



"Nourishing Vitality, Breath, and Spirit"

A Daylong Retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center

With Roshi Teja Fudo Myoo Bell

Sunday, October 12, 2025

Today's retreat follows this natural progression:

Morning: **Jing** – Rooting Vitality in the Lower Center

Midday: **Qi** – Cultivating Energy in the Middle Center

Afternoon: **Shen** – Opening the Luminous Heart in the Upper Center

Understanding these centers helps us navigate our inner landscape with greater wisdom and skill. Today's program focuses more on direct experience than on lots of technical details, giving us a taste of the centers and their qualities. This writing may help clarify some details, keeping in mind that these are taught in a layered way and are not learned through traditional study but through practice and patience as part of each person's unique unfolding process.

THE ALCHEMY OF TRANSFORMATION

Ancient Daoist practitioners understood that human beings have an "inner laboratory" where transformation occurs naturally. Even the Buddha said that everything we need is right here in the fathom-long body. Just as water changes from ice to liquid to vapor, our vital energies undergo progressive refinement.

Jing (essence) Qi (energy) Shen (spirit) Wuji (infinite space) Dao (unity)

This transformation isn't abstract; it occurs through our embodied practice. When we focus awareness in the Lower Center and unite body and breath, the "ice" of physical vitality begins to thaw into the "water" of flowing energy. As we direct this energy through the heart center with compassionate attention, it transforms into "steam" rising into spiritual awareness and luminous presence. This is the poetry of the teaching.

THREE CENTERS, THREE FORMS OF AWARENESS

Each center corresponds to a distinct quality of consciousness:

Lower Dantian: Kinesthetic awareness, the felt sense of the body, grounding, stability, and physical presence.

Middle Dantian: Empathic awareness, emotional intelligence, connection with others, and heart-centered compassion.

Upper Dantian: Intuitive awareness, spiritual insight, clarity of mind, and connection with what is greater than ourselves.

All three forms of awareness are valid and necessary. Our practice cultivates each one and brings them into harmonious balance.

MORNING SESSION: JING – THE LOWER CENTER (HARA)

Location and Function

The Lower Dantian, called "hara" in Japanese Zen practice and martial arts, is located in the lower abdomen. It forms an energetic triangle between the navel, lower back, and perineum. This downward-pointing configuration naturally gathers Earth energy, grounding, stabilizing, and nourishing.

The Lower Dantian is our foundation. All authentic qigong and meditation practice begins here. Without this root, we become ungrounded, scattered, and vulnerable to imbalance.

Jing: Essence and Vitality

Jing refers to our constitutional vitality, the deep reserves of life force we inherit at birth and sustain through nourishment, rest, and wise living. Think of Jing as the densest form of life energy, like ice or fertile soil. The Lower Dantian stores this vital essence and, through practice, transforms it into Qi.

This occurs when "fire and water" meet, as Heart warmth mingles with Kidney depth through conscious breathing and attention. The ancient Chinese character for Qi depicts "steam rising from rice," a perfect image of this alchemical transformation.

Kinesthetic Awareness

The Lower Dantian is the seat of kinesthetic consciousness, our body's inherent wisdom. This is the intelligence that allows us to sense our posture, feel our balance, and know intuitively when something is right or wrong in our physical experience.

In meditation and qigong, we cultivate this awareness deliberately. We learn to feel the subtle currents of breath and energy moving through the body. We cultivate what Zen practitioners refer to as "center mind" or "grounded presence," a state that remains unaffected by thoughts or emotions.

Scientific Perspective

Modern research validates this ancient wisdom. Dr. Michael Gershon's groundbreaking work at Columbia University revealed that the digestive system contains over 100 million neurons, more than the spinal cord. This "enteric nervous system" operates independently, produces major neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, and genuinely functions as a "second brain."

The gut doesn't just digest food; it processes experience, generates feelings, and communicates with the brain. When we focus awareness in the Lower Dantian, we're connecting with a genuine center of consciousness.

Practice Guidance

In this morning's practice, we:

- Establish the felt presence of the Lower Dantian through breath and attention
- Feel natural abdominal breathing as the pathway of practice
- Practice gentle circulation of qi in this foundational center
- Cultivate stability, presence, and embodied grounding

Remember: Our practice begins with the Lower Dantian. Attempting to work with higher centers before establishing this foundation may lead to imbalance.

MIDDAY SESSION: QI THE MIDDLE CENTER (HEART)

Location and Function

The Middle Dantian is located in the heart and chest area. While the physical heart is the main organ, this center encompasses the entire chest, including the lungs, thymus, and the electromagnetic field produced by the heart.

The Middle Dantian is where Qi (energy) naturally gathers and where the transformation from Qi to Shen (spirit) begins. The energy here has a flowing, fluid quality, like water or breath moving through the body. Don't try to match your experience to these words; instead, patiently feel and sense what is actually present on the subtle level. We are not trying to 'make things happen.'

Qi: Energy and Breath

The word Qi is often translated as "energy," but it also means "breath" and "air." In Chinese medicine, Qi isn't separate from breath, and they are closely connected. When we regulate our breathing, we directly affect the quality and flow of Qi throughout the body.

气 (qì): The base character, originally meant "vapor" or "air," and appears as three wavy horizontal lines in its earliest forms to represent mist or breath.

米 (mǐ): The character for "rice" was later added to the center. This combines the earlier meaning of "vapor" with the symbolism of steam rising from cooked rice, representing the transformative power of nourishment into vital energy

The Middle Dantian contains what's called Zong Qi (Ancestral Qi), the Qi that nourishes the heart and lungs, governs respiration, and enables speech. This is the Qi we actively cultivate through breathwork and qigong practice. It refers to the vital life force that animates all living things and flows through the universe.

In TCM understanding, "Qi is the commander of Blood; Blood is the mother of Qi." They are inseparable. Our practice enhances both blood circulation and the flow of life-force energy throughout the body.

Empathic Awareness

The Middle Dantian is the seat of empathic consciousness, our capacity to feel what others feel, to resonate with joy and suffering, to experience genuine compassion.

In Chinese, the word "Xin" means both "heart" and "mind." The heart-mind isn't just a pump; it's an organ of perception, feeling, and knowing. When we say in English "I know it in my heart," we're pointing to this deeper truth.

This is where the Five Virtues naturally arise. These correspond to the traditional Five Virtues (Wu De) associated with the five elements in Chinese medicine.

kindness, integrity, trust, wisdom, and order.

Scientific Perspective

The heart's electrical activity (measured by an electrocardiogram, or ECG) produces an electromagnetic field that is much stronger than the brain's electrical signals (measured by an electroencephalogram, or EEG). The heart's field is detectable several feet away from the body.

Neurocardiology has revealed that:

- The heart contains the same neurotransmitters found in the brain
- The heart exerts as much control over the brain as the brain exerts over the heart
- The heart produces neurohormones that communicate directly with the immune system
- The heart influences the hypothalamus, pituitary, pineal, and other master glands

These statements really require additional clarification for accuracy. If you are interested, you can research this for yourself.

The ancients knew through direct experience what modern science now confirms: the heart is an organ of consciousness, not merely a mechanical pump.

Practice Guidance

In today's midday practice, we:

- Bring awareness to the breath moving through the chest
- Feel the natural expansion and softening of the chest
- Sense the heart's rhythmic presence, steady, continuous, life-giving
- Cultivate emotional balance and heart-centered compassion
- Allow energy to circulate through the Middle Dantian, flowing rather than accumulating here

The Middle Dantian is where we balance the "five thieves"—fear, sadness, worry, anger, defensiveness, with the Five Virtues. This requires maturity and patience. We don't force or suppress emotions; we create spaciousness around them and invite wisdom to arise naturally.

AFTERNOON SESSION: SHEN, THE UPPER CENTER (LUMINOUS MIND)

Location and Function

The Upper Dantian is located in the head, centered inward from the forehead – the proverbial third eye. It includes the brain and the master glands: pineal, pituitary, thalamus, and hypothalamus.

This center connects us with what is called Heaven Qi (the subtle energies associated with sky and cosmos in Daoist cosmology). The energy here is thin, light, vapor-like—the most refined form of life force. Maybe don't take this too literally, but with mindfulness practice, observe what is present and let it change, as it most certainly will.

Shen: Spirit and Awareness

Shen is perhaps the most difficult concept to translate. It means spirit, but also consciousness, awareness, radiance, and presence. When someone has strong Shen, their eyes are bright, their presence is noticeable, and they emit vitality. Shen resides in the heart but shines through the Upper Dantian. In meditation, we often talk about "clarity" or "luminosity" of mind; this is Shen expressing itself. When Shen is disturbed, we feel restless, anxious, confused, and disconnected. The practice involves: Shen, Wuji, Dao. As Shen refines, it merges with Wuji (infinite space, emptiness, the void) and eventually reunites with Dao (the source, the absolute, that which cannot be named).

Intuitive Awareness

The Upper Dantian is the seat of intuitive consciousness, the knowing that comes without logical thinking, the sudden insight, and the link to wisdom beyond our individual understanding.

This isn't magical or supernatural; it's a natural human ability that becomes available when the mind is calm, clear, and receptive. In Buddhist practice, we develop this through shamatha (calm abiding) and vipassana (insight meditation). In Daoist practice, we cultivate it through stillness meditation and connecting with Heaven Qi.

The Upper Dantian contains what Daoists refer to as the Hun (Original Spirit), called Tai Guang, "Eminent Light," which connects with Heaven and seeks purity of body, heart, and mind.

Scientific Perspective

The brain contains approximately 86 billion neurons, with trillions of synaptic connections. It never completely sleeps; subconscious awareness remains perpetually active.

The pineal gland is photosensitive and responds to light and regulates circadian rhythms, mood, and consciousness. Some ancient traditions called it the "seat of the soul" and the organ of telepathic communication. While we needn't accept all traditional claims literally, the pineal's role in consciousness and spiritual experience is increasingly recognized.

Practice Guidance

In this afternoon's practice, we:

- Bring gentle awareness to this center in the head
- Sense the natural clarity and spaciousness of mind
- Allow connection with something greater than our individual selves
- Cultivate receptivity, openness, and luminous presence
- Integrate the entire day's practice, body, energy, and spirit, unified

Five principles support genuine spiritual connection:

- Clarity of intention
- Let go of any hidden agendas
- Consider the nature of our relative and Universal 'selves'
- Base trust and faith on critical reasoning
- Quiet, receptive stillness enhances intuitive awareness

Working with the Upper Dantian requires care. We must have a solid foundation in the Lower Dantian (grounding) and sufficient development of the Middle Dantian (emotional maturity) before extensive Upper Dantian work. Otherwise, we may experience imbalance, grandiosity, or confusion. Not to worry, proceed with care and curiosity.

INTEGRATION: THE THREE CENTERS IN HARMONY

The Three Centers are not separate; they form a unified system connected by what we call the central channel running from crown to perineum. In qigong and taiji nomenclature, the central channel might be called the Taiji Pole or Chong Mai.

As we practice:

- Energy moves through the central channel, connecting all three centers
- Each center influences and supports the others
- An imbalance in one center affects the whole system
- Harmony among the three centers creates optimal health, clarity, and presence

The progression of today's retreat mirrors the natural alchemical process:

- Morning: We establish grounding and gather vitality (Jing)
- Midday: We circulate energy with an open heart (Qi)
- Afternoon: We refine awareness and connect with spirit (Shen)

This isn't a one-time journey but a continuous cycle. We return again and again to the foundation, rebuild our energy, and refine our awareness. This is the practice of a lifetime.

TAKING PRACTICE HOME

After today's retreat, here are some ways to keep working with the Three Centers.

Daily Practice:

- Begin each practice session by settling awareness in the Lower Dantian.
- Use your breath as the bridge between centers.
- Notice which center feels most active or accessible at each moment.
- Allow energy to move naturally without forcing it.

Signs of Balance:

- Lower Dantian: Feeling grounded, stable, present in the body
- Middle Dantian: Emotional resilience, capacity for empathy, and connection
- Upper Dantian: Mental clarity, spacious awareness, sense of perspective

Signs of Imbalance:

- Lower Dantian: Feeling ungrounded, scattered, anxious, disconnected from body
- Middle Dantian: Emotional reactivity, difficulty with relationships, heart closed
- Upper Dantian: Mental fog, confusion, grandiosity, or spiritual bypassing

Simple Daily Check-In:

1. Place one hand at the hara area, breath naturally: How does this center feel?
2. Place one hand on the heart center, breath naturally: How does this center feel?
3. Place fingertips gently on forehead, breath naturally: How does this center feel?

This simple practice takes just two minutes and builds embodied awareness of your energetic state.

The teaching of the Three Centers offers a map for navigating our inner experience with greater wisdom and skill. It's not merely theoretical; it's a living practice that unfolds through sustained attention and sincere engagement.

Remember:

- Practice begins with the Lower Dantian. Establish your root
- The Middle Dantian requires patience; the heart opens gradually
- The Upper Dantian needs proper foundation, don't rush to "spiritual" experience

Most importantly, these centers are already present within you. The practice doesn't create them; it reveals what has always been there, waiting for your attention.

May today's practice serve your well-being and support your journey toward wholeness, clarity, and compassionate presence.

With respect for these ancient teachings and gratitude for the opportunity to practice together,

Teja Bell (Fudo Myoo Roshi)
Spirit Rock Day-Long Retreat
October 12, 2025

Three Treasures: A Day of Transformation

Morning roots in the hara deep,
where Earth and body meet and give,
where stillness holds—the Lower Center
gathering what nourishes—Jing
condenses like dew on an ancient stone.

Here in the hara,
the cauldron warms.
One hundred million neurons listen below,
as breath descends to meet the core,
and essence becomes the ground of all.

By midday, energy lifts like steam,
circulating through the heart's domain—Middle Center,
where breath becomes a living bridge,
where the thieves transform to virtue.

Qi flows through gates that guard and guide,
the Yellow Court, where alchemy abides,
as electromagnetic tides pulse outward,
The heart remembers its ancient wisdom.

Afternoon opens a luminous crown,
where spirit meets the sky unbound—Upper Center,
the seat of radiant knowing,
Shen dissolves into boundless light.

The pineal eye awakens softly,
As melatonin marks the rhythm of the stars
and consciousness expands beyond edges.

Three become one in the central channel,
Jing refines to Qi, Qi blooms to Shen—
from ice to water, water to mist,
and mist returning to the source, unnamed.

Not knowing but being,
not striving but allowing,
the fathom-long body contains all realms,
And every breath is coming home.