

Masters Along the Way

By Lawrence Howard, LAc, MSAc

I have been exploring *qi* for just over 10 years now, and for most of that time I have been trying to find a master. I knew masters existed, because one introduced me to *qi* and the subtle energies of life. I met him during my last semester of college, and he changed my life. I was given a taste of *qi* – and it was good.

I met this master during my last semester at Brooklyn College. I had decided to become a research scientist and spent three years working in different laboratories to help choose a specialty. I was accepted to work in a biofeedback laboratory to assist one of the graduate students. The grad student was a 42-year-old Taiwanese *qi gong* master, whose research was to study the effects of emitted *qi* on brain activity. I had never heard of *qi* or that one could master it. In order to review his writing and serve as a subject, it was useful to become familiar with *qi*.

My experience with him was close to what I expected of a master. My understanding was based on movies such as the first Star Wars trilogy and Saturday afternoon karate movies. Although he was not very old and occasionally seemed overconfident, he was Asian, possessed unusual abilities, and was willing to pass them to me. He also referred to himself as a master and me as a student. Like the movies, I could not see how I could learn his abilities without learning from him directly. I did not find any books that described anything he did. The closest I could find was *tai chi* or *qi gong* books that explained the movements, but not the experience. In other words, like the movies, the student was dependant on the master to learn.

The lessons he gave me were infrequent, short and unpredictable. One day he would show me how to feel the *qi* between my hands or a *qi gong* exercise; on another he would describe the appearance of a dead relative of mine; on another day, he would hold a stick of burning herbs (moxa) near a spot on my hand (LI 4) to see my face turn red. He often told me anecdotes that did not always seem useful at the time, but served to impress me nonetheless. Years later, I learned to appreciate those anecdotes. For example, he

differentiated between "*qi gong* power" and ESP power. Apparently *qi gong* power could consume energy, whereas ESP power did not.

As graduation approached, he suggested that I go to acupuncture school to explore *qi* more. I was hesitant about turning away from five years of college and a future in research science, but considered this possibility nevertheless. I considered going to China in a study-abroad program to learn of the culture and maybe meet a master who could provide further guidance.

While in China, I did not find a master. I visited a few Buddhist temples but did not find any monks willing to teach. Instead, I was able to volunteer in a traditional Oriental medical doctor's office. The reusable acupuncture needles soaking in disinfection solution, and the lack of glass in the windows and patient privacy (there were about three beds in one open room, with one bed having a curtain) was not what I expected, but I learned there anyway. The doctor showed me a *tui na* technique (rolling) and allowed me to use it on his patients. He even transmitted *qi* to me for the purpose of healing. He placed his hand on my back, and I felt a penetrating heat and a strange vibration. In that office, I learned that *qi* was a powerful force that could be emitted at will. I did not visit there long, due to language barriers and his beginning to want more compensation than I could afford.

Back in the United States, I soon decided to go to acupuncture school. I returned to Brooklyn to tell the master, but he had returned to Taiwan. I already learned from experience that *qi* was a force that could be used to heal oneself and others, and likely in some supernatural events. I recalled the "force" in the Star Wars movies and how they resonated with something deeply within me. My understanding of *qi* was fragmented. I had difficulty understanding some of the concepts but decided this was where my future was. I wanted to find another master.

I entered the newly founded New York campus of Pacific Institute of Oriental Medicine to begin formal education in the ways of *qi*. Among those my entering class was a psychic who I became friendly with. She was a drummer in a band and had recently become aware of her psychic abilities. She did not have anyone to guide her as she explored the subtle energies of life, but studies were spiritually based and rooted in Indian systems. She was aware of different types of energy than I was familiar with. She was sincere and did not try to impress me with anecdotes or things she accomplished. She spoke of auras and chakras, none of which made sense to me. She explained that a master could be considered as one who studied and practiced their craft for more than seven years. Although I was primarily concerned with *qi*, I knew what she was

saying was important. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue her studies the following trimester. I was saddened by her loss because our goals were similar. Later, I learned that she had been using her skills to heal and seemed to have unintentionally absorbed their illnesses, causing her to become sick herself.

As a student of acupuncture, I had difficulty. I had been accustomed to learning about *qi* by experience. I felt frustrated and wondered how anyone could study such abstract-sounding concepts without trying to experience it. The ancients likely experienced *qi* directly in order to develop the system and theories. *Qi gong* and *tai chi* classes were good but not enough. I longed for a master's guidance.

During my final year at Pacific, I was an intern when I met an assistant who was more knowledgeable about *qi* than I. He spent much time in Russia in a Korean woman's Buddhist monastery when he was young. Although he was not my assistant, he followed me when he had the chance and showed me some techniques to manipulate *qi*. He showed me how to locate and remove *qi* stagnation by simply pulling it out with my hands and flicking it away. He also shared useful anecdotes. From these experiences, *qi* changed from a force to a tangible substance. I asked to meet his masters when they were in the United States but was refused; he said that "you do not choose the teacher; the teacher chooses you." This was disheartening, but it seemed to be true. He also said that you have to constantly read to learn and that you have to be a "thief" to learn. During that one trimester, my perception of *qi* grew substantially. He was the last of those I would learn *qi* from.

As graduation approached, I felt inadequate. I had performed well academically but felt that something was missing. A classmate who was aware of my troubles used to console me by saying that we are in school merely to pass tests. In school, the goal is to "pass now, learn later." I knew the most basic concepts of *qi* experientially, and was disturbed that I was probably the only one to graduate who did.

I was on my own. I followed the advice of the *qi gong* master and my "almost-assistant." I continued to practice the simple *qi gong* exercise I was given in Brooklyn and a few from Pacific. I was using what I had learned from my assistant in the busy pain management offices where I worked. New experiences followed that I did not expect from those pain-removing techniques. They were incredible. I discovered how to feel the *qi* of meridians and other symptoms, to name a few. I was surprised to find that as my experiences with *qi* broadened, the books I found seemed to confirm my experiences. Lastly, I read everything I could find that was remotely related to *qi*. Most of what I found did not pertain to Oriental medicine at all, but focused on the subtle energies of life. This understanding filled in the gaps of my understanding of TCM. I still read,

I still learn, and I still get better. I also help those who realize that there is more to *qi* than theory, and I want to do something about it.

Reflecting on the past 10 years, my concept of the master was idealistic. I did not find any old master in a monastery who was willing to impart all their knowledge to me. My concept of a master was rigid. This led to frustration, but not giving up the search led me to meet several influential people instead. I no longer have a clear concept of what a master is, except that the gap between the master and the student/average person is great, and the influence of master is profound when accepted.

Except for one, those I met did not consider themselves to be masters. They may not have known it, but their lessons were of master's quality. All of them gave me a seed of knowledge and experience, and I had to nourish it to see what would grow. This is one of the characteristics of a master I had that has not changed. They may not have been masters, but to me, for a moment, they were. They were masters along my way of discovery and exploration of *qi* and the subtle energies of life. To them, I am thankful.

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