

A Poetical Excursion

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Sometimes people ask me why I took up Tai Chi. “Why would you not take it up?” usually doesn’t seem an appropriate answer, so I generally say something in terms of general health, new interests in retirement, interest in Chinese philosophy, meditative qualities, etc.

For me, really, the central motivation for beginning was my love of early Daoist philosophy. I had retired from my profession, moved back home to this area, and wanted to attend to things I had long neglected. Here is a Daoist poem that has inspired me for rather a long time:

I built my hut beside a traveled road
Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses.
You would like to know how it is done?
With the mind detached, one’s place becomes remote.
Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge
I catch sight of Mount Lu:
The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets
And flocks of flying birds return together.
In these things there is a fundamental truth
I would like to tell, but there are no words.

Tao Qian (Tao Yuan-Ming) (365-427 CE)
from Twenty Poems After Drinking Wine

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This poem was written in China around the year 400 CE. It is an early example of a type of poetry that becomes central in a major aesthetic and spiritual movement in Chinese culture. I see a connection between the themes of poetry like this and Tai Chi practice that I want to explore. I continued Tai Chi because of the various ways I found Tai Chi improving my quality of life. From a Daoist perspective, “quality of life” has to do with naturalness, simplicity, stillness of mind, and other sorts of attitudes associated with *wuwei*. Tai Chi helps a lot, but these qualities can be hard to cultivate when one is immersed in the hectic, day-to-day hustle bustle of normal economic family life. Retirement helps one to disengage.

The poet Tao Qian spent some years of his adult life as an aristocratic Confucian gentleman in the imperial administration of the Chinese capitol, dealing with issues of wealth and power in that cutthroat political world. Then he retired to a small farm in south China. There is no doubt that he had read this tale about the classical Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi:

Once, when Chuang Tzu was fishing in the P’u River, the king of Ch’u sent two officials to go and announce to him: “I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm.”

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Chuang Tzu held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, “I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch’u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?”

“It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud,” said the two officials.

Chuang Tzu said, “Go away! I’ll drag my tail in the mud.”

Offered the position of prime minister of the kingdom, Zhuangzi rudely dismissed the ambassadors in order to continue fishing. A good story, indeed! Tao Qian was probably not so rude, but he just as surely dismissed the glories as well as the vicissitudes of courtly life in order to retire to his little farm. He preferred country life to courtly life; idleness to power, position and wealth; and detachment to attachment.

These are standard themes in early Daoist philosophy, found throughout the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* during the Period of the Warring States. Some seven hundred years later, they recrystallize in the aesthetic traditions developing during the Six Dynasties Period – also “interesting times” in China. Here’s another poem by Tao Qian:

Home Again Among Fields and Gardens

Nothing like all the others, even as a child,
rooted in such love for hills and mountains,

I stumbled into their net of dust, that one
departure a blunder lasting thirteen years.

But a tethered bird longs for its old forest,
and a pond fish its deep waters – so now,

my southern outlands cleared, I nurture
simplicity among these fields and gardens,

home again. I've got nearly two acres here,
And four or five rooms in this thatch hut,

elms and willows shading the eaves in back,
and in front, peach and plum spread wide.

Villages lost in mist-and-haze distances,
kitchen smoke drifting wide-open country,

dogs bark deep across back roads out here,
and roosters crow from mulberry treetops.

No confusion within these gates, no dust,
My empty home harbors idleness to spare.

Back again: after so long caged in that trap,
I've returned to occurrence coming of itself.

Like so much good poetry, this works as simple surface narration of life experience. No doubt the language is more compelling in the original, but it seems to translate well. It is also dense with explicit Daoist imagery and references to classical texts. The “net of dust” represents entanglements of wealth and position, of course, and the word dust is also symbolic of impurities of all kinds that blur clarity of vision and purpose. One finds this usage in the Zhuangzi [BW 70]; it also looks forward to Chan/Zen usages, for instance, in the story of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch (638-713).

The dogs barking and roosters crowing refer to a passage in the Daodejing [80] describing the ideal village: one hears the sounds of nearby villages but life is so self-sufficient that one has no need to visit them. “Idleness to spare,” indeed.

“These gates” are the doors of perception, thus in the last four lines the rural homestead is likened to the mind of the poet, which, in idleness and simplicity, has become empty (*wu*), he rests in nonaction (*wuwei*), in “occurrence coming of itself” (*ziran*), which is pure spontaneity. The perspective is central to Daoism, and also to Chan Buddhism, which is developing at this period. So here, in this natural place (both physical and mental) the poet encounters the deep qualities of reality. Surface and depth cohere, as they do everywhere, if the house is empty. There is a poetic continuity among themes of retirement, nature, and clarity.

Tao Qian is by no means the sole expressor of this aesthetic, which comes to be called mountains-and-rivers (*shanshui*). The aesthetic embraces numerous art forms inspired by Daoism and Buddhism in Chinese, Japanese and Korean traditions, and, in modern times, has spread beyond the Far East. But Tao Qian is one of the tradition's poetic inaugurators.

Another is Xie Lingyun (Hsieh Ling-yun) a contemporary of Tao Qian, an aristocrat who labored at the heart of the empire, lost a political battle, and, later in life was exiled to the south Chinese coast. He made the most of it. Here's one of his poems:

Looking up to the example that old sage handed down,
and considering what comes easily to my own nature,

I offered myself to this tranquil repose of dwelling,
and now nurture my lifework in the drift of idleness.

Master Pan's early awakening always humbled me,
and I was shamed by Master Shang's old-age insight,

so with years and sickness both closing in on me
I devoted myself to simplicity and returned to it all,

left that workaday life for this wisdom of wandering,
for this wilderness of rivers-and-mountains clarity.

But what does any of this have to do with Tai Chi? While there are sometimes hints of meditative practices – chanting, breathing – in these poems, I haven’t found any direct reference to our practice. The connections I perceive are, on the one hand, symbolic/metaphorical/allusory, indeed, poetic (!); while on the other hand they have to do with mental attitudes and states of consciousness.

The roots of our practice are concerned with attending to the flow of *qi* throughout the body and beyond. In all the postures, in movement and in stillness, in effort and in rest, that’s what we’re doing. (Or so I am told.) But this attention to *qi* is also at the heart of the Daoist enterprise and the *shansui* aesthetic.

In her recent, masterful review of the state of knowledge concerning the Zhuangzi text, *Zhuangzi: Text and Context* (2014: Three Pines Press), scholar Livia Kohn summarizes the embodiment of *qi* as found throughout the text, particularly in terms of the upright and wayward aspects of *qi*:

“In either dimension, *qi* stands in close connection to the human mind (ch. 4). When it flows smoothly, ‘the mind is at rest and free from affairs’ (ch. 6) and we get along easily with all beings (ch. 7). By the same token, mental peace supports and nurtures *qi*, causing it to be upright (ch. 19). Yet the mind can also modify *qi* into wayward mode so that, for example, depression prevents it from coming forth (ch. 29) and its expression in emotions and desires ‘entangles virtue [*de*]’ (ch. 23).

“A key to working with *qi* is its conscious cultivation: ‘Sitting quietly, you stabilize the *qi*’ (ch. 30) In stages reminiscent of the ‘*Neiye* [*Inward Training* text],’ adepts become upright, still, clear, and empty (ch. 23). Doing away with ordinary perception, they release the mind to the point where they perceive through pure *qi* rather than with the help of the senses (ch. 4). They can go even beyond this by ‘forgetting the spirit and *qi*, casting off form and bones’ to reach a state of oblivion and flow (ch.11). Some may even master control of the self as dynamic expression of *qi*. Thus, the Gourd Master can show ‘the workings of balanced *qi*’ as one of the energy patterns at his disposal.” (Kohn, pp. 88-89; chapter references are to chapters in the *Zhuangzi* text.)

All of these poets were steeped in the literary classics of Chinese tradition. They were quite aware of what Zhuangzi had to say about *qi*, and undoubtedly took *qi* quite seriously. After all, they were Chinese scholars! As poets, however, they preferred to express the results of *qi* cultivation rather than the process, and to do so in imagistic language. So there is an intrinsic connection between this *shanshui*, or mountains-and-rivers, aesthetic and our practice in terms of *qi* cultivation.

No one expresses the extreme horizon of “wilderness of mountain-and-rivers clarity,” the “casting off [of] form and bones,” better than the Tang dynasty (ninth century) poet who lived on Cold Mountain.

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The poet and the mountain are called both Han Shan – Cold Mountain. The poetry is as Buddhist as it is Daoist. Han Shan is said to have lived on the mountain, where he left his poems written on rocks and trees. Occasionally he visited a Chan monastery where his friend Shide worked in the kitchen. Most of the monks thought they were both crazy, but some felt they were enlightened. When Han Shan disappeared only the poems were left. [Japanese name forms: Kanzan and Jittoku. “Shide” means “foundling.”] There are some 300 Cold Mountain poems. Here is one:

9.

People ask about Cold Mountain Way.
Cold Mountain Road gives out where

confusions of ice outlast summer skies
and sun can't thin mists of blindness.

So how did someone like me get here?
My mind's just not the same as yours:

if that mind of yours were like mine,
you'd be right here in the midst of this.

One more:

205.

The cloud road's choked with deep mist. No one gets here
that way,

but these Heaven-Terrace Mountains have always been
my home:

a place to vanish among five-thousand-foot cliffs and
pinnacles,
ten thousand creeks and gorges all boulder towers and
terraces.

I follow streams in birch-bark cap, wooden sandals, tattered
robes,
and clutching a goose-foot walking-stick, circle back
around peaks.

Once you realize this floating life is the perfect mirage of
change,
it's breathtaking – this wild joy at wandering boundless
and free.

But while he's on Cold Mountain (and *is* Cold Mountain),
we're here along Salmon Creek. The poets I chose to work
with express three aspects of their retirement aesthetic, that
of "Fields and Gardens" (Tao Qian), "Rivers and
Mountains" (Xie Lingyun), and the reclusive extreme of
Cold Mountain. All retire from ordinary life to, in various
ways, cultivate *qi* in the outdoors, from charming
countryside to the furthest wilderness. Tao Qian is married,
raising children, in some of his poems; Xie Lingyun is
elderly; Cold Mountain is beyond such descriptions.

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Take your pick! Perhaps you also find these poets inspirational. Again, one way to think about them is through the connection: retirement/retreat – nature/wilderness – clarity/freedom.

Whatever your time and situation in life, consider your practice, at home, in class and at camp, *as* retirement – in the sense of removal, retreat, reclusion from ordinary life. You probably already think of it this way. Find here a companionable refuge from the day-to-day, a “thatched hut” among friends that leaves the “net of dust” behind, at least for the moment. A high place that affords a loftier viewpoint. Disconnect, follow the circles, let your mind become quiet and idle. Find the wilderness within.

When you come to Tai Chi, leave your busyness behind at the gate. Bring only yourself, or “what comes easily to [your] own nature.” As another poet, Meng Hao-jan, put it, (H. 46)

No interest in the fetters of responsibility,
I leave all worry and trouble behind here,

Wander the heights onto Radiant-Four Ridge,
follow dark-enigma to Primal-Three Canyon,

and soon, lost deep in thoughts all distant
wandering, perfecting that deathless Way,

I’m looking across three twilight mountains,
Clouds billowing empty and boundless away.

Or, if that seems a bit too much, just feel free to drag your tail in the mud.

SOURCES

All translations of poetry are by David Hinton, save the first of Tao Qian, which is by Arthur Waley.

The story of Zhuangzi is translated by Burton Watson.

David Hinton, *Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China*. New Directions: 2005.

Livia Kohn, *Zhuangzi: Text and Context*. Three Pines Press: 2014.

Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Columbia UP: 1968. [BW]

Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese*. Alfred A. Knopf: 1941.

NB: All these works are highly recommended. If you're interested in this kind of poetry, Hinton is an excellent source: fine selections, excellent introduction and notes.