

Gut Feelings: Daoist Lower Dan-tien Psychotherapy

Dan-tien is a Daoist expression for energy center. There is a psychotherapeutic process related to Daoist practices of dan-tien development. The dan-tien psychotherapeutic process does not fit the pattern of what we normally think of as psychotherapy. It takes place in the larger context of a person's existence in the universe. Therapy takes place when there is an interaction between the person and the cosmos. Although many psychotherapists have incorporated meditation for their clients as well as for themselves, the central factor in the western psychotherapeutic process is the verbal exchange of thought and experience between client and therapist. In Daoist practice there is an exchange of non-verbal information between the practitioner and nature.

Dan-tien, Qi, Mind and Breath

A central characteristic of Daoism (also spelled Taoism) is the development and utilization of three primary energy centers. These lower, middle, and upper energy centers are called *tancheon* in Korean, *dan-tien* in Chinese, and *tanden* in Japanese. The lower dan-tien is located 2-3 inches below the navel, the middle dan-tien is at the heart level, and the upper dan-tien is between the eyes. All three are on the center line inside the body. The three dan-tiens play a central role in the Daoist practice of internal alchemy.¹ The lower dan-tien is developed first in the internal alchemical process. The psychotherapeutic process described in this paper is a by-product of lower dan-tien development.

There are many kinds of Daoist practices and all, in varying degrees, have a psychotherapeutic effect on the practitioner. Many Daoist practices, but not all, have some form of dan-tien development and some make dan-tien development their primary focus. This paper describes the psychotherapeutic process that takes place when dan-tien development is primary. The principal thesis is that a profound psychotherapeutic experience takes place when *qi* is applied to the body/mind through the lower dan-tien.

Qi is the Daoist concept for what is often referred to as spiritual, psychological, biological, electrical, and chemical energy. The concept of *qi* is all-encompassing and includes the energy in our environment. *Qi* has many forms, both subtle and gross, and is the essential makeup of all things in the Daoist universe. Some Daoist descriptions of *qi* are:

- a) The foundational energy and essence of the universe.
- b) The cosmic energy field.
- c) The source of all life and matter.
- d) *Qi* presents on a continuum that links the physical (dense *qi*) with the non-physical (refined *qi*) thereby acting as a connection between all things and dimensions.
- e) Light is highly refined *qi*.

Science is reluctant to accept the Daoist theory of *qi* because there is little scientific proof that it exists. Quantum Physics, however, is accumulating evidence that there is a universal energy field. The centuries old notion that humans and their minds are separate from the objective three-dimensional world is being challenged. Quantum physics has discovered what it calls a Zero Point Field (or Zero Point Energy), a vast ocean of energy in the space between the smallest particles. The whole universe is interconnected by waves that carry to infinity.² The Zero Point Field exists both inside and outside the human body.

The idea that all things are energetically connected has been widely debated among scientists. At the present time the Zero Point Field is a theory that has been mathematically postulated but not proven. One leading physicist, however, thought that the idea of things being separate has led to many of the problems we face today. David Bohm, in a conversation with the Dalai Lama, said "if we examine the various ideologies that tend to divide humanity, such as racism, extreme nationalism, and the Marxist class struggle, one of the key factors of their origin is the tendency to perceive things as inherently divided and disconnected."³

The Daoist concept that *qi* is the foundational essence of everything in the universe also has implications for the idea that the mind and body are separate entities (mind-body dualism). In Daoism, *qi* is the essence of both mind and body. Thus, at their deepest level, Daoism understands mind and body to be the same thing. The Daoist mind "is not different from body, but flows through it as a subtler form of energy."⁴ Non-material (spiritual) *qi* is the foundation of the mind. Mind is the most subtle type of *qi*.⁵ In Daoist practice, the mind has an existence beyond the brain and extends into the universal energy field. The whole mind is a combination of dan-tien, brain, body, and external energy.

Maspero's research on Daoism, originally published in the 1930's, emphasized the importance of breath.⁶ Breath is directly connected to the essence of what we are. It is the foundation of the mind and body. Breath methods used specifically for dan-tien development are usually called dan-tien breathing. Various Daoist practices have their own methods of dan-tien breathing. The following brief description of dan-tien breathing comes from a Korean mountain practice called Sundo. Dan-tien breathing is, first of all, deep abdominal breathing. The lower abdomen expands on the inhale and contracts on the exhale. One breath cycle consists of an inhale, hold, and exhale. Thus, dan-tien breathing is controlled breathing. The growth of the lower dan-tien depends on various types of *qi* being deposited into it and mixed together. The breath, during inhalation, extracts yin energy from the earth below and yang energy from heaven above and deposits both into the lower dan-tien. During the breath hold, energy from the base of the coccyx and from ming-men (the acu-point GV-4 located on the spine below lumbar 2) are both moved to the lower dan-tien. During the exhale the mind lets go and becomes blank. The length of inhale, hold, and exhale varies from beginning to advanced practice. The breath cycle becomes longer as one progresses. An anal lock is used in conjunction with the breath cycle. The anal lock helps to concentrate energy in the lower dan-tien and pulls down to keep the dan-tien low during the breath hold.

The specific techniques for using breath to extract, deposit, move, and mix *qi*, whether from Sundo or other Daoist practices, require the guidance of a teacher. Dan-tien breathing should be checked on a regular basis. The lower dan-tien (and later on the middle and upper dan-tiens) grow and brighten via dan-tien breathing. While the breath process itself is therapeutic, it is the development of the lower dan-tien that is the main factor in the Daoist psychotherapeutic process.

What we are seeking
can't be seen, heard, or touched.
It is our essential unity
beyond the division of our senses.
It is not obvious to the mind,
but neither is it hidden from the heart.
Looking at nothing,

all of a sudden there it is!
But the moment we see it, it disappears,
leaving only a vague memory.
Chasing after it is useless
because it didn't begin anytime
and isn't going anywhere.
To realize our own true nature,
we need only return to our breath,
here and now.

Tao Te Ching, verse 14
translated by William Martin

Lower Dan-tien Psychotherapy

Development of the lower dan-tien drives the psychotherapeutic process because the lower dan-tien has a strong influence on *qi* patterns in the body, mind, and brain. The lower dan-tien also controls the exchange of *qi* between body/mind and the environment. "If one concentrates all the activities of the mind which are normally directed outward, that is, ideas, judgements, feelings, volitions and even the function of breathing, in fact if all the life energy is concentrated in the [lower] center of the body, in the *tanden*, a new sphere of consciousness arises within us ..."7 *Qi* shifts in the lower dan-tien, brain, body, and universal energy field make up the therapeutic experience. The main components in the process are *qi*, the lower dan-tien, and breath. *Qi* within the body and *qi* in the external energy field are both utilized.

Western psychotherapy works with the thoughts, feelings, and emotions inside us. Healing takes place because we question, discover, analyze, experience, and change our thoughts and emotions. Dan-tien psychotherapy takes place both inside and outside of us. There is an overall process in which energy inside of us is connected to the energy field outside us. Healing takes place because the energetic connection between internal and external strengthens and grows. *Qi* connections are a fact of life for a Daoist. The lower dan-tien is an anchor/guide that makes mind/body transformation possible. The path of dan-tien development helps us understand our relationship to nature and the universe. Understanding that we are intimately linked to the entire universe improves the quality of all aspects of our lives, especially our mental health. "The Tao experience conveys a profound awareness of being part of something far greater than ourselves, of being included ... and in touch with an invisible, eternal reality ... everything and everyone seems synchronistically connected."8

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.
We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.
We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.
We work with being,

but non-being is what we use.

Tao Te Ching, verse 11

translated by Stephen Mitchell

The Lower Dan-tien Psychotherapeutic Process

In Daoist theory and practice emotions, feelings, and thoughts have *qi* patterns as their basis. *Qi* patterns both inside and outside of us are the foundation of our psychic experience. The developing lower dan-tien has the capability of uniting different *qi* patterns. For example, a practitioner may experience the *qi* pattern of excess anger (liver energy) and the *qi* pattern of excess joy (heart energy) being combined into a single *qi* pattern that is a balance between the two. The original *qi* patterns of excess anger and joy are diffused. In the early stages of its development, the lower dan-tien begins to energetically communicate with all parts of the body and with the cosmic energy field outside the body. These *qi* dialogues have a harmonizing effect that help one become centered and grounded. One's personal energy pattern becomes more aligned with the energetic patterns of the natural universe.

As the lower dan-tien grows stronger, it sends *qi* to all parts of one's being. Eventually the body/brain/mind becomes saturated with *qi*. Furthermore, the lower dan-tien has a balancing effect on the *qi* in the body/brain/mind. For example, *qi* in the brain is increased when there is not enough and decreased when there is too much. From a Daoist perspective, balancing *qi* in the brain normalizes the flow of electrical current in neurons. The *qi* balancing effect that takes place in the brain is the lower dan-tien's way of preventing underproduction or overproduction of neurotransmitters. A strong lower dan-tien reduces a chemical imbalance in the brain. Western psychology recognizes the importance of keeping a balance between too much or too little stimulation. "If the nervous system is to function properly, it must maintain an exceptionally finely-tuned balance between excitation and inhibition."⁹

Two other events during the initial stages of lower dan-tien psychotherapy are worth mentioning. First, saturating the body with *qi* leads to an encountering process whereby painful events from the past stored in the unconscious mind are activated by *qi* and brought into conscious awareness. This can be a painful experience. However, the centering and grounding effect produced by the lower dan-tien helps one go through the experience without being overwhelmed. The lower dan-tien provides the strength and flexibility needed to face the pain and grief associated with past problems while simultaneously recycling and releasing *qi* patterns associated with them. This part of the psychotherapeutic experience has some similarity to exploring the unconscious mind while on the psychotherapist's couch.

Second, as the lower dan-tien receives more and more *qi* through breathing methods, a process of *qi* refinement begins to take place. *Qi* refinement occurs when dense forms of *qi* (body substances such as blood and fluids) are transformed into non-physical *qi* (mind, consciousness, spirit). Eventually, as energy in the lower dan-tien becomes more refined, it is able to engage in a direct exchange of *qi* with the cosmic energy field. This is important because the cosmic or universal energy field contains *qi* patterns that have a strong psychotherapeutic effect on the human mind. These cosmic *qi* patterns are a form of non-conceptual wisdom. Just as neurons in the brain communicate with each other using a chemical language, the lower dan-tien and the cosmic energy field communicate through a *qi* (energy) language. Both the chemical and energy languages are non-conceptual forms of communication, understanding, and wisdom.

The processes of using breath to refine *qi* in the lower dan-tien and the lower dan-tien's direct exchange of *qi* with the universal energy field evolve into many experiences that have a psychotherapeutic effect and enrich the human condition. Two of these experiences are well worth mentioning because, in addition to having a psychotherapeutic effect, they also cast light on the human condition. First, respect for all forms of life becomes the highest priority. Developing a high level of respect involves changing many of our beliefs and behaviors. As we grow and mature our family, culture, and educational system teach us to respect life. These teachings are only partially successful. Simply reading the morning newspaper tells us there is great strife between people who are racially, culturally, religiously, or politically different. Additionally, there is disrespect for other forms of life. If seemingly insurmountable problems, such as war, are to be eliminated, then the human race must evolve to respect all life and not kill. The lower dan-tien raises our level of consciousness to understand that each of us is energetically connected to everything else in the universe. We realize that the act of killing also injures our own energy.

Not killing is generally viewed as an unrealistic expectation. Many people think, at the least, we need to kill animals for food consumption. A strong lower dan-tien is a tool that can raise our level of respect for life and possibly reduce the amount of killing humans carry out. When the lower dan-tien increases our communication with the universal energy field, it also expands the *qi* exchanges we have with the people, animals, and plants around us. These *qi* exchanges are forms of communication that create bonds and feelings of connectedness which raise our respect for all life and all things.

Second, the lower dan-tien, by continually exchanging *qi* directly with the cosmic energy field, helps us to overcome the fear of death. Wisdom obtained from the cosmic energy field teaches us that life and death are part of the same process. When the body dies, mind and spirit *qi* become part of the universal *qi* field. We come to understand that death is another form of existence. The *qi* of both life and death are within the cosmic field. This form of wisdom, gained through the lower dan-tien, provides a non-religious understanding of life and death. Eliminating the fear of death also tempers and reduces other types of fear. Life becomes full when we integrate death into the life process. We are better able to live in harmony with those around us.

Life emerged from the lower tancheon
And death will rest in our heart.
Breathing is a miniature of life and death,
And they come and go with inhale and exhale.
Breathe a thousand times,
The boundary between inhale and exhale will fade away,
Allowing life and death to merge.

Hyunmoon Kim, Daoist master, Fall 2003.

Final Thoughts

The psychotherapeutic experience that results from lower dan-tien development is a natural form of healing in which the body/mind transforms by tapping into its own energy resources. It is a process of discovering and cultivating the energy already inside you and then connecting outward to the energy in

the cosmic field. Cultivating the lower dan-tien makes us aware of our higher nature. This results in being able to use our full capacity to help ourselves and those around us to live an authentic, balanced, and harmonious life. Understanding and aligning with our higher nature fills us with experiences and responsibilities which are beneficial to the human condition. Some of these experiences and responsibilities include self-empowerment, self-reliance, a sense of community, and getting in touch with what it means to be human. Each of these benefits our mental health.

Self-empowerment brings independence and moves us toward realizing our full potential. We gain a sense that there is something more to do with life. We move past sticking points in our development and strive to become fuller human beings. We begin to understand our life and move past the boundaries of our mind in order to become open to the forces and wisdom of the cosmos. The lower dan-tien psychotherapeutic process also encourages self-reliance. Dan-tien psychotherapy is done alone. *Qi*, dan-tien, and the universal energy field are, in a sense, your therapist. Working alone gives you a sense of self-reliance regarding your ability to cope with life's difficulties. The lower dan-tien helps you to become responsible for yourself.

When, over time, we energetically integrate our dan-tien/mind/body into the people and environment around us, a strong energetic (*qi*) connection develops. Our energy actually becomes part of and communicates with the people, animals, and plants in our surroundings. A sense of community grows out of this experience and we take on the responsibility to be harmonious in all our relationships. Finally, the lower dan-tien puts us in touch with our source and by doing so gives us an understanding of what it means to be human. Our source is the essential *qi* of the universe and the non-conceptual wisdom it gives to us. Integrating ourselves into the cosmic energy flow makes our life an authentic experience.

In the last 120 years western psychology and psychotherapy have made tremendous and invaluable contributions toward lessening human pain and suffering. Psychotherapy has evolved into a wide field with diverse applications and is beginning to adopt principles from eastern practices. The lower dan-tien is a valuable and powerful psychotherapeutic tool that could be used by itself or within other therapeutic modalities. When developed, the lower dan-tien guides us through the changes we need to make. It teaches us about the great potential we all have to live in wholeness and peace. Dan-tien psychotherapy is available to everyone and is a natural way to heal the mind. Dan-tien practice creates a way of being in the world that is powerful, balanced, simple, and complete.

Walking this path,
we experience inexhaustible energy.
From what appears an empty void,
we find the bounty of life.
Our edginess, tension,
anger, and turmoil
begin to settle down.
In their place we find
a deep tranquility
that has been here waiting
since before the beginning
of beginning-less time.

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NOTES

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