



## PART THREE: THE DOORWAYS OF PRACTICE

If the front door is locked, you find another way in. This is not defeat; it is wisdom. The house is still there, waiting for you. You simply need to discover which entrance will open.

For many people whose nervous systems carry the weight of trauma, the traditional door to seated meditation remains locked, at least for now. The instruction to sit still, close your eyes, and watch your breath leads not to peace but to panic. And so they stand outside, believing they cannot enter and that meditation is not for them.

But there are many doors. The path has never been closed to you. Only the entrance has changed.

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### The Body in Motion

In the earliest Buddhist teachings on mindfulness, the **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta**, which means "The Applications of Awareness," the Buddha did not speak only of sitting. He taught awareness in all postures: sitting, yes, but also walking, standing, and lying down. He spoke of knowing the body as it bends and stretches, eats and drinks, and moves through the ordinary activities of life.

Somewhere along the way, meditation became almost exclusively associated with stillness. But this was never the whole teaching. The body in motion can be just as profound a vehicle for awareness as the body at rest, and for some practitioners, it is far more accessible.

This understanding lies at the heart of QigongDharma.

Qigong is an ancient Chinese practice of cultivating life energy through gentle movement, breath, and intention. Dharma is the Sanskrit and Pali term for the Buddha's teaching, the truth of how things are, and the path of awakening. QigongDharma brings these streams together: the Daoist wisdom of working with the body's energy and the Buddhist wisdom of mindful awareness.

In this approach, we do not view movement as preparation for "real" meditation, something to do before we settle down to the serious business of sitting still. Movement itself is meditation. Awareness does not depend on immobility; it depends on relationship. The flowing forms of Radiant Heart Qigong, the mindful walk through the garden, the simple act of standing with awareness, these are complete practices, not lesser substitutes.

For a nervous system that does not yet feel safe in stillness, movement offers something essential: the freedom to discharge. When stress energy builds in the body, it needs somewhere to go. Stillness can trap that energy, intensifying the pressure. But gentle, mindful movement allows the energy to flow and release. The body can complete the protective responses it may have been holding for years, such as the impulse to run, to push away, or to shake off danger.

This is not a metaphor. Trauma researchers have observed that animals in the wild, after narrowly escaping a predator, often shake or tremble before returning to normal activity. They are discharging survival energy, allowing the nervous system to reset. Humans have the same capacity, but we often suppress it. We hold still, we "keep it together," and we push down what needs to move through. Mindful movement practice gives us permission to let the body do what it knows how to do. Always within the bounds of choice, gentleness, and safety.

## **Cultivating, Not Just Observing**

There is an important distinction in how QigongDharma approaches practice, and I want to name it explicitly.

In some forms of mindfulness training, the emphasis is purely on observation. You notice what is present: sensations, thoughts, emotions, without trying to change anything. This approach has great value and has helped many people. But for someone whose present-moment experience is dominated by distress, pure observation can feel like torture. You are asked to watch your suffering with equanimity you do not yet possess.

QigongDharma takes a different approach. We are not merely observing; we are cultivating. We are actively nurturing states of ease, groundedness, and vitality. We are not passive witnesses to whatever the nervous system happens to be



doing; we are gentle gardeners, tending the conditions in which peace can grow. And like any good gardener, we work with seasons, not against them.

This does not mean forcing positive states or pretending you feel something you do not. It means working skillfully with the body, breath, and intention to create an environment where the nervous system can settle. It means recognizing that you are not helpless in the face of your own biology. You have tools, and you can use them with wisdom.

The ancient Daoist principle of *wú wéi* guides this work. Often translated as "non-doing" or "effortless action," *wú wéi* points to a way of moving through life aligned with natural flow rather than against it, action arising from alignment rather than pressure. In practice, this means we do not strain. We do not grit our teeth and demand that our bodies relax. We invite. We allow. We create conditions and trust the body's innate intelligence to respond.

As I often say to my students:

*Force is not needed in our practice of QigongDharma.*

*Wú wéi is not mere non-doing; it represents the freedom of effortless being.*

*In harmony with the Dao, nothing is done, and nothing is left undone.*

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## The Five Regulations

Over the centuries, Qigong masters developed a practice framework that I have found endlessly useful, both for myself and for those I teach. It is called the **Five Regulations**, or *Wǔ Tiáo* in Chinese. These are five aspects of our experience that we learn to tune and harmonize, like a musician tuning the strings of an instrument.

**Regulating the Body** (*Tiáo Shēn*) comes first. Before we can settle the mind or refine the breath, we must find ease in the physical form. This means cultivating relaxation, not collapse, but a release of unnecessary tension. It means finding

alignment so that the body can support itself without strain. It means discovering balance and rootedness, the feeling of being grounded on the earth.

A relaxed body promotes a relaxed mind. Our biology and emotions are intimately connected; when the shoulders soften and the jaw unclenches, the mind softens too. This is not a metaphor but a physiological reality. The body is constantly sending signals to the brain about how things are going. When we consciously relax the body, we send signals of safety.

In QigongDharma, we work with posture not by forcing the body into some ideal shape, but by listening. What does your body need right now? Perhaps the spine wants to lengthen. Perhaps the knees want to soften. Perhaps there is an ache that needs acknowledgment before it can release. We approach the body with curiosity and kindness, as we would a friend who has been carrying a heavy burden.

**Regulating the Breath** (*Tiáo Xī*) follows naturally. The breath is a bridge between the conscious and unconscious, the voluntary and involuntary. You can choose to breathe deeply, but breathing also happens on its own while you sleep. This makes the breath a powerful doorway into the autonomic nervous system, the very system that governs our stress responses.

Slow, gentle breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the branch responsible for rest, digestion, and restoration. When you extend your exhale, you are directly stimulating the vagus nerve, sending signals of safety to the brain. This is not ancient superstition, it is confirmed by modern research. The breath is perhaps the most accessible tool we have for shifting our physiological state.

But here too, we do not force. Some trauma survivors find that focusing on the breath increases anxiety rather than easing it. If this is true for you, we work gently, perhaps simply allowing the breath to be natural without trying to control it, or perhaps focusing attention elsewhere until the breath feels safe to approach. The breath will wait for you. There is no hurry.

**Regulating the Mind** (*Tiáo Xīn*) is the third aspect. In Qigong tradition, there is a saying: *Yì dào, qì dào*, "Where the mind goes, the energy flows." The quality of our attention shapes our experience. If the mind is scattered and anxious, the body's energy becomes scattered and anxious. If the mind is settled and clear, the body follows.

Regulating the mind does not mean achieving a blank state of no-thought. It means cultivating a steady, kind, and wise quality of attention. It means noticing when you have been caught in rumination or self-criticism and gently returning to presence. It means setting intentions that support healing, perhaps as simple as "May I be at ease" or "I am safe in this moment."

For those with trauma, regulating the mind also means understanding your own patterns with compassion. The negative self-talk, the hypervigilance, and the tendency to catastrophize are not personal failings. They are symptoms of a nervous system that learned to expect danger. As you come to understand this, you can meet your own mind with less judgment and more tenderness.

**Regulating the Qi** (*Tiáo Qì*) and **Regulating the Spirit** (*Tiáo Shén*) are the fourth and fifth aspects. These move into subtler territory, encompassing the felt sense of life energy moving through the body and the quality of consciousness itself. For now, I will simply say that as the first three regulations become established, these deeper dimensions often open naturally. The body settles, the breath flows, the mind clears, and something else becomes possible: a sense of aliveness, presence, and connection to something larger than your personal story.

These five regulations are not a linear progression you complete and move beyond. They are more like dimensions of experience you return to again and again, each time with greater refinement. In any moment of practice, you might check in: How is my body? How is my breath? How is my mind? From that checking in, small adjustments arise, a softening here, a deepening there, that bring you into greater harmony.

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## Safety, Choice, and Listening

Underlying all of these practices is a fundamental orientation: *your safety matters, your choices matter, and your body's wisdom matters.*

In some meditation traditions, there is an emphasis on pushing through discomfort and not letting the ego or the body run the show. There is value in learning to sit with difficulty rather than always fleeing from it. But this teaching can be misapplied, especially for those with trauma. Pushing through can become retraumatizing. Ignoring the body's signals can deepen the wound rather than heal it.

In QigongDharma, we take a different view. We trust the body's messages. If your body tells you something is too much, we listen. If your nervous system signals danger, we do not override that signal with willpower. We ask what might help you feel safer. Perhaps you need to open your eyes. Perhaps you need to move. Perhaps you need to step outside or feel your feet on the ground.

These responses are not weakness. They are wisdom.

You always have a choice in this practice. You are never trapped. If a particular form or instruction does not work for you, you have permission to adapt it or set it aside entirely. The teacher, whether that teacher is me, a book, or a recording, offers guidance, not commands. Only you can feel what is happening inside your body. Only you can know what you need.

This emphasis on choice is itself healing. Trauma often involves a loss of agency, a sense that something happened that you could not control or escape. When practice restores your sense of choice, when you know you can stop, change, or leave at any moment, the nervous system begins to learn something new. It learns that you are no longer powerless. From that foundation of safety and agency, deeper work becomes possible.

Practice should expand your capacity, not test your endurance.

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## The Body as Home

There is a beautiful possibility that opens through this practice: the body can become a home.

For many people, especially those who have experienced trauma, the body feels like enemy territory. It is where panic lives, where pain resides, and where unwanted sensations arise without warning. The instinct is to flee the body, to live in the head, and to disconnect from physical experience as much as possible.

But we cannot heal what we abandon. And the truth is, the body is not only the site of suffering, but it is also the site of aliveness, pleasure, groundedness, and peace. The same nervous system that generates anxiety also generates calm. The same body that holds tension also holds the capacity for release.

Through gentle, mindful practice, we can begin to reclaim the body as a place we belong. The movement forms of Qigong teach us that the body can feel good and that stretching, breathing, and flowing can be pleasurable. The standing practices teach us that we can be rooted and stable, supported by the earth. The breathing practices teach us that each breath can be a source of nourishment rather than anxiety.

Slowly, the body transforms from a place of danger to a place of refuge. It becomes what the teachings call "a home for mindfulness", a sanctuary of sensory awareness where we can rest in presence. This does not happen all at once, and there may be setbacks along the way. But the direction of practice is toward belonging, toward coming home to the body you have always lived in but perhaps never fully inhabited.

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## Many Doorways, One Home

So there are many doorways into presence: the doorway of gentle movement, the doorway of breath, the doorway of standing practice, the doorway of walking meditation, the doorway of sound and chanting, the doorway of stillness when stillness becomes safe. QigongDharma offers all of these, and part of your journey is discovering which ones open most easily for you.

Some days, one doorway will be accessible and another will be locked. This is normal. The practice is not about mastering one technique forever, but about developing sensitivity to what you need in each moment. Today, perhaps your body craves flowing movement. Tomorrow, you may find yourself drawn to stillness.

The form matters less than the quality of presence you bring to it.

What all these doorways share is the invitation to be here, now, in this body, with kindness. They share the understanding that healing happens not through force but through allowing, not by conquering the body but by befriending it. They share the trust that your own inner wisdom knows the way if you can learn to listen.

This is the practice of QigongDharma: finding your doorway, crossing the threshold, and coming home.