

# CLASSICAL TAI CHI FORUM

VOLUME 7  
DECEMBER 2003

Dear Students,

Although we got some great feedback in the last month, we are postponing publishing the comments, essays and responses from Master Hwa.

This issue is devoted solely to Master Hwa's explication of some of the underlying philosophy influencing Tai Chi.

Wishing you and yours a happy holiday season and a healthy and happy New Year!

Please continue to send your observations and questions to me at:

parea10@yahoo.com

E. Marie

## PHILOSOPHY OF TAI CHI

When early Tai Chi masters lectured their students, they often used quotes from three Chinese philosophy books to make their points. These three books are: I-Ching (Book of Changes), Lao-Tzu Te-Tao-Ching (sometimes named Tao-Te-Ching), and Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare. That these three books were part of mainstream Chinese philosophy for more than 2500 years undoubtedly contributed significantly to the development of Tai Chi is evident from the unique characteristics of Tai Chi as a martial art. Also, these books were important text books in classical education during that period. Students were familiar with these books and were taught to revere them for their teaching of the nature of things. Therefore using quotes from these books to explain Tai Chi's principles impressed students greatly. After the turn of the twentieth century, modern education replaced classical education. Students are not that familiar with these books any more. The use of these quotes in teaching Tai Chi has become much less prevalent.

### **Tai Chi and Taoism**

Two of the books mentioned above, I-Ching and Tao-Te-Ching, are also important philosophical foundations of Taoism. So, Tai Chi and Taoism share some of the same philosophical heritage. There is also the story about the mystical Taoist, Chang San- Feng who supposedly developed an early form of Tai Chi by observing fighting movements of animals.

All the writings about the current practice of Tai Chi only date back about three hundred years, with a majority of Tai Chi books published in the last seventy years in China. From the writings I read, I have not seen any tie in between Tai Chi and Taoism aside from those mentioned above. None of the writings cross over the boundary into metaphysical or spiritual writing. It seems that only very recently, especially in the west, that association between Tai Chi and Taoism and spiritualism becomes more common. Several times when I gave a talk about Tai Chi in public, I was asked about the spiritual side of Tai Chi. I know that my answer disappointed the questioners.

### **I-Ching (The Book of Change)**

This is the earliest known book in China with known written version dated back to 1000 BC while the symbols representing yin – yang and eight trigrams were invented many thousand years before that. It is a very complex book with many different aspects including divination, cosmology, mathematics (binary number system), morals, and philosophy of the nature of things.

For example, the eight directions used in Tai Chi (see Lesson 2) is said to follow the orientation of the eight trigrams. Certainly the concept of yin and yang is the foundation of Tai Chi (as well as the foundation of Chinese medicine, biology etc). In my video, I have talked about this concept and its application in Tai Chi. I shall expand on that here. Everything in the universe exists in an opposite and complementary pair, such as male and female, sun and moon, earth and heaven, fire and water, dominance and submission, soft and hard etc. Yin and yang constantly evolve or change from one to the other cyclically so that not one entity continually dominates the opposite entity for long. If the imbalance persisted, it would lead to distress of the system. Since all entities evolve into their counter part, every entity has within it the seeds of the counter part.

Every aspect at every level in Tai Chi follows the principles of yin and yang. Here are some notable examples:

- Every movement in Tai Chi has yang (the moving part of body) and yin (the stationary part of body supporting the moving part and providing the majority of the power). This requirement minimizes any movement involving the entire body moving with momentum, such as jump off attack- a common move in external martial arts. Each Form movement is often a combination of several sets of yin-yang pairs in motion simultaneously. However the primary pair of yin-yang of that movement is always located in the torso. That is the principle of Internal Discipline.

- When practicing the Tai Chi Form, certain portions of the body are completely relaxed while other parts of the body are energized by the internal movements. “Relaxing” and “energizing” are therefore constantly maintained and evolved in the body. If the body is mostly relaxed without energizing from the internal movement, then there is too much yin and not enough yang to balance it. On the other hand, external martial arts usually tense up the entire body. Then, it is all yang and no yin.
- We play the Form slowly with the intent of developing instinctive swift responses during martial art applications. “Slow” grows the seed of “swift”. “Swift” retains the character of “tranquil”.
- Softness and yielding conceal the hidden potential of “fa jin (a sudden burst of power)”. During “fa jin”, one does not need to fully commit one's body so that “fa jin” and “yielding” could proceed in cycles.
- Round Form and Square Form outwardly could not be more diametrically opposite to each other. Yet, in the Square Form, there are seeds of Round Form and in the Round Form, there is hidden Square Form.

### **Lao-Tzu Te Tao Ching**

Lao-Tzu was said to be written around 500 B. C. I shall quote from the following book directly certain relevant passages for discussion:

Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching

Robert G. Hendricks, Ballantine Books, New York, 1989

Translation based on a newly discovered manuscript buried 168 B. C.

Page 47

*When people are born, they're supple and soft;  
When they die, they end up stretched out firm and rigid;*

.....  
*Therefore we say that the firm and rigid are companions of  
death,  
While the supple, the soft, the weak, and the delicate are  
companions of life.*

**Note: That is often quoted as the health benefits of practicing Tai Chi.**

-----  
-----

Page 12

*The softest, most pliable thing in the world runs roughshod over  
the firmest thing in the world.*

Page 49

*In the whole world, nothing is softer and weaker than water.  
And yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can beat it,*

.....  
*There is no one in the whole world who doesn't know it,  
And yet there is no one who can put it into practice.*

**Note: Soft can conquer hard. That is the martial art application of Tai Chi.  
So, Tai Chi has put this knowledge into practice!**

-----  
-----

Page 63

*We fire clay and make vessels;  
It is precisely where there's no substance, that we find the  
usefulness of clay pots.  
We chisel out doors and windows;  
It is precisely in these empty spaces, that we find the usefulness  
of the room.  
Therefore, we regard having something as beneficial;  
But having nothing as useful.*

**Note: Emptiness or nothingness ( yielding ) is the unique tactic of Tai Chi martial  
art applications.**

-----  
-----

Page 66

*We look at it but do not see it;  
.....  
We listen to it but do not hear it;  
.....  
We touch it but do not hold it;  
.....*

*These three cannot be examined to the limit.  
Thus they merge together as one.  
“One”- there is nothing more encompassing above it,  
And nothing smaller below it.  
Boundless, formless! It cannot be named,  
And returns to the state of no-thing.  
This is called formless form.  
.....  
This called the beginning of the thread of the Way.*

Page 72

*Formless am I! Like the ocean;  
Shapeless am I! As though I have nothing in which I can rest.  
The masses all have their reason for acting;  
I alone am stupid and obstinate like a rustic.  
But my desires alone differ from those of others—  
For I value drawing sustenance from the Mother.*

Page 73

*As for the nature of the way-it’s shapeless and formless.  
Formless! Shapeless! Inside there are images.  
Shapeless! Formless! Inside there are things.*

**Note: Formless and shapeless are the way of Tai Chi. This is what we work so hard to achieve. We gradually absorb the essence of the forms and shapes we practice into our subconscious. Eventually, every move we make will instinctively follow the way. More about this will be discussed in The Art of Warfare.**

-----  
-----

Page 9

*When the highest type of men hear the Way, with diligence  
they’re able to practice it;  
When average men hear the Way, some things they retain and  
others they lose;  
When the lowest type of men hear the Way, they laugh out loud  
at it.*

*Hidden! Obscure! Inside there are essences.  
These essences are very real;  
Inside them is the proof.*

**Note: My teacher Young Wabu often quote this, describing the three kinds of people he encounters.**

### **Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare**

This book is written by Sun Wu in around 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. I shall quote passages from the following book for discussion.

Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare

Roger T. Ames, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993

Translated from recently discovered manuscript entombed 140 B. C.

Page 111

*So to win a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy's army without fighting at all.*

**Note: Tai Chi is basically a defensive martial art following the spirit of the above passage.**

-----  
-----

Page 115

*The expert in battle would first make himself invincible and then wait for the enemy to expose his vulnerability.*

.....  
*Being invincible lies with defense; the vulnerability of the enemy comes with the attack.*

**Note: This is the strategy of Tai Chi martial art applications. A famous saying about Tai Chi is as follows “If the opponent does not move, I do not move. When my opponent prepares to move, I already know how to handle him.” That is, instinctively you have sensed the weakness in his coming movement.**

Page 115

*The expert at defense conceals himself in the deepest recesses of the earth; the expert on the attack strikes from out of the highest reaches of the heavens.*

**Note: In other words, one does not let his defense be visible. When attacking, the force comes from nowhere. The element of surprise is repeatedly emphasized here.**

Page 119

*Generally in battle use the “straightforward” to engage the enemy and the “surprise” to win the victory. Thus the expert at delivering the surprise assault is as boundless as the heavens and earth, and inexhaustible as the rivers and seas.*

**Note: That is how my teacher Young Wabu describes Wu Chian Chuan handled him when they were sparring, continuously keeping him off balance. Certainly in this case, Wu was just showing the technique, not seeking a quick victory.**

Page 119

*There are no more than five cardinal notes, yet in combination, they produce more sounds than could possibly be heard; there are no more than five cardinal colors, yet in combination, they produce more shades and hues than could possibly be seen; .....*  
*“Surprise” and “straightforward” operations give rise to each other endlessly just as a ring is without a beginning or an end.*

Page 126

*Thus an army does not have fixed strategic advantages or an invariable position. To be able to take the victory by varying one's position according to the enemy's is called being inscrutable.*

**Note: (Surprising that they knew so much about sound and color at such an early time) If one is well versed in the elements of Tai Chi, one should be able to generate infinite variations for the optimum application. This is formless.**

-----  
-----  
Page 123

*So veiled and subtle,  
To the point of having no form;  
So mysterious and miraculous,  
To the point of making no sound.  
Therefore he can be arbiter of the enemy's fate.*

Page 126

*The ultimate skill in taking up a strategic position is to have no form. If your position is formless, the most carefully concealed spies will not be able to get a look at it, and the wisest counselors will not be able to lay plans against it.*

**Note: Avoid an expansive stance and posture when facing the opponent. It not only exposes your intention but also retards your ability to respond to a changing situation. Standing with wide stance while weight is on both feet gives one false feeling of security. It is like trench warfare. Tai Chi is a defensive martial art in spirit. But, it is not a trench digging, holding the ground, fighting to the death kind of strategy. It depends on quickness and surprise, yielding to the opponent and then counterattack. Mobility and fast response are of primary importance. For example, when you have compact or small stance, your opponent cannot determine where your center of gravity lies. You can shift your weight quickly to engage.**



*.....make him show himself to discover the viability of his battle position; skirmish with him to find out where he is strong and where he is vulnerable.*

*So it is with the expert at battle that his strategic advantage is channeled and his timing is precise. His strategic advantage is like a drawn crossbow and his timing is like releasing the trigger.*

**Note: Skirmish and probe the front line, when weak points are discovered, after determining that it is not a trap, marshal a concentrated force, quickly break through the opponent's line and rout the enemy. This kind of scenario plays out all the time in battles. So it is in Tai Chi martial art application. "Stick to the opponent" is equivalent to skirmishing and probing. Sensing and "ting jin (listen to opponent's power surge and ebb)" is to determine the value of the intelligence. Then lightening strike with "fa jin".**

*...baiting him with easy gains. Set out after he does, yet arrive before him.*

**Note: Yielding to an opponent to give him easy gain is often used in Tai Chi. If his attack is fully committed with all his momentum you could give him an "empty" or "nothingness" reception to take full advantage of his momentum. But, if he is cautiously attacking, you have to weigh your neutralization force to give him some satisfaction that he is engaging you with an upper hand, not walking into a trap. This is one of the objectives in push hand training.**