood, and metal energies and then help these energies evolve into earth. Earth energy has a powerful centering effect on the body/mind and prepares the lower dan-tien for the process of transforming jing into qi.

Conclusion

This paper shows one way that postures are related to internal alchemy because they strongly influence the creation and transformation of specific forms of energy. In the above example, they help produce and store earth energy in the lower dan-tien. The earth energy centers and grounds the lower dan-tien so the process of transforming jing into qi can begin.

Postures can activate, build, and transform various forms of energy. These energy transformations eventually lead to non-conceptual experiences that create relationships between the body/mind and the universe. Specific postures can function as ideograms that convey non-conceptual energetic principles of nature and the cosmos. Postures are a key ingredient for gaining insight because they align the body/mind with universal qi flows. In this way they create a natural environment that teaches us the way of the Dao and our true relationship to nature.³

When postures build and transform energy they automatically help to expand consciousness. The body/mind has a new experience and explores a new dimension of existence. Postures are both an expression and a discovery of how one exists in the universe. They have an existential quality and are universal expressions of the human condition. A profound body language, postures express the essence of humanity and how we relate to the cosmos.

Postures and Daoist internal alchemy are closely linked. Breath, postures, and meditation are the key ingredients for alchemy. Postures help breath and meditation to work better. Postures are symbols of how we can become one with the universe and they express the essence of our existence. When our practice harmonizes breath, postures and meditation we become pure, fully realized beings at one with the Dao.

Notes

1. Maciocia, Giovanni. The Foundations of Chinese Medicine: A Comprehensive Text for Acupuncturists and Herbalists. London: Churchill Livingstone, 1989, pp. 17-18.
2. Maciocia, Giovanni. The Foundations of Chinese Medicine: A Comprehensive Text for Acupuncturists and Herbalists. London: Churchill Livingstone, 1989, p. 23.
3. Kim, Hyunmoon. The Tao of Life: An Investigation of Sundo Taoism's Personal Growth Model as A Process of Spiritual Development. Ph.D. Dissertation. San Francisco: Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 2002, p. 28.

Posture captions translated by Jung-Gil Goh, Hong-Sup Hyun, Hyunmoon Kim, Su-Il Kim, Young-He Kim, Anne Lee, and Hong-Young Lee.

Ron Catabia has been practicing Sundo Mountain Daoism for 20 years. Originally from Massachusetts, he currently lives in Taean, South Korea where he continues his Sundo practice and teaches English at Hanseo University. He also does research at the International Institute for Sundo-Taoist Cultural Research in Dangin, South Korea. For more information about *Kuksundo* go to <http://www.sundo.org>.