

MAKING THE WAY IN TAI CHI

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I want to begin by thanking Jane for asking me to give a talk at this camp. I have been studying a recent translation of the *Daodejing*¹ for the last few months and was really struck by how differently the old book seems now that I practice tai chi. Of course, this new (2003) translation is quite radical, in that it is based on decades-long collaborations of a team of scholars seeking to render the world view of ancient Chinese philosophy into terms that can be appreciated by the 21st century west. So part of the “freshness” I’m finding in the *Daodejing* is due to the sophisticated philosophical language of the translation and commentary, while another part is based in the changes of my own perspective due to tai chi. Of course, the freshness is also an integral aspect of the text itself. Anyone who has pondered even the first chapter will testify to that! What I want to do today is to highlight some aspects of the ancient book that seem to resonate with our practice, drawing on the insights of this particular volume. Given that the Daoist perspective has infused tai chi chuan for millennia, that shouldn’t be too difficult!

Dao, as you probably know, is impersonal – not a deity of any kind, and further, *dao* is absolutely present in the world, or “the 10,000 things,” or *wanwu* to use Chinese-style terminology. So too is *tian*, “heaven,” part of this world. Heaven, or sky, is more ethereal, more spiritually charged, as one might put it, but all things are composed of *qi*, as you might recall. The *qi* of heaven is more tenuous; that of earth more turbid. So, this entire world is real, and we have the capacity to observe it accurately. All aspects of the world are interconnected:

Human beings emulate the earth,
Earth emulates the heavens.
The heavens emulate way-making [*dao*],
And way-making emulates what is spontaneously so (*ziran*).²
[25]

But it is important to consider that things in the world are in constant flux; everything is changing all of the time. Indeed, time is an essential component of things as they are. This is one of the reasons that these translators render the term *dao* in a dynamic sense, inventing the translation “way-making.” Way-making is the ever-present, spontaneous activity of the world

Way-making (*dao*) is the flowing together of all things
(*wanwu*).³ [62]

You see, *dao* is not something separate from reality; it is the very nature of reality. It is not a static “thing,” it is rather the event-stream of the changing world, in which there is both continuity and change all the time. Indeed, it is dynamic, changing, blending into opposites, indefinable, spontaneously moving out and flowing back, dark and light, mysterious.

And you (and I) are integrated into this flow. We can never be separated from it; rather, we are intrinsically part of it. We are *qi*; we are yin and yang, we are *dao*. According to Laozi, we keep forgetting this and construct elaborate mental architectures that we project onto the world in order to get a handle on things, thus separating ourselves from reality. Often these mental architectures are projected on to events in terms of binary oppositions: good/evil, self/other, nature/culture. These projections may be helpful in negotiating life situations, but they are also deceptive. One of the first things Laozi admonishes us with is the statement:

Naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming.⁴ [1]

Laozi's position is that the viewer (you, I) is always integrated into the viewed. There is no independent objective viewpoint. The only views are those of some viewer. The "objective" viewpoint is "the view from nowhere,"⁵ which, to use the Chinese philosophical phrase, "is inadmissible!" But this is not a claim for solipsistic subjectivity. Only a madman (or woman) would assert that, "Only I exist! The world is my creation!" No, for Laozi the world is quite real, though one or another of us may perceive it more clearly or dimly. Included in this reality is the fact that the world looks different to different people (as well as to other, non-human viewers). The Daoists aren't much into making grandiose metaphysical claims; they're very practical. Reality is what we see and feel, though we do get confused.

So, for instance, if two people, say a woman and a man, need to talk about things, they need to come to a mutual agreement about what is actually going on if they're going to get any where. Clarity about what's real is necessary for effective dealing. And if they want to interact, this mutuality and clarity will have to pervade their activity. Doing this well requires techniques of perceptiveness, humility, grace, spontaneity, and charity, among other virtues. So to, as Laozi would have it, with all our interactions with the world. But we have to cultivate these effective attitudes of clarity and mutuality (among others) in order to do it.

The aim of the *Daodejing* is to try to help you appreciate, connect and deal with the true nature of the event-stream that is the actual world. That would be an active process, which involves, paradoxically, *wuwei*, often translated as "non-action,"⁶ (everything seems to be paradoxical in the *Daodejing*). But how does this work?

Among the strategies Laozi employs to try to seduce you into the proper attitude is to disengage your binary defaults (the mental process of naming in terms of opposites) by harping on the mutuality of opposites – this strategy pervades the text. This statement is already in Chapter Two:

As soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful are beautiful,
There is already ugliness.
As soon as everyone knows the able,
There is ineptness.

Determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other,
Difficult and easy complement each other,
Long and short set each other off,
High and low complete each other,
Refined notes and raw sounds harmonize with each other,
Before and after lend sequence to each other –
This is really how it all works.⁷ [2]

While it is useful to frame reality in terms of opposites such as ‘difficult and easy,’ ‘long and short’, we must keep in mind that such names or terms are opinions and their utility is dependent on perspective. Events themselves are always continuing to change. “Things,” as we observe them become their opposites. This is one of the reasons that Daoism is so mistrustful of names and definitions. What is long in one context becomes short in another. Definitions become relativized according to the contextual or perspectival view, and, Daoism insists, there is no one perspective that is absolutely, positively correct. Further, if your definitions, or naming, or mental architecture fail to correspond to what is actual you may become confused and agitated, causing your relationships

with the ten thousand things (the event-stream) to become disturbed and unbalanced.

What the *Daodejing* aims to do is to help you get a clearer handle on things. If you really want to experience the world as it is, you must clarify the nature of the imaginary mental constructs that burden your perceptions. Much of the “nothingness” so promoted in the text (the translators discuss them as “*wu*-forms,”⁸ from the Chinese word for negation) has to do with ridding oneself of, or at least managing, desires – but even here there is paradox:

Thus, to be really objectless in one’s desires (*wuyu*) is how one observes the mysteries of all things,
While really having desires is how one observes their boundaries.⁹ [1]

Note that this statement doesn’t claim that we can, or even should, eliminate desires completely, but nevertheless they must be managed somehow.

So what is one to do? Well, to put it most simply, act according to the context. Put aside petty motivations, clarify your perspective, and see the pattern before you. Taking into account the whole situation (your presence included, of course), act appropriately without forcing your perspective as the necessarily correct one. Of course, your action can only be appropriate to the situation if you can see beyond yourself with the acuity to engage what is actual.

It is thus that sages act on behalf of things but do not make any claim on them,
They see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them.¹⁰ [77]

And the mirror-like acuity necessary for proper *wuwei* is not easy to develop:

In carrying about your more spiritual and more physical
aspects and embracing their oneness,
Are you able to keep them from separating?
In concentrating your *qi* and making it pliant,
Are you able to become the newborn babe?
In scrubbing and cleansing your profound mirror,
Are you able to rid it of all imperfections?¹¹ [10]

Embracing oneness, concentrating *qi*, cleansing the mirror, easy enough, eh? Well, actually I think tai chi practice is rather helpful here, both metaphorically and practically.

Tai chi is a form of self-cultivation, one of many such practices developed in traditional China. We follow this path for many reasons: some emphasize health benefits, or longevity; others develop martial arts; some promote fitness; others focus on spiritual benefits. None of these are in conflict, of course. My aim here is to remind us that, traditionally, the overall aim of self-cultivation techniques is to bring the practitioner into alignment with *dao*.

In learning the elements of tai chi form and refining our techniques we are yoking our mind-and-body to a pre-established series of movements. This develops discipline in the entire person and fosters a practice-oriented awareness – a mentality somewhat different from the everyday perspective.

The various forms are, of course, dynamic. We move through the postures in sequence, with many specific repetitions; we flow through the pattern with more or less concentration, pain in this muscle, balance here, broken equilibrium there, moments of confusion, but moments of intense clarity as well – oh, that's what it's like. Oops, lost it again. In class we take cues and confidence from our fellows, though we're not free of silent critiques, either.

And Jane's touch shows us where we really are. Continual students; continual beginners.

Laozi knows about students, too:

When the very best students learn of way-making (*dao*)
They are just barely able to keep to its center.
When mediocre students learn of way-making
They are sporadically on it and off it.
When the very worst students learn of way-making
They guffaw at the very idea.
Were they not to guffaw at it
It would be something less than way-making.¹² [41]

But are we way-making when we do the form? I would say, to a greater or lesser extent, yes. But isn't *dao* natural, while the form is an artificial construct, a created pattern that is quite separate from the natural scheme of things? Yes, perhaps, but is that to say that what we are engaging when we do the form isn't real? The forms are, of course inspired by and infused with Daoist elements, and further, the practice hones our intentions and actions, creating habits of mind and body that develop technique. One works very hard over time to be able to move freely. The *Daodejing* translators, David Ames and Roger Hall, express a Daoist view on formal practice, using music as a subject:

Most individuals would recognize the peculiar contribution of technique to artistic endeavor. Without the ability to mentally parse and physically play musical notes and chords in a stylized fashion, neither composition nor performance would be possible. Technique, as pre-reflective and dispositional, frees the artist to perform and to create. The same relationship to spontaneity is realized throughout one's experience.¹³

In their view, which echoes Laozi's, genuinely creative spontaneity depends on techniques developed through practice. So I think that tai chi is not only a good metaphor for way-making, but also that there's a bit more to it than that. The techniques developed through practice are conducive to the attitudes foundational for way-making, such things as clarity, mutuality, humility, and discipline – and therefore foundational for spontaneous action appropriate to the lived contexts of the event-stream, that is, according to *dao*.

In Jane's class we've been working on various forms of push hands for some time now. It's pretty frustrating for us newbies and some of us don't seem to like it much. I know I wasn't too eager to start it up: 'you mean I have to do this with somebody else?' Nevertheless, a growing familiarity has bred not contempt, but relative comfort, and an increasing interest. And so, when I was deeply into this new translation of the *Daodejing* a few months ago, I was delighted to come across a reference to push hands in the chapter commentary. I want to use their point to round out this talk. The authors were working with Chapter 16, which they translate in part as follows:

Extend your utmost emptiness as far as you can
And do your best to extend your equilibrium (*jing*).

In the process of all things emerging together (*wanwu*)
We can witness their reversion.
Things proliferate,
And each again returns to its root.
Returning to the root is called equilibrium.
Now as for equilibrium – this is called returning to the
propensity of things,
And returning to the propensity of things is common sense.
Using common sense is acuity,
While failing to use acuity is to lose control.

And to try to do anything while out of control is to court disaster.¹⁴ [16]

So many rich allusions to tai chi practice here. Extension and return, root and equilibrium, emptiness, acuity... and loss of control, which is not unfamiliar. In push hands you must, of course, be aware of your partner, engage and respond. Attention and sensitivity are central, while of course there is also the technique: the circling, steps, and gestures that are formal aspects of the practice. You must be alert for any feint or change, but mustn't anticipate, and, of course, it's not about force, but about response and equilibrium. Body and mind must be responsive; or, to put it another way, one's mirror must be spotlessly scrubbed.

Ames and Hall express this idea by citing another ancient Daoist text, the *Huainanzi*:

Sages are like a mirror –
They neither see things off nor go out to meet them,
They respond to everything without storing things up.
They are thus never injured through the myriad
transformations they undergo.¹⁵

These sages would be pretty good at push hands: always at home, always responsive, always transforming. That's how to make the way.

It seems to me at this point that the best metaphor for tai chi as way-making, or engaging Dao, would be two of these sages, a woman and a man, given the gendering of things throughout the *Daodejing*, playing four corners (*dalou*). One in white, the other in black, moving through the four corners, giving way to one another as they exchange positions, circling the compass. Perfect in harmony, now weak, now strong, balancing, responding, making their way in the dancehall of the cosmos.¹⁶

¹Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing "Making This Life Significant." A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003. All translations of the text (unless otherwise noted) and page references are from this volume.

² Chapter 25, p. 115.

³ Chapter 62, p. 173.

⁴ Chapter 1, p. 77.

⁵ P. 18.

⁶ "...*wuwei*, often translated (unfortunately) as 'no action' or 'non-action,' really involves the absence of any course of action that interferes with the particular focus (*de*) of those things contained within one's field of influence." P. 39.

⁷ Chapter 2, p. 80. Other translations of *you* and *wu* are "being and not-being" (Waley) and "is and isn't" (Addis and Lombardo).

⁸ See, espec. pp. 36-53.

⁹ Chapter 1, p. 77.

¹⁰ Chapter 77, p. 196.

¹¹ Chapter 10, p. 90.

¹² Chapter 41, p. 140.

¹³ P. 51.

¹⁴ Chapter 16, p. 99.

¹⁵ *Huainanzi* 6, translated by Ames and Hall, p. 101.

¹⁶ "Dancehall of the cosmos," p. 24.