

PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF TAIJIQUAN

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1. HISTORY

My aim today is to sketch out an outline of some of the philosophical foundations that undergird Taijiquan. To do this I will draw upon classical philosophical Chinese texts, dating from the Period of the Warring States and the Former Han Dynasty, that is, roughly the first 500 years BCE. The Period of the Warring States is sometimes called the Period of the 100 Philosophies and is the time of Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mencius, and others. Besides the *Analects* and the *Daodejing*, I will refer to the Daoist works the *Zhuangzi* and *Guanzi*. Though Confucians and Daoists differed in many ways, they held in common the basic configurations of the Chinese cultural orientation. These philosophical texts tend to focus on “self-cultivation” leading to moral perfection (variously described) and mystical insight into the very nature of things, that is, the Dao, or Way. They are not at all concerned with martial arts. They do occasionally allude to “inner cultivation” practices, however, that are elemental to Qigong and Taiji, about which I will have more to say.

Most of the Taiji books I’ve seen have something to say about the philosophical basis of Taiji practice. They usually cite the *Daodejing*, describe *Yin* and *Yang*, and provide

correlations among *Yijing* trigrams, Five Agencies theory and Taiji form elements to ground our practice in aspects of Chinese philosophical tradition back to antiquity. But while the ideological tradition is grounded well enough in ancient history, the case for Taiji practice forms is much more tenuous. The current forms seem to date more or less from the 19th and 20th centuries. Historical documentation becomes insecure prior to the 18th century, though there is evidence for martial arts practices related to Taiji as far back as the Tang dynasty (ca 750 CE). Further, there are archaeological materials unearthed from an early Han Dynasty tomb (ca 168 BCE) describing breathing exercises and postures associated with healing (*daoyin* “guide and pull” exercises). There is also an earlier mention of *daoyin* in the *Zhuangzi*. It dismisses those who use the techniques merely to achieve long life:

To huff and puff, exhale and inhale, blow out the old and draw in the new, do the “bear-hang” and the “bird-stretch”, interested only in long life -- such are the tastes of practitioners of ‘guide-and-pull’ exercises, the nurturers of the body, Grandfather P’eng’s ripe old-agers. (AG 265, CT 15)

Given the extraordinary continuity of cultural forms over the roughly 4000 years of Chinese development, it seems likely that Taiji’s roots are deeply buried. To unearth them, perhaps we should begin with images.

2. YIN, YANG, AND WATER

The description of events in the world in terms of the binary opposites *Yin* and *Yang* is an elemental aspect of Chinese culture. While both sides are always active, Daoism

seems in many ways to prefer the *Yin*. For instance, anyone who reads the *Daodejing* cannot help being struck by the frequent use of the image of water.

Tao's presence in the world	[Addis & Lombardo]
Is like valley streams	
Flowing into rivers and seas.	#32

Best to be like water	
Which benefits the ten thousand things.	#8

Water, as well as other *Yin* correlates such as valley, are employed again and again in this and other Daoist texts, and the American scholar Sarah Allan argues that this usage of water images is not just Daoist, but Chinese, and it pervades many early texts and serves as a root metaphor for Dao and associated concepts in Chinese culture. Here are some of the ways water is presented in these texts:

Water is soft and yielding, but can also present an irresistible force. It is clear, even invisible, but it reflects. (The first mirrors were pools of still water.) Water can also be turbid, muddy, but when it becomes still, it clarifies of its own accord. It can be deep or shallow, fast-moving or still. It sinks into the earth to disappear, but also flows out, irresistibly, in springs. It seeks its own level in low places, and it can also be used as a measuring level. It spontaneously flows in the channels of streams and rivers, but can also flood and cover the earth. All of these images are found in the texts and used as descriptors especially of Dao and, as well, *qi*. While the Yang is never rejected as being irrelevant, the Daoist preference is always for *Yin*, associating Dao with images such as water, valley, female, darkness, depth, return to the source, etc. You already know how

deeply these *Yin* images of liquidity, softness, and yielding pervade Taiji practice. Meet hardness with softness; yield to redirect force.

3. ALIGNING WITH DAO

“Dao,” “Way,” is the provisional term employed in the *Daodejing* and other Daoist writings to designate the mysterious pattern that the sage may discern in events (or the 10,000 things). The “Way” is often explained as a path or a road, but Sarah Allan argues convincingly, using textual evidence from Shang inscriptions, that the root idea is more like a watercourse (Alan Watts’ term) or channel. Chinese perspectives often speak of the 10,000 things in terms of the triad of Sky, Earth, and Humans. In terms of heaven and earth, Dao flows inexorably, inexhaustibly, naturally; it is the deep and mysterious way of things. But in humans, Dao can be blocked up, diverted, lost sight of, lost. There are many causes of these obstructions. Confucians and Daoists alike say that the Way is lost because of selfish desires, but Daoists add that civilization itself is problematic. Its seeking and striving is far too forceful, too scheming, too *Yang*. When one loses the simplicity of spontaneous action because of willfulness or second-guessing, the Way is lost as well. Then we must find a way to return to the source to search out the wholesome, natural way of life: to align with Dao. Finding this path and the power it brings is the ultimate objective in Daoist philosophy.

4. QI AND SELF-CULTIVATION

But if Dao is the pattern of the universe, *Qi* is the substance. But, as British scholar A.C. Graham has pointed out, the Chinese conceptualizations are different from the western ones that originated in Greece. Whereas substance in western philosophy (since Aristotle) is material (in Greek literally “lumber”), which can be shaped into form by the carpenter, the Chinese view is that things are composed spontaneously from *qi*, which

is in the first place the breath, alternating between motion and stillness, extended in space but insubstantial, although condensing to become visible on a frosty day. The *ch’i* is conceived as becoming solid the more slowly it moves, with the more tenuous circulating within and energizing the inert, for example as the *ching* “quintessence”, the vitalising fluid in the living body. In its ultimate degree of fineness we could think of it in western terms as pure energy. [AG, note, p 156]

Breath, vapor, fluid, energy. Like water, *qi* may be solid, liquid or gaseous -- or even finer and more tenuous. It is ever present everywhere. Unlike western concepts, the permutations of *qi* are not accomplished by acts of an agent; they are rather unwilled, spontaneous evolutions that follow the natural pattern of the universe. On a jade inscription from the Warring States period we read:

The moving *qi* is swallowed;
 When it is swallowed it nurtures;
 When it has nurtured, it is expelled;
 When it is expelled, it goes down;
 When it goes down, it settles;
 When it settles, it solidifies;
 When it solidifies, it sprouts;
 When it sprouts, it grows;
 When it grows, it returns;
 When it returns, it ascends to the sky.
 As for sky, its root is in the above.
 As for earth, its root is in the below.

If one follows along, one lives.
If one goes against, one dies.

[Allan 88-89]

On the physical level of the human body, *qi* is often paired with blood and associated with the *xin* (heart/mind), the blood-soaked thinking organ according to Chinese concepts. Thus the *Analects* of Confucius:

When one is young and one's blood and *qi* are not settled, one's guard is against lust. When one has reached maturity and one's blood and *qi* are firm, one's guard is against aggressiveness. When one has reached old age and one's blood and *qi* are in decline, one's guard is against acquisitiveness. [XVI.7 Allan 89]

Daoist texts add that this physical and moral self-cultivation must be tempered with *Yin* values:

In concentrating your *qi* so that it is supremely soft, can you reach infancy? In cleaning and wiping the dark mirror (*xuan jian*), can you make it flawless? (TTC 10. Allan 90)

Another passage in the *Zhuangzi* depicts a conversation between Confucius and his favorite disciple Yen Hui about contemplative practices aimed at aligning with Dao. Yen Hui is told he must fast, not simply in terms of eating, but in terms of his mental activity. (In this Daoist text both Confucius and Yen Hui are espousing Daoist values!)

Yen Hui: I venture to inquire about fasting of the heart/mind?

Confucius: Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the heart/mind. Rather than listen with the heart/mind, listen with the energies (*ch'i*). Listening stops at the ear, the heart with what tallies at the thought. As for energy (*ch'i*), it is the tenuous which waits to be roused by other things. Only the Way accumulates the tenuous. The attenuating is the fasting of the heart/mind. (AG 68)

Yen Hui must focus within on refining *qi* in order to allow Dao to flower. Aligning with Dao is not accomplished by an act of will, rather one refines inward awareness to move beyond mundane sensibilities and allow a mystical insight to occur.

Again, these philosophical works aim at mystical experience of Dao, the Way. The pattern is everywhere, inward as well as outward. Cultivating *qi* flow within the body allows the mind to disengage from the will-driven personality in order to let the mysterious appear. This, of course, parallels the sort of cultivation that is present in Taiji and Qigong practice, save that the philosophy texts don't much mention postures and forms.

Or do they? The section of the *Guanzi* text titled "Inward Training" (*Nei-Yeh*) contains passages that are usually taken to refer to sitting meditation practice, but they are very suggestive when read from a Taiji perspective:

When your body is not aligned,
 The inner power [*te*] will not come.
 When you are not tranquil within,
 Your mind will not be ordered.
 Align your body, assist the inner power,
 Then it will gradually come on its own. [Roth, 104]

For those who preserve and naturally generate vital essence [*ching*]
 On the outside a calmness will flourish.
 Stored inside, we take it to be the wellspring.
 Floodlike, it harmonizes and equalizes
 And we take it to be the fount of the vital energy [*ch'i*].
 When the fount is not dried up,

The four limbs are firm,
 When the wellspring is not drained,
 Vital energy freely circulates through the nine apertures. [Roth 106-107]

Therefore, while direct evidence for the existence of Taiji form practice during the Warring States period is lacking, there is clear and compelling evidence for both concepts and practices that are the foundation of Taiji practice, as well as medical and other styles of *qi* cultivation. The aforementioned passage from the *Zhuangzi* on *daoyin* techniques is more explicit in terms of body practice, though the specific practices remain obscure, and while the writer is dismissive, the point that is made as the passage continues is that it is those who do *daoyin* only to gain longevity are following the wrong path. The sage may well use these and other techniques, but for the ultimate aim of “forgetting them all and possessing them all, being serene and unconfined and having all these glories as consequences, this is the Way of Heaven and Earth, the Power which is in the sage.” (AG 265) Few could follow such a path to fruition -- the philosophical writers present the ideal. Nevertheless, it seems clear that they knew of traditions that formed the ideological and practical foundations of Taiji and Qigong.

5. THE KNACK (AND HOW TO GET IT)

A final point: Daoism emphasizes spontaneity, freedom, acting without intention (*wuwei*). Taiji training emphasizes learning form. What could this have to do with spontaneity? The apparent contradiction is of course a false one, and one story from

the *Zhuangzi* must suffice as an illustration. (It also illustrates the maxim, “Those who speak do not know.”)

Duke Huan was reading a book at the top of the hall, wheelwright Pien was chipping a wheel at the bottom of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan

‘May I ask what works my lord is reading?’

‘The words of a sage.’

‘Is the sage alive?’

‘He’s dead.’

‘In that case what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn’t it?’

‘What business is it of a wheelwright to criticise what I read? If you can explain yourself, well and good; if not, you die.’

‘Speaking for myself, I see it in terms of my own work. If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in my hand and respond in the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words; there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me. This is how through my seventy years I have grown old chipping at wheels. The men of old and their untransmittable message are dead. Then what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn’t it?’
[AG, 139-140]

Pien the wheelwright is, of course, a master of his craft. With the Knack, he can work spontaneously, moving the chisel at the right speed in the right way according to the wood at hand. Years of hard work led to his finding the Knack; he’s got it, but he can’t pass it on. He can only teach the craft, his son must work, and work, and work to find the Knack on his own. The master creates with spontaneity, he employs the Way; the son has to work at it, to open his heart to the craft. Just so with the cultivation of *qi*, and just so with Taijiquan. It’s like the old New York joke, “Cabdriver, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?””Practice, practice, practice.”

Works cited:

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- Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue*. SUNY Press, 1997.
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- Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. Columbia University Press, 1999.

Note: I use both Pinyin and Wade-Giles transliterations, thus:

Dao=Tao	“Way”	
De=Te	“Power	
Taijiquan=T'ai Chi Ch'uan	“Great Ultimate Fist”	
Qi= Chi	“Vital Energy, etc.”	
Jing=Ching	“Vital Essence”	
Laozi=Lao Tzu	“Old Master Lao”	
Daodejing=Tao Te Ching	“Way Power Classic” (Book title)	
Guanzi=Kuan Tzu	“Old Master Kuan	“
Zhuangzi=Chuang Tzu	“Old Master Chuang”	“
Yijing=I Ching	“Change Classic”	“