

Ritual, Sacrifice and Alchemy in Taijiquan

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Philosophical Background of Taijiquan

Taijiquan (or T'ai-chi'ch'üan) is an internal martial art known for its emphasis on mental and spiritual development. It is further characterized as a predetermined sequence of movements performed in slow motion. Thus, Taijiquan is set apart from other martial arts whose movements are always performed at fast speed, as well as forms of sitting meditation and contemplation which place much less emphasis on the body. In contrast to dance as a performing art which connects to the world externally through the interpersonal and horizontal communication between the artist and his or her audience, Taijiquan connects to the world internally through a vertical communication between matter and spirit, or Heaven and Earth (*Tian Di*) as the Chinese would put it. Communication between the Heaven and Earth poles of existence has been of paramount importance to the Chinese throughout its long history, of which Taijiquan is but a comparatively recent development.

Although Taijiquan was created, according to legend, by Zhang San Feng in the Song dynasty (960 to 1278 AD), its philosophical roots go back to the beginning of recorded history in China encompassing the development of Chinese thought, as well as man's relation to one another and the natural universe. These roots include ancestor and spirit worship in the Shang dynasty (1766 to 1154 BC), the development of Confucianism in the Zhou dynasty (1122 to 255 BC), the origination of Daoism in the Warring States period (403-222 BC), and the development of alchemy in the Han dynasty (206 BC to 189 AD) and beyond. In order to understand important concepts in Taijiquan, such as "emptiness" (*xu*), "effortlessness" (*wu-wei*), and "spontaneity" (*zuran*), as well as the internal purpose of Taiji quan itself (i.e., connecting to the source of the universe within the core of one's being) it is necessary to view Taiji quan in this cultural and historical context.

To begin with, the very name "Taijiquan," in Chinese, denotes a process that is simultaneously physical, mental and spiritual. The word *quan*, which etymologically depicts a hand (*shou*) flexing (*quan*) into a fist.¹ On the surface level this refers to Taijiquan as a "style" of martial art, but on a deeper level *quan* refers to the physicalization of the spiritual and philosophical realms, i.e., "grasping" the relevance and deeper meaning inherent in the term "Tai ji."

"Taiji", or Great Ridgepole (sometimes called Great Ultimate), is a very ancient philosophical term referring to the gateway of the origination of the universe itself. The term "Tai ji" first appears in the "Great Appendix" of the *Yijing* (or Book of Changes, a philosophical and divinatory text attributed to Confucius around 551 to 479 BC) where eight stages are described in the creation of the physical world. According to the *Yijing*, "Tai ji" (stage 1) is what produces the two principles (*I*) of Yin and Yang (stage 2) from the Great Void (*Tai-xu*) which is considered the non-differentiated, empty (*hsu*) source (*yuan*) of all things (stage 0). Yin and Yang, then, begin an energetic process of interpenetration and incubation through which the physical embryo is fashioned and birth takes place. The third stage, according to the *Yijing*, produces the first level of this interpenetration in what are called the "Four Symbols" (*xiang*) which describe this interpenetration in four different polar aspects: Yin, Yang, Yin within Yang and Yang within Yin. The following four stages (four, five, six and seven) describe this continuing interpenetration in more detail. In order to avoid the confusion that would result by naming each of these stages according to the linguistics of Yin and Yang, especially on the seventh level where there are six levels of Yin-Yang interpenetration (e.g., the Yin within the Yin of Yang which is within the Yang within the Yang of Yin), more easily understood visual symbols were used instead. Thus this Yin-Yang interpenetration was conveyed through a system of solid and broken lines (*gua*) where the solid lines represented Yang and the broken lines represented Yin. Stage four resulted in eight different groups of three-lined symbols called the eight trigrams (*pa gua*). Stage seven resulted in sixty-four different groups of six-lined symbols called the sixty-four hexagrams.² Each trigram and each hexagram was further associated with names and symbols derived from the natural and social worlds. In this way they were more readily distinguished from one another. The trigrams were named according to symbols from the natural world: Heaven, Earth, Water, Fire, Thunder, Wind, Mountain and Lake. The hexagrams were named according to symbols mostly from the social world: "The Return," "Difficulty at the Beginning," "Before Completion," etc. All complexities aside, this "creation sequence" begins with Void and then progresses through seven stages of Yin-Yang polarization where the physical process of creation is completed: (1) Void, (2) Yin-Yang, (3)

“Four Images,” (4) Eight Trigrams, and then (5) sixteen, and (6) thirty-two continuing subdivisions of Yin and Yang until (7) the sixty-four hexagrams are reached, which depicts the completion of the Yin-Yang archetypal image preceding (8) the physical manifestation of the world.³

Yin-Yang Interpenetration⁴

8	MATERIALIZATION											
7	etc., with 64 Hexagrams											
6	etc., with 32											
5												
4	EARTH	MOUNT	WATER	WIND	THUND	FIRE	LAKE	HEAVEN				
3	YIN IN YIN		YANG IN YIN		YIN IN YANG		YANG IN YANG					
2	YIN						YANG					
1	TAI JI											
0	VOID											

In Chapter 7 of the *Zhuangzi* (350 to 222 BC, one of the three major early Daoist texts including the *Daodejing* and the *Huainanzi*), a legendary version of these seven stages is recounted in the myth of *Hundun*. *Hundun*, whose name means “chaos,” was a cosmic-egg type creature with no orifices to his body. He was also called the Emperor of the Central region and, when visited by the two Emperor’s of the North and South (symbolizing Water and Fire, see below), treated them so generously that in order to repay his kindness they said:

All men have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. But Hundun doesn't have any. Let’s try to bore him some!’ Everyday they bored him another hole, and on the seventh day Hundun died.⁵

In this story, the seven openings symbolize, not only the seven sensory orifices of the head and the opening of the unmanifest source to the external world, but also the seven polar stages of creation developing from the central void. It is interesting to note that this legend signifies that the birth of creation implies the death of, or disconnection to, Source, a plight which, as we shall see, becomes fundamental to the Daoists.

The idea of the creation emerging from a non-differentiated void state is also reflected in the *Daodejing* (or *Classic of the Source and It’s Power*, China’s oldest Daoist text, generally believed to have been composed after Confucius sometime during the Warring States period.⁶ Here the process of creation goes through four stages. The second chapter posits the origin of this sequence in Dao: “The origin of Heaven and Earth (Dao) is the mother of all things.”⁷ Later, in chapter 42 it describes the order of this sequence in symbolic detail:

Dao engenders the One, One engenders the two, Two engenders the Three and the Three engenders the 10,000 things.⁸

In the *Daodejing* Dao is equated with the void space of the *Yijing*; One is equated with Tai ji; Two refers to Yin and Yang; Three is equated with the five levels of Yin-Yang interpenetration through the binary sequence (2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, etc.) which lead from the “Four Images” to the Eight Trigrams and Sixty-four Hexagrams; and Four is associated with the material world. The *Yijing* and *Daodejing* traditions are somewhat unified in the *Lu shi Chun qiu* (third century BCE) where the term Taiji is replaced by Tai i (the Supreme One), one of the divinities esteemed by the *fangshi* magical practitioners of this period.⁹

The Creation Sequence: Path of Manifestation

Stage	<i>Yijing</i>	<i>Daodejing</i>	<i>Lu-shi Chun qiu</i>
0	Great Void	Dao	Tai i (Great One)
1	Tai ji	Tai ji	Tai ji
2	Yin and Yang	Yin and Yang	Yin and Yang
3	Yin-Yang Interpenetration (“Four Images,” 8 Trigrams, 16,	Yin, Yang and Balance	Yin, Yang and Balance

	32, 64 Hexagrams)		
4	The Material World	The Material World	The Material World

Inherent in these early maps of creation was also the reverse path of return (*fu*) from Source. Since the creation path was thought to have led, in its extreme, to disharmony, disconnection to Source, disease and death, the path of “return” led to renewal, healing, longevity and, according to the ancients, immortality as well. The key to both of these maps is none other than the philosophical term Tai ji, the invisible gate between the unmanifest and the manifest. Ancient shamans (*wu*) travelled through this gate in their rituals in order to connect Heaven and Earth, and harmonize these two paths. This shamanistic activity is depicted etymologically in the word *ji* of Taijiquan which depicts a cosmic tree (*mu*) in this *axis mundi* function through which the human supplicant (*ren*), or shaman, connects Heaven and Earth (*er*) through his words (*kou*, or chanting), and deeds (*you*, ritual actions),¹⁰ as signified by the moving of the arms (*you*). These shamanistic rituals were the earliest aspects of Chinese religious function, and their most important aspects (the ritual connection of Heaven and Earth, matter and spirit) were incorporated in highly significant ways in the historical development of later Chinese tradition of which Confucianism and Daoism were the most important. A thousand years later, all of these aspects came together in the formation of Taijiquan.

The ideographic component of *ji* as that from which Heaven and Earth are derived can also be extended to that of a ridgepole of a building from which the eaves spread out on either side. In Chinese temples, the most striking and unmistakable feature is the roof. “Instead of sitting simply on walls like the typical Western roof, it looks to be, as it structurally is, independent of the building itself; and therefore one has the impression that it is light and free despite its relatively massive proportions.”¹¹ From this apparently immaterial ridgepole, the eaves extend, as if emanating Yin and Yang as well as Heaven and Earth from the void, and ultimately sheltering the birth and death of the human activities carried out below.

In both Confucian and Daoist philosophy it is frequently cited that human activities, as well as the creation of the world, extend from a common center to an increasingly complicated and diverse periphery. This extension is frequently symbolized by the root, branches, stems and flowers of a tree. Creation and its activities are symbolized by the flowers, whereas the source of creation, the Great Void, Dao, or Tai i, is symbolized by the root from which these flowers spring. Around 1130-1200 in the time of the legendary creation of Taijiquan, Juxi, the greatest neo-Confucian synthesizer, said, “Taiji is like a tree growing upward, it divides and becomes branches and stems...flowers and fruit...and continues until it produces seed.”¹² The more one’s consciousness becomes entangled in the flowers, the more one is cut off from the root. In as much as the expansion of the life force (*qi*) naturally tends toward its own dissipation as it reaches the extremities of its periphery, all the great traditions of China have recognized in some form or another that in order for the life of the spirit to be maintained there must be some accompanying attention, or even devotion, to the periphery’s corresponding center and source. These two directions give rise to the two paths of “creation” and “return.” When the outgoing path of “creation” reaches its extreme in the devotion to material things, such as greed, lust, pride etc., there is a tendency to lose the connection to one’s immaterial, or spiritual source (Dao), as well as the internal power or Virtue (*de*) that is generated from it. Confucius called this materialistic path the path of the petty person, or “small man” (*xiao ren*). In contrast, he called the more inner directed path, even when it was connected horizontally through human relations, the path of the “Great Person” (*Da-ren*). The recognition/idealization of the “Great Person” gave rise to many other names, e.g., the sage (*junzi*) in Confucianism and the Realized Person (*zhen ren*) in Daoism. These were, in effect, the saints of the ancient Chinese and were characterized, in essence, by their constant relation with *Dao* and *de* through the connection of Dao and *de* to Tai ji. The main difference was that in Confucianism, the *junzi* applied the knowledge of these two paths horizontally in the social domain, while the *zhen ren* in Daoism applied them vertically to the natural and spiritual world.

Philosophy in Practice

The Daoist path of “return” is symbolically traversed by following the focus of one’s Intention in the reverse order of the Creative path, i.e., from flower, to stem, to the small and large branches, and finally to the trunk and root. If we relate this metaphor, as well as the metaphors given in the *Yijing* and *Daodejing* creation maps cited above, to the most basic Yin-Yang aspects of Taijiquan training such as found in the Taijiquan sequence and described in the Taijiquan Classics, we will then be able to see how the “return” path of regeneration etc., applies to Taijiquan as a practical expression of these philosophies.

In order to do this, substitute the abstractions mentioned in the philosophical texts with four of the most basic Yin-Yang aspects of Taijiquan training.

The Taiji Classics describe these four as: (1) the in and out, opening and closing, movement of the breath including it's connection to the joints; (2) movement itself with its corresponding Yin stillness (*jing*) and Yang action (*dong*); (3) the shifting of weight from substantial (*shi*) to insubstantial (*xu*, note that this term is the same word "empty" used for the Great Void itself); and (4) movement in the six directions (up/down, left/right and forward/backward) through a seventh neutral or pivot space (recall the seven stages of creation in the *Yijing*, and the seven openings, or movements, of *Hun dun*, the Emperor of Center). In order to incorporate these Yin-Yang principles into practice we must begin with the basics of Taijiquan training, the Taiji standing postures, which are represented by Horse Stance, Bow Stance, Embrace the Pillar, and each of the 37 postures of the Taijiquan sequence on both right and left sides. In the Standing Postures external movement is reduced to the absolute minimum. In effect, there is no external Yin-Yang or outward motion except for the opening and closing of the breath and the joints. This simple opening and closing represents the Taiji principle, prior to which is the unbreathing, totally unmoving source which the philosophers call *Wu-ji*, Dao, or Void, and following which is the sequence of the Taijiquan form.

With this void space established, begin to add the most basic movements (slow movements, of course) to our basic Taijiquan sequence. In the *Taiji Classics*, it says that this movement begins (is rooted at, *gen*) the feet, is generated from the legs, directed (*zhu*) by the waist, and expressed in the fingers.¹³ This is done first by shifting our weight either from side to side in a medium to upright Horse Stance, or from front to back in Bow Stance. In this first aspect (shifting our weight) we have gone from *point* (Taiji) to *line* (simple left/right or forward/backward movement).

Now from this simple shifting of weight from foot to foot, let us progress to the third stage which is a *circle*. Focusing specifically on the origin of movement in the feet (done slowly) notice that the linear movement of weight, shifting from the substantial to the insubstantial foot, "grows" from a straight line to a curved line that "circles" under the feet in two directions when the movement shift to substantial has become complete. For example, when the weight on the right foot (substantial) shifts, the substantiality of that shifting should be perceived as the bottom of a circle traveling under the floor until it reaches the left foot, which then becomes substantial again. When the left foot starts to shift its substantiality back to the right, the top aspect of the circle moves up the left leg to the waist where it is then directed into the right leg which then becomes substantial. This circle, then, (call it right to left) continues throughout the exercise. At the same time, however, there is a circle rotating in the opposite direction (left to right). In other words, any time the substantial leg changes to insubstantial, there is a downward circle moving under the floor to the other leg and a corresponding upward circle moving up the substantial leg to the waist and down the other leg to the foot where the two circles meet when the other leg becomes substantial. One has to keep the structural integrity of the body in order to experience these circles. This means that the feet, ankles, knees and hips have to be in alignment. The knees should be held at the same height throughout the exercise. They should also be bent, but not poking out over the front or sides of the feet. This structural integrity allows the muscles to relax, and the tendons and ligaments to be strengthened so that the body weight can be supported more by the skeletal system (bones) which is designed specifically for this purpose.

The fourth stage of our progression now moves from *circle* to *sphere* by involving the expression of movement through the fingers (level 4 of the Taijiquan Classics). This fourth stage of progression from *circle* to *sphere* also corresponds to the fourth stage in the *Daodejing* where the "Three" begets the Ten-thousand Things (*wan-wu*), or the created universe. At this stage we add the motion of the arms and hands in, for example, any of the more complex 37 postures of the Yang Style form. Picture any one of these postures being performed over and over again in a continuous sequence as they would be if they were linked together by doing them on both the right and left sides, one following the other. This can be visualized more easily with postures where the right and left versions follow one another in the sequence such as "Brush Knee Twist Step," "Repulse Monkey," "Cloud Hands," etc. At this fourth stage we have completed the "materialization" of our basic Yin-Yang principles through the Taijiquan sequence, as well as the creation path of materialization, into the three-dimensional realm, or *sphere*.

Three-Dimensional Weight Shift

	Image	Stage	Weight Shift	Movement in	Substantial/
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				Classics	Insubstantial
0	No-thing	Wu-chi	None	None	None
1	Point	Taiji	None	Breath-Joints	None
2	Line	Yin-Yang	In feet	Rooted in feet	Horizontal
3	Circle	Yin-Yang Interpenetration	To waist	Directed by waist	Horizontal & vertical
4	Sphere	Manifestation	To fingers	Flowers in hands	Horizontal, vertical & forward

At this stage of movement, breath, as well as the shifting of weight from substantial to insubstantial, completes the top/bottom polarity of directions and becomes much more complex as the shift now includes the shoulders, arms and fingers moving in relation to the waist, legs and feet and encompasses the entire sphere of activity. Now with the mind focused on these principles, imagine continuing through not only the rest of the 37 postures but all of the movements of the Taijiquan form. When one learns Taijiquan in this manner, these Yin-Yang aspects are incorporated into the Taijiquan sequence in the order following the “creation” path. Therefore, as in the *Yijing* when the development of polarity reaches completion in the sixty-four hexagrams, all of the archetypal Yin-Yang aspects are now in place. The final materialization of the “creative” path here would be to apply this development either in a martial or healing situation, or to use these principles in daily life. At this point of completion, the “return” path begins and establishes these Yin-Yang aspects within the sequence on a deeper level in which each of these basic aspects, from the most basic to the most complex, is understood as the basis within the next. This process connects the expression of the entire sequence to its most basic foundation. The focused mind (*I*) and body (*shen*) then discovers that the sequence is founded upon more and more basic principles. This process of discovery changes the performer into an observer deeply anchored in the still center of a Heart now in resonance with the universe and at One with Dao. By practicing the choreographed and conscious (*shen*) sequence of Taijiquan, our minds become aware, not so much of the peripheral phenomenal world which is the realm of the “small person,” but the perceiver of the whole of motion itself which lies within as our immortal spirit. We now have a map for mind and body which can act as a ritualized procedure with which we can, at any moment, return to where we started. By keeping the heart/mind on the polarities of Yin-Yang instead of the periphery of the external world it is easier for the heart/mind to become aware of itself where, in the empty (*xu*) stillness (*jing*) of its center, the cosmic Source is found.

Alchemy, Rooting and the Development of *Jing*

In their observations of Heaven and Earth’s permutations, the ancient Chinese became aware of the polarity between transience and long-life (*zhang sheng*), the nurturance of which (*yang-sheng*) has been an overriding concern of the Chinese, especially the Daoists, since antiquity. There have been many phrases over the centuries that depict this fascination including: “*bao shen* “preservation of the visible individual”; *nan-lao* “to retard the advance of old age,” which implies the retardation of senility; *que lao* “warding off old age”; and *wu si* “deathlessness,” all of which are “exemplified... in the common greeting and toast *wan-sui* ‘May you live 10,000 years!’”¹⁴ The practices associated with these concepts, including alchemy (*jin-dan*), a term first seen in Ge Hong’s *Bao pu zi* (265-419),¹⁵ were the forefathers of both Taijiquan and modern day *qi-kung*.

Chinese alchemy consists of both exoteric (*wai dan*) and esoteric (*nei dan*) aspects. Exoteric alchemy works with chemical substances in the laboratory in order to refine what is called the “elixir” which supposedly confers immortality upon those who take it. Esoteric alchemy, also called inner alchemy, works to refine the elixir within the human body through meditation. Both types of Chinese alchemy are fundamentally concerned with blending the polarities of matter and spirit so that each contains something from, and is transformed by, its opposite. This process not only spiritualizes, or vitalizes, matter, but also materializes, or concentrates, the spirit as well. Central to this idea is what the alchemists called the Three Treasures: *jing*, *qi* and *shen* which are three different polar states of the life-force. *Jing* corresponds to Earth, is the most material and is stored in the Kidneys and bones; *shen* corresponds to Heaven, is the most spiritual and is stored in the Heart; and *qi* is in between, corresponding to what the Chinese call Man, and associated with the Spleen/Pancreas. Heaven, Earth and Man were considered the

cosmic triad (*can*) where Heaven and Earth come together due to the man's participation in order to form what is known as the Three Powers (*san cai*),¹⁶

The system of correspondence between the Three Treasures and the Three Powers also integrates with the system of the Five Phases (Fire, Soil, Metal, Water, and Wood) which adds an additional dynamic to the Three Powers system in the same way that the equinoxes add a harmonizing dynamic to the more extreme polarities of the Summer and Winter solstices in the seasonal cycle. These three systems blend together so that the Three Treasures and Three Powers connect with the Five Phases and their more comprehensive associations, e.g., the primary organs of the body as well as specific emotions, psychic counterparts and virtues. Thus, Earth, representing matter, is associated with the phase Water, the Kidneys, fear, Will (*zhi*) and Wisdom (*zhi*). In contrast, Heaven, representing spirit, is associated with the phase Fire, the Heart, elation or giddiness, Spirit (conscious awareness, *shen*), and the ritualization of social relations and behavior (*li*). Between Heaven and Earth, the central harmonizing level of Man is associated with the phase Soil (*tu*), the Spleen/Pancreas, worry, Intention (*I*) and Trustworthiness (*xin*).

Qualities of the Three Powers and Five Phases

Three Powers	Phase	Organ	Emotion	Psychic Counterpart	Virtue
Heaven	Fire	Heart	Elation	Consciousness	Ritual
Man	Soil ¹⁷	Spleen	Worry	Intention	Trustworthiness
Earth	Water	Kidneys	Fear	Will	Wisdom

When the ancient Chinese examined the “creation” path (*sheng dao*) of the “small man” they realized that this path naturally reaches an extreme where it's very manifestation becomes worldly attachment. At this point psychic loss as well as the loss of virtue prevail and the connection to Source wears thin and breaks. In contrast, the path of “return” (*fu dao*) of the “Great Man” embraces the Void at the heart of Self where one's virtue and psyche are regenerated through a spontaneous process. The *Dao-de jing* describes the spirituality of the Great Man thusly:

Heaven lasts long, and Earth abides. What is the secret of their durability? Is it not because they do not live for themselves [i.e., worldly pursuits] that they can live so long? Therefore, the Sage (*sheng-ren*) wants to remain behind, but he finds himself at the head of others; reckons himself out, but finds himself safe and secure. Is it not because he is selfless [i.e., in his non-pursuit of the world] that his Self is realized?¹⁸

It seems as though the creative process itself, especially the separation of Heaven and Earth from the Great Void, automatically contains within it the seeds of its own dissolution. According to the *Huainanzi* (a Daoist text of 139 BC):

The pure yang (ch'i) drifted up and became heaven; and the heavy and turbid congealed downwards and became earth... Heaven and earth unified their essence (*jing*) making yin and yang. Yin and yang blended and circulated their essence and produced the four seasons; and the four seasons in scattering their ch'i produced the 10,000 things.¹⁹

In as much as Yin and Yang continue to blend with each other in the ongoing creation of life, the initial seed of separation continues to occur as well. After all, Life and Death are both aspects of Yin and Yang. This happens because the Yin and Yang, light and heavy, elements (meaning especially *jing* and *shen*) reach an extreme point where they simultaneously recycle and interpenetrate in order to maintain the life form, and separate from the body in order to maintain their connection with Dao. After a period of time, the amount lost is more than that regained so that the spirit (*shen*) and body (also *shen*, but a different character,) separate and death results.

The *Huainanzi* explains how the loss of *shen* occurs:

When perception comes in contact with external things, preferences are formed... When preferences are formed, perception is enticed by externals, and one cannot return to the self (which is, then,) destroyed.²⁰

The progression of perception to preference ultimately leads to lust, greed, pride, fame, fortune and pleasure, and becomes the ancient formula describing the path of the “small man.” The ancients thought that the loss of *jing* and *shen* through this progression was automatic unless there was some conscious intention to rectify it. The dissolution results in the Water phase through the abuse of will so that *jing* leaks out below in the form of urinary incontinence, loss of sexual vitality, and senility. The dissolution results in Fire when the *shen* burns itself out above in direct proportion to one’s indulgence creating insomnia, heart disease, and loss of self through the ego’s attachment to deluded thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. Chapter 12 of the *Daodejing* admonishes:

The five colours blind the eye. The five tones deafen the ear. The five flavors cloy the palate. Racing and hunting madden the mind. Rare goods tempt men to do wrong. Therefore, the Sage takes care of the belly [the Chinese word *fu* belly rhymes with *fu* return, and is also etymologically similar. The belly, or *dan tian* (literally “Elixir Field”), is the *locus classicus* of Taoist meditation]²¹, not the eye. He prefers what is within to what is without.²²

And again in Chapter 52:

All-under-Heaven have a common beginning [Source]. This Beginning is the Mother of the world. Having known the Mother, we may proceed to know her children [the flowers of creation], we should go back [return] and hold on to the Mother [renew ourselves in Source]... Block all the passages! Shut all the doors! And to the end of your days you will not be worn out. [This refers to sense perception in pursuit of worldly desires.] Open the passages! Multiply your activities! And to the end of your days you will remain helpless. [The plight of the small man indeed].²³

The alchemists realized that if they could recycle more of their Yin-Yang elements, they could prolong life, perhaps even to the extreme state of “deathlessness” which they so ardently sought for, and attain the Tao. Thus, they needed to insure that Yin and Yang continue their immortal interplay and that *jing* and *shen* did not leak away. Therefore, the exoteric alchemists came up with the idea of a closed container in which they would bury alchemical ingredients under the ground so that they could not leak away and, therefore, be completely transformed in their interactions with one another.²⁴ The internal alchemists followed the same idea but used their *I*/Intention to contain the alchemical process within the human body. We can also see this idea at work in Chinese herbalism in the most important Kidney strengthening formula, the “Six Flavor Rehmannia Decoction.” This important formula uses only six herbs, and focuses on the lead herb, Rehmannia, in order to create the physical and mental stillness (*wu-wei*, a Daoist term for non-action or “effortlessness”) so important for the Kidneys and the Water phase as well as for the practice of Taijiquan). The ancient herbalists recognized that even the absolute stillness of Rehmannia (*Di huang*, which means “Yellow Earth,” representing the most still and material end of the Taiji Heaven and Earth spectrum) could leak away so they included the astringent herb Cornus in order to contain Rehmannia’s stillness.²⁵

We can also find this idea of containing the *jing* and *shen* in the Taijiquan Classics where the *I* (psychic counterpart of the “Power” Man, the phase Soil, and the organ Spleen/Pancreas) takes on the function of container:

Up and down, forward and backward, left and right, it’s all the same. All of this is done with the *Yi*....²⁶

Elsewhere the Classics build on this same idea:

(Throughout your) entire body, your mind (*I*) is on the Spirit of Vitality (*jing-shen*) [“concentrated awareness” is the translation I prefer for this term], not on the (Chi (qi)).²⁷

In Taijiquan it is easier to understand how *I*/Intention, as a closed container, can preserve and develop the *jing* and *shen* through the “Standing Postures” where movement is reduced to its extreme

slowness. Whereas the Taiji sequence is characterized by continuous and repetitive motion through its 37 basic postures, the “Standing Postures” are characterized by holding any one of these postures for an extended period of time (5 to 60 minutes). What is most readily perceived while doing any of these postures is that they are difficult, if not impossible, to hold for more than a few minutes with muscular force alone. And yet a common traditional way is for a beginner to hold these postures for up to an hour **before** any further work involving movement in the sequence was to be done. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to let go of muscular strength in order to go deeper in the body to the tendons, ligaments and finally into the bones. In Chinese medicine the bones are associated with the Kidneys, the Earth “Power” and the Water phase. The Kidneys are the source of *jing* which is stored, among other places, inside the bones in the marrow. The Taiji Classics say: “Condense (*lian*, literally draw together, *qian*, with the breath, *qian* 夬) the ch’i into the marrow (*sui*) [or center of the bones].”²⁸ The process of “condensing” *jing* into the bones in the standing postures is like storing more and more energy in a battery. At a certain point the *jing* and bones resonate with the ch’i of the Earth and one’s deep root is established.²⁹

The containment of Fire revolves around, what in alchemy is called, the fusion of *K’an* and *Li*. *K’an* and *Li* are the names of the *Yijing* trigrams for Water and Fire, and represent the third stage of manifestation, after the initial interpenetration of Yin and Yang as Heaven and Earth, but prior to the creation of the hexagrams or even tangible things. In the body the locations of *K’an* and *Li* are such that *Li* is in the top, Heart region, and *K’an* is in the Kidney region below. According to the *Yijing*, Hexagram 64 “Before Completion”:

When Fire, which by nature flames upward, is above, and water, which flows downward, is below, their effects take opposite directions and remain unrelated.³⁰

The opposing directions of Water and Fire in this position is that of dissipation and separation. The archetypal stages of the “creation” path are characterized by Yin-Yang interpenetration, but once materialization has been achieved the Yin-Yang principles gradually lose their attraction for each other and tend to go their separate ways leaving one’s existence “in a rather dubious state.”³¹ The purpose of the method of “*K’an* and *Li*” is to return the opposing tendencies of Water and Fire back to their original interpenetration. It does this by bringing the essence of Fire below that of Water so that Fire can steam the essence of Water into ch’i which can then later become *shen*, while bringing Water to bear on Fire so that the volatile *shen* is subdued. Through this interpenetration the opposing energies of Water and Fire, Heaven and Earth, are “returned” through the Taiji gate to their central Source (*yuan*, void, Dao, etc.).

If the storage of *jing* in the bones is like the charging of a battery, then its transformation into *shen* is like a generator. In the Standing Postures, at the same time one sinks the *I* and ch’i into the bones in order to concentrate the *jing*, one’s conscious awareness (the most basic definition of *shen*) is lowered automatically into its associated realm (Water). The result is that the heart/mind (*xin* 心) is stilled while the *jing* is increased. Stilling the mind and increasing the *jing*, is also typically achieved in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. As such they are, along with these standing postures, an entry level into the alchemical “*K’an* and *Li*” procedures.

Placing the bones into the Earth, if you will, in order to attract the *shen* is also a practice found in ancestor worship, especially in *feng-shui*, the ancient Chinese practice of grave-siting. The ancients practiced both primary and secondary burials. The primary burial involves a process of 1-2 years, the purpose of which is to rot the flesh. After the flesh decays, the bones which contain the *jing*/essence of the ancestor are then dug up and placed in a container and reburied in a place where the bones are kept dry.³² The bones of these ancestors, after they were placed in jars for secondary burial, were called ‘yellow gold’ (*huang-jin*), a name referring to alchemy³³ and the transmutation matter to spirit.³⁴ According to the *Tsang-shu* or Burial Book of Ch’iu P’u (276-324 AD), the bones of the ancestors resonate with Heaven and Earth ch’i as well as with Tao itself. This resonance is then directed toward the living descendants who thereby receive various benefits (*de*) from both the ancestral spirits (also called *shen*) and their connection to the cosmic source (Dao).³⁵

Chinese alchemy is derived from these much older practices of ancestor worship where the interrelation between matter and spirit in relation to longevity and immortality practices begins. In order to understand these interrelationships more completely in regard to the development of *shen* in Taijiquan, we will now explore the connection of these ideas to sacrifice and ritual in the context of not only ancestor

worship, but also the later development of Confucianism and Daoism, and finally the connection of each to the development and practice of Taijiquan some thousand years later.

Sacrifice and Ritual in the Development of *Shen*

The practice of ancestor worship involves making an earthly and tangible offering, usually in the form of food and drink served in sacred implements, to the spirits (*shen*) and ultimately their connection to Dao in order to secure *de* (i.e., their wisdom, blessing, and protection). Sacrificial offerings, therefore, symbolize Man in his mediating role between Heaven and Earth conducting their interaction for the purpose of securing blessings.

Chinese ancestor worship attempts to contain the spirit(s) (bring them down) through the sacrifice of Earthly material things which represent the *jing* alchemically in the human body. Alchemy reiterates the earlier idea of external sacrifice found in Chinese ancestor worship, but does so internally within the body and mind through the conversion of *jing* to *shen* via the intermediary level of *ch'i* and *I*/Intention. Whereas in alchemy what “contains” the spirit(s) is *K'an* and *Li*, in Chinese ancestor worship it is what the ancient Chinese also called *Li*, but signified with a different character meaning ritual. Both *Li*, the trigram, and *Li*, ritual, relate to Fire in the Five Phase system of correspondence which associates them both with the Heart and *shen*. Whereas the sound and association with the Five Phases of these two *Li*'s is similar, there are also relevant differences. *Li*, the trigram, also carries the meaning of separation, leaving, and distance,³⁶ as is the inherent scattering tendency of Fire as discussed above, whereas *li* ritual connotes the containment of Fire through sacrificial activity. In the Shang dynasty, enormous attention was given to every conceivable detail of the royal sacrifice. These details were carefully orchestrated to correspond to seasonal and cosmic (astrological) events, as well as to the particular ancestor or spirit that the sacrifice was directed toward. Thus, tremendous significance was given to the colors one wore, the kinds of nourishment one ate and drank, as well as to the specific actions and words that were used at specific times (recall the definition of the *ji* of “Taiji” where the *wu* shaman, in order to make life meaningful enough to bring the spirit(s) down, had to make his words and actions congruent).

Later, in the Zhou dynasty (1122 to 255 BC) Confucius made ritual into a virtue, and in so doing made *Li* (and *shen*) available to the common person by defining it as one of the three main aspects in the development of the Great Man. For Confucius it wasn't enough to simply perform the mechanics and technique of ritual, however perfectly that could be done. In order for ritual to truly qualify as Confucius' *Li*, it had to be performed with great intention, but even more importantly, with the conscious awareness and feeling that characterize *shen*. Even though ritual contained aspects of mechanical actions, true ritual, or *Li*, required the presence of spirit. The intention behind Confucius' *Li* was to create a symbolic learning situation, not unlike Taijiquan, that would prepare his disciples for life in the everyday world by bringing something sacred (*shen* spirit) to the mundane.

If you think about it, most of life is concerned with mechanical activity, and in the mundane world it is easy to become preoccupied with these affairs. You have to get up, get dressed, brush your teeth, cook your food, wash the pots, get to and from work, say hello, say good-bye, and on and on before any otherwise “meaningful” activity ever takes place. In his emphasis on *Li*, Confucius was the first to realize the importance of the Zen of presence of mind in the simple activities of daily life, e.g., chopping wood, carrying water etc.. Everyone has probably noticed that in times of emotional stress (such as in great joy, grieving, anger, fear, worry, or even boredom) it is sometimes difficult to be fully present. Instead the heart/mind (locus of the *shen*) drifts off toward an external image that may or may not correspond to what is actually happening. If one becomes traumatized into, or by, one of these emotions, one will then develop attitudes and beliefs about life that will make one prone to react to these attitudes and beliefs about life instead of responding directly to life itself. These false images spend the *jing* as the Will chases illusory goals down wasted paths that bear no return. According to Confucius, in times like these, *Li* is what creates the container for *shen*, keeping it linked to its surroundings, so that it can appropriately respond to the external world and thereby receive the blessings and protection (*de*) that Dao has to offer without losing itself either to the external world or one's imagination of it.

Ritual, like alchemy, contains the *shen* in the process of its transformation from *jing* and *ch'i*. If in the Standing Postures we build up a great quantity of *jing* and *ch'i* only to squander it away again in the transformation to *shen* because there is nothing to contain the *shen*, then we not only lose the *shen*, but the *jing* as well. This is a dangerous situation because the *jing* is the essence of material existence. If the Heart *shen* is not trained to identify with its greater source in emptiness, external cravings will arise which

lead one out to squander the *jing* in even greater amounts than before training because there simply is more power to waste. The irony is that in doing so, what should become empty (the Heart) now becomes full, whereas what should have been full (the Kidney *jing*) becomes empty.

There is a fail-safe to this drawback built in to the Taijiquan sequence due to its embodiment of ritual. After all, Taijiquan is a ritualized performance. Not only must one repeat the same sequence each time it is performed, but do so with Intention and spirit. This means that one has to coordinate the opening and closing of the breath with the opening and closing of the joints, the three-dimensional movement from substantial to insubstantial and back again in the six directions throughout the progression of the 37 postures and 108 or so movements. Performance on this level, as a starting point, certainly transcends mechanical action. The mind is unified with the body, the right (creative) and left (structured through ritual) sides of the brain are brought into balance, spirit and matter are coordinated, and Heaven and Earth are reunited through the return to Source via the Taiji (ridge)pole. In the Taijiquan Classics it says that where the heart/mind (*xin*) goes the ch'i will follow.

(Throughout your) entire body, your mind (*I*) is on the Spirit of Vitality (*jing-shen*), not on the Chi (*qi*). (If concentrated) on the Chi (*ch'i*), then stagnation. A person who concentrates on Chi (*qi*) has no Li (strength); a person who cultivates Chi (*qi*) (develops) pure hardness (power).³⁷

This means that when one keeps the Intention focused on the *jing-shen* (an aspect of *shen*) instead of the *qi*, or any other phenomena that may occur in practice, what develops is *shen*.

At this point, practice of Taijiquan turns to play as the spontaneous movement (*zuran*) of Yin-Yang *ch'i* expressing itself naturally from its source in "Taiji" is experienced. The Taijiquan Classics speak thusly of this spontaneity:

The true nature of the Heart (*xin-xing*) as well as the Intention (*I*) should be calm (*jing*), and then spontaneity (*zuran*) will miraculously (*ling*) appear from nowhere (*wu*).³⁸

This calmness (*jing*), or quiescence, is a Daoist technical term used to refer to the root state preceding birth. According to the *Zhuangzi*,

From emptiness comes quiescence; from quiescence comes movement; and from movement comes attainment. From quiescence comes non-activity (stillness, *wu-wei*) and when [the ruler] (Heart) is non-active, those in charge of affairs may assume their responsibilities.³⁹

There are several paradoxes at play here through which apparently simple things turn to their opposite. Turning away from the outward directed path of life to the path of return creates not death, but the everlasting life of spirit. Turning away from the Fire-like, externally directed movement of *shen* in order to embrace the most Earthly energy of *jing*, provides the foundation and perpetuation of *shen*. Placing a container on *shen* through the ritualization of the Taijiquan sequence results in the deepest and most comprehensive level of spontaneity (*zuran*) revered by the ancient masters and saints. Perhaps these paradoxes are symbolized in the legendary creation of Taijiquan through the battle between the bird and the snake. After all these are in fact the traditional Chinese symbols of the Water and Fire interaction discussed above.

Bio:

Dennis Willmont has been practicing Oriental medicine in conjunction with *Taijiquan* since 1971. He currently maintains a practice in acupuncture and Chinese herbs in Marshfield, Massachusetts. Dennis studied *Wu* style *Taijiquan* with Li Li-t'a in the 70's, Yang style *Taijiquan* with T.T. Liang in the 80's and currently studies Yang style with Yang Jwing-ming. He has also studied *Xingyi*, and *Baguazhang* with Liang Shou-yu.

Ideas and information in this article are derived from Mr. Willmont's extensive research into the cultural background of ancient acupuncture. He is currently writing a book on this topic which specializes on the interpretation and development of acupuncture through the symbolism of the acupuncture point-names.

¹ Léon Weiger, *Chinese Characders: Their Origin, Etymology, History, Classification and Signification*. (New York: Paragon, 1965) 710 & Lesson 47K.

² Z. D. Sung, *The Text of the Yi King (And its Appendixes), Chinese Original with English Translation* (Shanghai: The China Modern Education Company, 1935) 299, *Yijing*, Great Appendix, Section I, Chapter XI.

Note: This progression follows what is called the binary sequence where each level multiplies itself by 2, i.e., 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 etc.

³ Khigh Alx Dhiagh, *The Eleventh Wing- An Exposition of the Dynamics of the I Ching For Now*, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1973) 73.

⁴ Khigh 73.

⁵ David C. Yu, "The Creation Myth and its Symbolism in Classical Taoism," *Philosophy East and West* 31 (1981) 481. See also Kristofer Schipper, "The Taoist Body," *History of Religions* 17 (1978) 360.

⁶ Feng Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy Vol. 1*. Translated by Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952) 170.

⁷ John C.H. Wu, trans. *Lao Tzu- Dao Teh Ching*, (New York: St. John's University Press, 1961) 3, *Dao-de jing* 2.

⁸ Wu 60, translation mine.

⁹ Isabelle Robinet, "The Place and Meaning of the Notion of Taiji in Taoist Sources Prior to the Ming Dynasty," *History of Religions* 29.4 (1990): 381-382.

¹⁰ Weiger Lesson 2D.

¹¹ Lawrence Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989) 70.

¹² Jeffrey F Meyer, *Peking as a Sacred City*, (Taipei: The Oriental Culture Service, 1976) 32.

¹³ Yang Jwing-ming, *Advanced Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan vol. 1- Tai Chi Theory and Tai Chi Jing*, (Jamaica Plain: YMAA Publications, 1987) 213, "T'ai-chi-ch'üan Treatise" by Chang San-feng.

¹⁴ John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, Volume I, Books 1-6*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 114.

¹⁵ William H. Barnes, "Diagrams of Chinese Chemical Apparatus," *Journal of Chemical Education* October 453.

¹⁶ Derk Bodde, *Chinese Thought, Society, and Science: The Intellectual and Social Background of Science and Technology in Pre-modern China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991) 112.

¹⁷ Note: The Wood and Metal phases fit here in their association with Man but are, however, irrelevant to this discussion.

¹⁸ Wu 9, *Dao-de jing* 7.

¹⁹ Norman J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Daoism: The Theme of Chaos (hun-tun)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 148, *Huai-nan-tzu*.

²⁰ Harold D. Roth, "Psychology and Self-Cultivation in Early Taoist Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51 (1991): 643, *Huai-nan-tzi* 1.

²¹ Wieger Lesson 75H.

²² Wu 15, *Dao-de jing* 12.

²³ Wu 73, *Dao-de jing* 52.

²⁴ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China. Vol. 5, part 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956) 4-6.

²⁵ Ted Kaptchuk, "A Course in Chinese Herbalism," Arlington, 1996.

²⁶ Yang 214, "T'ai-Chi-ch'üan Treatise" by Chang San-feng.

²⁷ Yang 228, "Thirteen Postures: Comprehending External and Internal Training" by Wang Tsung-yüeh.

²⁸ Yang 234, "Seventeen Key Theses".

²⁹ Allen Clay, personal interview, 6 August 1996.

³⁰ Richard Wilhelm, *I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Cary Baynes (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967) 249.

³¹ Richard Wilhelm, trans. *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Incorporated, 1962) 15.

³² Marcel Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, trans. Kathleen E. Innes and Mabel R Brailsford (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tribner & Company Limited; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930) 332.

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- ³³ Alchemy was often called the art of the “Yellow and White,” with “yellow” referring to gold, and “white” to silver. Gold and silver were two of the main symbols for Yang and Yin respectively.
- ³⁴ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society*, (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1966) 119.
- ³⁵ Andrew L. March, “The Winds, the Waters and the Living Qi,” *Parabola* 3.1 (1978): 29.
- ³⁶ Weiger 617.
- ³⁷ Yang 228, “Thirteen Postures: Comprehending External and Internal Training” by Wang Tsung-yüeh.
- ³⁸ Yang 232, “The Marvelous Application of the Entire Body” my translation.
- ³⁹ W. Allyn Rickett, “An Early Chinese Calendar Chart: Kuan-tzu, III, 8,” *T'oung Pao Archives* 48 (1960): 227.