

## Nudan Practice and the Modern Woman

In this paper I will address the relevance of ancient Nudan practices for modern women and share my thoughts about how one might best approach them. The information in this paper is not academic in nature, but rather is based upon the actual experiences of modern women performing this body of work. Part of why I feel this is important is that these ancient exercises are often so buried in metaphorical language that they are not very accessible to individuals not steeped in Daoist tradition. My whimsical working title for this paper was “Nudan practices for the Modern Woman, or “I am my own Lab Rat.” I want to begin with a disclaimer, which is to say that if you are fortunate enough to have a master from whom to learn this work, then one should by all means pursue this precious body of work under a teacher. I offer my thoughts upon this work not as a substitute for more traditional sources, but rather as an addendum because there is so little opportunity for most of us to actually speak to others who are actively pursuing this work, and to share experiences and insights about the roadblocks and successes that one may encounter along the way. I have actively practiced this work for the last three decades, and intensively pursued the inner levels of the work with an intrepid group of fellow practitioners for the last six years. This paper is an attempt to share some of what can and does happen when those of us who are living out in the modern world take up this great adventure into the realm of the Immortality practices.

One of the first of the difficulties is that unless one has an experienced teacher there is little guidance for the neophyte as to how to best structure her time and energy in approaching this body of work. While it is all profoundly energetic, nonetheless these exercises can be grouped roughly into categories: some are more internal meditations, some focus on movement and exercise of the body (along with internal meditations), some are specifically oriented to parts of the body such as the breasts, ovaries or pelvic floor, some are geared toward balancing and transforming the emotions. Some of them are more active and building in nature, while others are more nourishing and purifying. They can be done in an ascending order of difficulty moving from the more externally focused to the more internally focused, or they can be done simultaneously, with less time devoted to each practice in order to make time for a set of exercises. One also needs to consider the age and health of the practitioner; for younger women some exercises will need less time, whereas for older women there needs to be a strong focus on rebuilding the jing and bringing back strength and vitality to the older body. Finally one can do these exercises in the context of Taoist sexual practices with or without a partner, or one can choose to work within the context of celibacy.

In this paper I am going to talk about the basic exercises which I feel are most beneficial to every woman. These include the jade egg exercises, the breast and ovary exercises; exercises designed to strengthen the endocrine system and create a supple spine such as Willow Waist, Soaring Dragon Feeds on Qi and Swimming Dragon; and exercises to prepare for or to induce the alchemical transformation of the being such as The Lesser Heavenly Circuit and the seated Eight Brocades. In addition I like to add Bone Breathing exercises along with Water and Fire purifications, especially during times of stress or ill health when more vigorous practices are too challenging. All of these exercises are

important from the standpoint of bringing greater life force and vitality to the body, as well as forming the basis for more advanced Nudan practices. But even if the practitioner has only the goal of enhanced physical health and the retardation of the aging process these exercises are more than worth the time and energy that they require. In the beginning I recommend that practices be done in short sets of 20 to 30 minutes one or two times a day. The more nourishing exercises can be done as a preparation to sleep, thus contributing to overall health while not seeming like a burden on one's schedule.

The first thing that every woman needs to begin this work is to restore pelvic tone. This is important for a number of reasons. One is that over 50% of American adults over the age of 50 years experience some degree of incontinence. I don't know about the statistics elsewhere, but it is probable that this is a difficulty that occurs elsewhere as well. One reason why this is such a problem for women is that many of us have gone through childbirth without any attention later to restoring the damage to the pelvic floor muscles. Not only is urinary incontinence a common outcome, but prolapses of the bladder, rectum and uterus can also occur. Even in women who have not experienced childbirth (or men for that matter) the process of aging can create a condition which in Chinese Medicine we call the "collapse of Central Qi." This is the inability to have appropriate pelvic tone in order to keep the organs in place; at the very least it means one is leaking Qi out the lower orifices on a fairly continuous basis. In an extreme sense this is what we all experience in the moment of death when the body releases the lower orifices and the Po exits the body and returns to the earth; this in turn means that the organizing principle for our physical life force is no longer present and the body will begin immediately to decay. Mortification sets in, the Hun and Shen exit and the process of death is complete. Thus the ability to have pelvic tone forms not only the basis for physical health, it is essential for sealing in the life force if one is to create the longevity necessary for Nudan.

The first method for restoring pelvic tone is to work with a jade egg. A small drilled egg of some stone about the size and shape of a pigeon egg should be inserted in the vagina for several hours a day. In the beginning a woman can simply insert the egg and then go about her day; later if she wishes she can learn to perform rhythmic internal contractions to move the egg up and down or to rotate the egg internally. The highest levels of the work involve weight lifting with small weights which can be suspended from the egg. Descriptions of how to do this work are readily available online or in books; Master Chia's book *Cultivating Female Sexual Energy* contains clear explanations.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, however, part of the beauty of working with the egg is that it can be done while going about one's normal day; it requires no real extra time. Women typically worry about whether or not the egg can get stuck. This is actually amusing as the real problem is most generally that it is difficult to keep the egg in place when one is a beginner. If the pelvic floor is weak the egg will simply fall out! However having a drilled egg removes the anxiety. One can attach a bit of dental floss or embroidery silk and pull the egg out if necessary. The gentle movement of the egg against the inner walls as the woman walks around will stimulate improved vaginal tone, increased secretions (which is very helpful for the older woman) and both increased tone and differentiation of the muscles of the pelvic floor. The advantages of increased pelvic tone are obvious; the advantages of differentiation are perhaps less so, but are equally important. One of the

difficulties in moving energy down the internal pathway from the ovarian palace (Qi Hai) along the shared internal pathways of the Chong Mai, Du Mai and Ren Mai to the perineum at Hui Yin, and then onward to the Wei Lu pass, is that most women have very poor sensing of their anatomical structures and only the most vague ability to visualize them. Being able to sense and move energy entails having a clear ability to sense the body accurately, image it clearly and feel what is actually going on. While one might think an area such as the genitalia would be an area clearly in one's sensing, in fact most women have no idea where their perineum begins or ends, where the various openings in the pelvic floor are located relative to each other; and they certainly have no ability to independently contract or differentiate these structures.

The Jade Egg helps women achieve this. When one can wear the egg and forget its presence yet then urinate without the egg precipitously falling out, one knows that the floor of the pelvis has strengthened and that one has gained the ability to open the urethra while simultaneously keeping the tone of the vaginal sphincter, an act which requires real differentiation of the actual structures. While this may not seem immediately important, it is in fact vital in doing the internal movement of energy required for the Lesser Heavenly Circuit. It also has the side benefit of ameliorating many of the irritations of menopause, as well as improving sexual functioning. Any woman who has worked with an egg can tell you that the strength and suppleness of her vaginal walls improves in one to two weeks of daily practice involving no more than simply wearing the egg. And if a woman is prone to urinary issues when sneezing or exercising, the egg will produce a cure in short order. For those who are choosing to do Nudan as part of the broader practices of Daoist sexual practice the egg will greatly increase their ability to induce the Valley Orgasm.

While the egg exercises need take little time out of one's day other than the few minutes involved in warming and inserting the egg; the "Doe" exercises require 15 -20 minutes. I recommend these exercises be done daily for women in all age ranges. They include massage of the breasts and ovaries with accompanying visualizations and breathing. Descriptions of these exercises are readily available in a variety of books, again I might recommend *Cultivating Female Sexual Energy*, or alternatively, the work of Hsi Lai in *The White Tigress Manuals*.<sup>2</sup> Various other authors describe them as well; in general they are all very similar so simply pick a set that feels comfortable for you. The Tigress lineage stresses restoration of tone and beauty to the breasts, which most women enjoy and which the exercises certainly do; other authors stress their health benefits. Certainly they are important because they are an excellent prophylactic against breast cancer. By mobilizing the energy and breaking up stagnation they prevent cancer; more importantly to the broader work, they help to awaken and restore the Qi of the chest. In Nudan this is essential because the center of a woman's Qi is in her heart, not the Dan Tien, as it is in men. This is something that is often poorly understood because this work has been largely taught by men for men; for women there are certain essential differences and the fact that we must center our Qi in the heart is one of them. Besides breaking up stagnation and preventing cancer, stimulating the breasts reawakens the life force and promotes a younger physiology. It is also important for those women who wish to move on to the practice of "Cutting off the Dragon" or menstrual cessation, which is to say

drawing the creative force of the ovaries upward to the breasts where it can be stored for the alchemical work of creating the immortal body.

Warming the ovaries is also part of the Doe practices. This involves rubbing and pressing the ovaries while breathing and visualizing light and heat entering them. In pre-menopausal women the main focus on the heating of the ovaries would be in the pre-ovulation part of the cycle when the ovaries are building their heat. During the days of ovulation special focus should be on drawing the energy upward. Post-ovulation focuses on the restoration of yin. In post-menopausal women the focus is on rebuilding the life force of the ovaries. This may trigger a resumption of menstrual cycling, an event that is unsettling at first for both the women and their physicians. However texts assure us that this is a normal stage in Nudan, and that the woman need only to focus on drawing the energy upward and after a while her cycles will cease again but she will be locked into a permanently physiologically younger state.<sup>3</sup> In women of all ages it is important that the ovaries be energized as this is the energy source that is drawn upon and passed through the internal pathways in the Lesser Heavenly Circuit exercise. The total required time for the Doe exercises once one has mastered them should be from 10 to 30 minutes. These exercises are especially important if one is choosing to do the sexual alchemical practice of generating the three peak medicines. In order to produce the sexual elixir of the Middle Peak a woman has to achieve a strong sensitivity to the energy of the breasts.

Learning how to compress or pack energy into the ovaries is important for older women who need to restore themselves, or for younger women who wish to increase their sexual force or to produce a very strong baby. This practice can be added on after the warming exercises and requires only a few minutes of concentrated breathing and muscular contractions. Once again, the actual exercise involves learning how to differentiate and work with the body. Anyone who has ever seen a belly dancer who can contract their abdominal muscles in a rhythmic way from the solar plexus down to the pubic bone has witnessed a form of this exercise. By simultaneously contracting the abdominal muscles while moving the energy down and while drawing the perineum up, the practitioner compresses the Qi and can direct it into the ovaries. Men have a similar practice, but direct the Qi to the testicles.

All of these exercises are designed to preserve the jing or rebuild the jing. They accomplish the first level of alchemical work, which is to restore and conserve jing. The second level of the work pertains to the Qi. Jing must be converted to Qi, and Qi must be moved and mobilized. There are many Qi Gong exercises that address this level, but in Nudan there is a particular emphasis on exercises that promote a supple spine and that stimulate the fat-burning of the abdominal region. Another way of looking at this from the more modern scientific point of view is that these exercises stimulate the endocrine system. When we consider that the endocrine system fundamentally determines the aging of the body, we can understand why Nudan/Neidan has such a focus on the preservation of youthfulness. It also makes sense that the classical texts talk about the process of immortality as involving a returning of energy: age becomes vitality, vitality becomes youthfulness, youthfulness becomes the prepubescent body – the ultimate yang body. Whether or not one chooses to view this metaphorically, still it is clear that promoting a

physiology that at the very least is pre-menopausal or pre-andropausal is a very good thing. The exercises that I have found most useful for this work are Willow Waist, Swimming Dragon (which is a variant of Willow Waist, more commonly done by men) and Soaring Dragon Feeds On Qi, which I believe is both a preparation for Swimming Dragon and also a way of opening the Eight Extraordinary Channels. These exercises are readily accessible in the works of Hsi Lai, Master Shih and in various other internet sources, so I will not describe them here other than to discuss their effects. 4

I recommend that beginners choose one of them and begin with five minutes a day and gradually work up to a minimum of 20 minutes a day. One might do 5 minutes of Soaring Dragon Feeds on Qi and 15 minutes of Swimming Dragon, or 20 minutes of Willow Waist. Willow Waist is the most physically challenging, and also involves a complex internal visualization to activate and blend the three elixir fields. Often I alternate between the exercises depending on my energy level, doing one set on one day and the other on another. It is important to take time building up the length of one's practice because the side to side movement of the spine can produce soreness and pain, especially in those with postural issues. Willow Waist can also strain the thighs and the knees until one has built up strength. What is important however is that one begins to learn how to move the Qi: up the spine, down the front of the body, through the central channel, through the energy field, and in the case of Willow Waist, activating the elixir fields and blending them. At this point in the practice the practitioner needs to begin to learn how to access the energy of the Three Pure Ones, which is to say the energies of the earth via the contact points of Kidney 1 and the energies of the Primordial force and one's own personal Shen which are channeled through Bai Hui. I stress visualizing these energies entering in and mingling them in the heart. One then needs to drop them down to the Dan Tien for the practices.

The final level of Nudan is to convert Qi into Shen. The exercises that help one to do this are The Lesser Heavenly Circuit (also known as the Microcosmic Orbit) and the seated Eight Brocades. Both of these are extremely focused internal meditations, although the Eight Brocades involves movements as well. One master with whom I studied told me that he thought that the Lesser Heavenly Circuit was too difficult for beginners and that it took years to make progress in moving the energy; my own experience is that daily practice yields results fairly quickly. Sensations of heat moving up the spine occur for most women in the early stages, later on women report remarkably consistent internal imagery. Energy improves and vitality increases, menstruating women often report that their cycles improve with there being a reduction in physical symptoms and shorter, more moderate flow. Detailed descriptions of how to do the Lesser Heavenly Circuit are found in a number of sources, but my personal favorite is again Master Chia. He includes many useful diagrams, movements and preparatory exercises that help the practitioner to really locate where the various energy points are on the body. One difficulty that I have observed is that oddly enough this exercise is harder sometimes for women who have been doing visualization practices for years. They *imagine* the movement of Qi, but they are not really sensing and feeling in the physical and energy bodies. It is important to actually *feel* what you are doing, and to know where the actual structures are that you are attempting to effect. The imaginal body is the Hun, and while important in the

modulation of emotions, it is not the primary body of energy. Another additional note that I would like to add here is that for women it is really important to focus on the descending aspect of the Qi. Any woman who is fully orgasmic can have a notion of what the upward flow of Qi is like; the descending of the Qi through the core of the body is actually where the most work needs to be done for most of us.

A frequent concern that is voiced about these more advanced practices is that they can cause health problems. What is more true is that they can alter the course of what is already a deranged process, moving it toward greater health but temporarily increasing symptoms. For example some changes that might occur might be that initially there may be an *increase* in bleeding accompanied with clots and brownish blood if the woman has had Qi stagnation. If on the other hand her periods were irregular, skipped or very light because of blood deficiencies, the woman is also likely to see an increase in the amount of blood, length of her periods and frequency. The heavier flow in both cases is a good thing, because the body is moving toward a healthier state. Some women also report slight cramping in the ovaries at the midcycle in the earlier phases of the work. This is probably due to the increased heat in the ovaries; as the practice continues and the energy is drawn upward this symptom will discontinue.

As practice continues the periods should move toward what is considered optimal in Chinese Medicine, which is to say that they have no cramping, bloating or other symptoms associated with them, and they arrive unheralded by anything other than a moderate but strong flow of bright red blood without clots or pain. They will over time shorten in length, in part because the body is becoming more efficient at shedding its lining, and may last only for two or three days. This change alone makes the practices worth doing in my opinion; the fact that modern woman consider it normal for menstruation to be a burden accompanied by a raft of unpleasant changes is truly unfortunate, given that it can be corrected. Infertility issues may also be resolved, especially as heat and life force builds up in the ovaries. Younger women in my study group all reported positive changes in their menstruation. Several women with abnormal bleeding due to fibroids (or in one case endometriosis) reported that over time their periods became more and more normal. In younger women, the periods may also stop, in a graduated fashion. This is referred to as “Cutting off the Dragon.” Should they wish to conceive, then they need only cease the exercises for several months until their flow returns, and they should then conceive a baby that is greatly enhanced by the increased life forces of the mother. I have not yet seen any menstruating women in my group experience the cessation of periods, although I have seen the resumption of cycling in menopausal or perimenopausal women. Classical texts report that such a change does happen, and that it should be gradual in nature, with the periods becoming less over time.

For the woman in perimenopause, Nudan offers the opportunity to ease what can otherwise become a difficult transition. This is also one of the more difficult times to take up Nudan because the changes that can occur can be obscured by the changes of perimenopause; women may have increased bleeding because of peri-menopause, or (briefly) because their returning life force may break up the Qi stagnation that has been gradually building up over the years. The difficulty here is that modern medical doctors will

become alarmed and want to perform unnecessary procedures such as D&Cs; this is a problem that also occurs in menopausal women who may resume their cycles as their life force returns to pre-menopausal levels. Unless these episodes of bleeding are prolonged or extreme, both the women and their doctors should adopt a “wait and see” attitude because they will often be passing phenomenon that are being caused by changes in the physiological aging process due to the age-reversal that occurs in Nudan. Generally speaking, however, after some period of adjustment, women either attain very regular and pain free cycles, or if they succeed in drawing the energy upward, they will have no discernable cycles at all, but without any symptoms of menopause.

Conversely, they may go through menopause without any serious symptoms, only to later have their cycles resume as they rebuild their life force! All of this can present a confusing picture. The most important thing is to maintain a sensible attitude. Questions that women need to ask themselves are: is this bleeding heavy enough to cause depletion or anemia? Are there other changes that point to positive (or negative) changes? An example of this might be that a woman who has been menopausal for seven years begins to bleed. She has been on bioidentical hormones for four years, but only at a low level, not in one of the programs that deliberately induce periods. She has never had any breakthrough bleeding, and suddenly she has a period. Her bleeding however was exactly like the menstrual periods of her younger years: exactly on time each month, without pain or clotting, normal in length. In addition, her vaginal secretions had increased to pre-menopausal years and her energy levels were greatly improved. Should one view her bleeding as dangerous and pathological? Many gynecologists insist that any bleeding in a post-menopausal woman is pathological, and certainly potentially dangerous. In this case blood levels showed that her FSH levels had dropped to below 10 (the number fertility doctors look for when hoping to achieve pregnancy). Fortunately her gynecologist, who had trained in China in TCM and also in Daoist tantric practices, chose to take a “wait and see” approach.

If the Daoist classical directions for “Cutting off the Dragon” are to be believed literally (as my own experiences have borne out) then post menopausal women should resume menstruation as their life force returns. Continued practice should then stop the flow. In my own experience I have found that when I am optimally healthy and doing my practices intensively I do not flow; if my health dips somewhat (as it did during the last year, when I had Lyme disease) I have normal periods. When I was acutely ill I didn’t have them at all. All of this is confusing but the best way to judge is by how one feels. When periods are resuming or normalizing the bleeding may for a short time look alarming- women may flow for several weeks as Qi stagnation releases or as the body attempts to resume its earlier rhythms. As long as the woman is otherwise healthy one should not panic as it will generally sort itself out. Women who are experiencing these changes should consult with a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine; TCM doctors have many ways to assess the health of menstruation and can often prescribe herbs or perform acupuncture to ease these shifts. They also have a paradigm that allows them to understand the fact that such changes can occur. Western allopaths have no way to understand these shifts.

It seems one need hardly ask why a woman would choose to do these exercises, yet the ultimate focus does make a difference. Doesn't everyone want to be healthier, more youthful and vital? Yet oddly enough Nudan is often dismissed as being on the one hand, too focused on external youthfulness (as in some Tigress lineages) or too esoteric and otherworldly. Immortality is generally not considered a goal that is attainable. Modern teachers may explain that to be an "immortal" simply means that one has attained the state of a vital and healthy old age – usually somewhere above the mid-eighties. However, ancient texts teach that this is *not* a metaphor, that immortality is a literal goal, which consists of building an immortal body into which the adept can transfer their life force either before death (which is then avoided) or at the moment of death, thus attaining an immortal body which can be material or immaterial at will. It is tempting to dismiss this and simply focus on the notion that this work will produce in practitioners a healthy and vital old age – one which will extend the effective life span allowing for individuals to ripen and mature their gifts. If it takes nearly sixty years to master a complex profession, wouldn't it be wonderful to have another thirty years of being fully productive?

Yet ultimately, I feel that this attitude actually impedes the work. I prefer to take the attitude that "I will become an immortal or die trying." This work is so profoundly based in the mind/body interface that the focus on one's belief actually *does* make a difference. The more one maintains an open and flexible belief system, the more one makes accessible the internal experiences that ultimately create change on a physiological level. In addition, especially for those of us who are beginning later in life, it is important to remember that any growth that we produce in our transcendent (immortal) body will survive this incarnation, and be present to form the basis for work in our next lives.

For younger women the work offers the chance to conserve energy while it is still strong, saving the work of rebuilding in later years. It also offers the opportunity to greatly slow physical aging, so that women maintain a youthful appearance much longer (or as some lineages teach, forever). It will correct and regulate the menstrual cycle. In adepts, it allows for the cessation of menstrual cycling, thus making conception an entirely conscious choice for women. One could see this as representing the next step in our evolution from our animal natures. By being able to control ovulation at will, women could control the number of children they produced, as well as ensuring that their children received maximal inputs of ancestral Qi. To have conception become a truly conscious decision would change the face of our social world as well. Women would also be spared the damage that untimely or too frequent childbearing creates.

For older women Nudan restores not only the body but also one's mind. Improved functioning of memory and the ability to learn new material easily again are some of the changes that I have noticed in myself and in some of the other older women in my practice group. Depression and the ravages of stress in women of all ages is strongly impacted by this work, especially if one adds the Six Healing Sounds to the mix. One can begin the exercises gradually and fit them into one's day by taking short breaks to do them. I like this approach because it makes it possible to fit them into a busy schedule while simultaneously giving one a breather in the busy flow of a day. I think even a few

minutes of any given practice on a daily basis is better than a longer time done sporadically. The effects are cumulative and are best noticed when one is very regular in one's practice.

To sum up, Nudan offers modern women a way to improve the quality of everyday life in significant ways. It empowers us and allows us to gain control of our feminine processes; it frees us from the often radical and ill advised interventions of modern medicine; it offers us the opportunity to have healthier, more productive work lives and more emotional balance. It is probably the single most profound practice that any woman can take up in order to enhance her life.

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