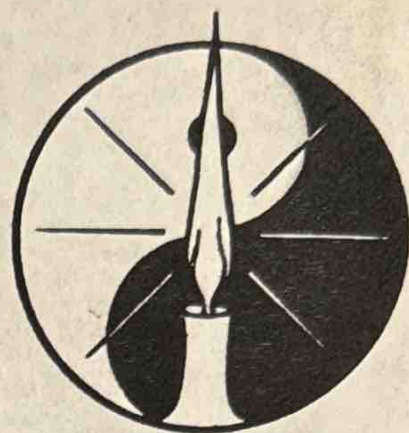




Beverley Milne

THE HEART OF T'AI-CHI



The Chinese art of movement for health, meditation, and integration is a study for self-development and realization using the body as the basic vehicle of experience and expression.

T'ai-chi Ch'uan is a callisthenic fine art, and is often described in appearance as a slow-moving dance of great beauty. Its present form dates from the 14th Century; its roots are in Chinese culture — philosophy (mainly Taoist, Ch'an and Buddhist, with Confucian influences), breathing techniques, alchemy — both spiritually pure and degenerate, seermanship and medical therapies, and self-defence exercises. A cultural masterpiece developed mostly in the monasteries and temple schools, it was until the 19th Century virtually an esoteric school, and in its true nature and communicated expression still remains so.

Exercising, whether for health or for self-defence, has always been a traditional part of Chinese culture. Earliest exercises for health and strength dating from thousands of years ago recognized four factors which have together formed the basis of Chinese exercises and medicine:

1. Man is a microcosmic reflection of Macrocosmic Law.
2. All life is movement and change within Unity.
3. The Human organism is designed to function as an integrated whole.
4. Prevention is better than cure.

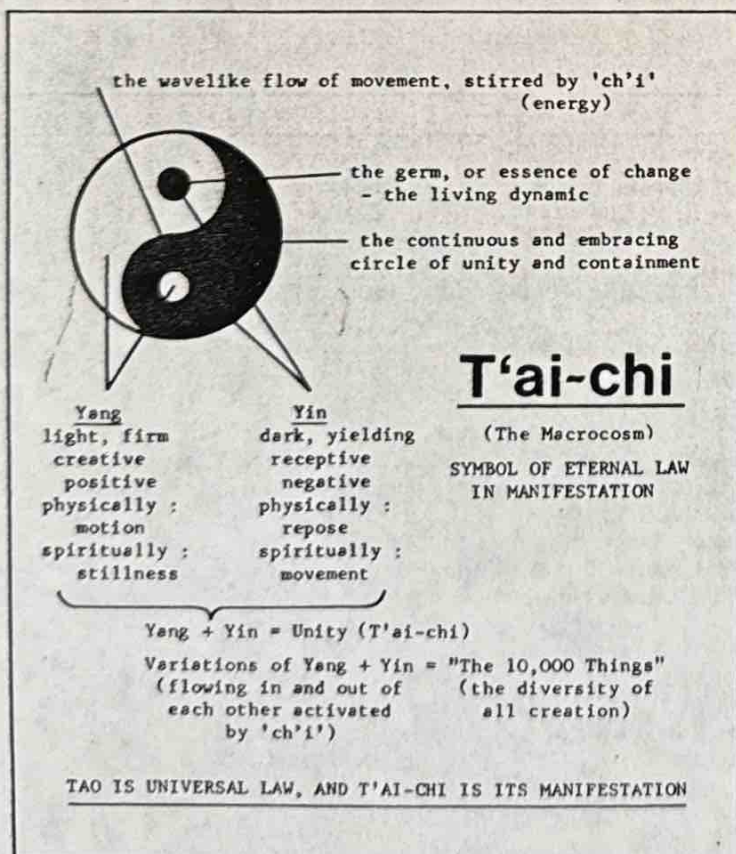
These are the premises upon which acupuncture, herbal medicine, therapeutic and callisthenic exercises such as T'ai-chi and self-defence techniques have been based. The observation that mind and body are intimately linked, and that mind linked with or distorted by emotion directly affects the body, made it obvious that anxiety, irritation, fear, etc., in causing tension causes disease and sickness by interfering with breathing circulation, and general body functioning. An active but peaceful mind was recognized as necessary to health and the balanced personality as an efficient body.

To maintain a state of naturalness and flow in all aspects of the personality therefore, therapeutic exercises were developed inspired by the unselfconscious naturalness of bird and animal movements and sounds. In time, these became mime plays of creation myths, in which the people could identify with the processes of nature, and through them find harmony and release. Such were the origins of T'ai-chi Ch'uan, an organic (and still growing) art developed largely by Taoist but in recent centuries Buddhist mystics and physicians according to the harmonies and flowing processes of change seen in all nature, and aligned with knowledge of esoteric anatomy (spiritual science) and the movements of 'ch'i' (vital force or 'prana').

Early in the Christian era exercises called 'kung-fu' for working out, releasing, and focusing the mind and body were developed chiefly by physicians, seers, and cultured associates and taught in the little schools attached to their practices for both preventive and curative therapy. Initially of a short and repetitive nature, they were eventually lengthened to require the finer balancing of energies — including mental and emotional as well as physical — essential for endurance. The later development of 'ch'uan' (literally meaning fist — a symbol of energy containment and focus) were exercise disciplines aiming for mastery of mind and body, with self-defence applications.

In the 11th Century, the inspired mystic Chang San-feng, concerned about the hard and aggressive nature of the army's Shaolin martial training (in which he was by birth obliged to engage) deserted from the army, and over the years arranged and developed a new 'ch'uan' as a long 'kung-fu' for fuller soul and spiritual development.

Later built around the philosophy of T'ai-chi (developed c. 12th Century, although in general terms a very old concept), it aimed for



THE VALUES OF T'AI-CHI CH'UAN

These values are extraordinarily comprehensive, and this list is necessarily inadequate. However, T'ai-chi is not a panacea for everyone under any circumstances, and is not a passport to either material health or spiritual growth. The following list is an indication of the possibilities, but each individual appreciates the T'ai-chi according to need, and can draw out only according to the effort (focussed relaxation!) put in. The Law of Life is that *we reap what we sow!*

Many of its values will not be attained by following mere physical mechanics, for that is not the T'ai-chi. Careful and enlightened tuition must be linked with self-discipline physically, emotionally and mentally, and rooted in a genuine aspiration and endeavour towards the higher life. If these are linked with common sense nutritional care, daily practice may lead to a long, active, health and creative progress through life.

These values may be summarized as follows:

1. How to *combat illness* of mind and body
2. How to build the skill to *maintain health*
3. How to *increase* resources and potentialities,
4. How to *reach* understanding of the inner nature,
5. How to *apply the will*.

In physical terms

1. co-ordinates physical body
2. relaxes whole body
3. stimulates circulation of blood, oxygen, lymph
4. deepens breathing, ** better respiration purer blood
5. strengthens heart and lungs
6. loosens joints, increases flexibility
7. strengthens legs to support body
8. improves stamina
9. finds centre of balance
10. tones up skin
11. improves vocal efficiency
improves visual efficiency
improves aural efficiency
12. prevents illness (unless karmic)
13. prevents freak injuries (unless karmic)
14. contain energy and control energy
15. massages internal organs
16. improves sleep
17. very valuable for pregnant woman, mother and child

In more subtle terms

1. integrates whole system
2. teaches self-control
3. develops patience and perseverance
4. calms and steadies emotions
5. gives confidence
6. focussed mind — better concentration
7. improves memory
8. mental alertness — avoids habit
9. makes one face reality — one's faults
10. teaches adaptability
11. aids orientation in space
12. develops awareness — physical, emotional, mental, spiritual
13. heightens perception — vivifies 'chakras' and psychic body naturally
14. provides release — physical, emotional, mental
15. develops sense of rhythm and musicality
16. facilitates creative spiritual outflow
17. develops healing abilities
18. promotes clarity
19. promotes simplicity
20. promotes appreciation of arts and cultural refinements — music, poetry, dance, art, sculpture etc.
21. promotes balanced development of the unborn child.

full integration and mastery of the *whole* Self, i.e. the eventual subordination of the personality ego to the Spiritual directive. Thus it stepped beyond the more elementary orientation of defending the personality self, and became called T'ai-chi Ch'uan about the 14th Century.

THE ULTIMATE AND NATURAL LAW

T'ai-chi, translated as Great Ultimate or Supreme Limit, means the underlying Unity of all manifestation. It is the wholeness embracing within itself the equilibrium of constant cyclic movements of change which are characteristic of the universe, ebbing and flowing between polarities — Chinese terms, between *Yin* and *Yan* (see Fig.1. In literature this is embodied in the "I Ching", the ancient Book of Transformations: in movement, it is the living beauty of T'ai-chi Ch'uan. Naturally the study of "I Ching" complements the study of T'ai-chi Ch'uan.

Designed to facilitate complete integration of the personality with the Spirit by alignment of energies and opening to higher faculties, the art has however been misunderstood in recent centuries by the

spiritually immature, and arrived in the Western world with materialist associations. In degenerating into the more material self-defence associations which it had stepped beyond (where one is concerned with defending rather than letting go of self), other combat techniques using sticks and swords as in martial arts were developed, which although excellent exercise and discipline and often beautiful in form are largely alien to the philosophy and spirit of T'ai-chi. Pushing Hands, however, a rhythmic practice to develop fine sensing between two people, is a valuable extension to the main solo form, as are other more recent developments by a few sensitively experienced Western teachers.

In design and purport T'ai-chi Ch'uan is a microcosmic reflection of Natural Law, the essential order and limitations of which we must accept and work within. Resistance to the laws of life incurs tension, disharmony, and disease. Thus the T'ai-chi 'forms' are a framework (like the skeleton) of movements which the student may not alter: establishing a field for a life-long growing process of experience and discovery, the discipline teaches self-analysis in a quiet and constructive way. In aiming for subtlety, not physical strength, it exercises and explores all aspects of the personality



concurrently without strain, co-ordinating mind, emotion, body, breath, and Spirit into harmony.

Being rooted in the spread and bended legs, the body rides easily through the constant shifting of weight linked fluidly via the pelvis and waist with the spiral movements of the arms. The slow, peaceful but dynamic flow of forms reflects the continuity of the life force. Through the focusing of the mind, this continuity of flow brings grace and fluidity to movement through the release of tension, developing awareness throughout the body, and teaching the containment and balanced distribution of energy.

T'ai-chi is a natural form of healing of both curative and preventive medicine at all levels, most importantly involving subtle internal, emotional and mental benefits such as mental clarity, adaptability and endurance (see notes — 2). The benefits, even of the physical, are innumerable, but notably include poise and confidence (see Fig.3.), better circulation and body tone, and elasticity of muscles.

Quiet but full-body breathing in co-ordination with the movement allows full relaxation and the opening of joints to facilitate the free flow of energy to cleanse, nourish, and strengthen, and provide internal massage. Unfortunately few schools now teach such integrated breathing, its technique having been misunderstood and the discipline avoided or discarded. Consequently, breathing with T'ai-chi is all too often not just quiet but shallow, leading to sunken chest and head, and collapsed shoulders. Rather than breathing with life, the experience and expression can easily become introverted — a lack of inspiration in more ways than one! Benefits to the soul life and fulfilment of creative potential are of course of a different order, and beyond delineation, though increasingly clear to the inspired student.

INNER STRENGTH

In balance with its outwardly soft and yielding nature (Yin,

feminine, receptive), the inner spiritual core of T'ai-chi is its great strength (Yang, masculine, creative). Working towards attaining this balance of polarities is the real study of all students, and relative to both the sex and the state of inner evolution of the individual. The rhythmic practice allows the subconscious to be relaxed and centred, and the opening to the spiritual inflow and heightened perception of the meditative state. Lao Tzu "to yield with life solves the insoluble", for "the way to do is to be"; this requires true inner strength.

Symbolically rich, T'ai-chi Ch'uan is essentially imbued with spiritual, mythological, cosmological, and numeralogical signifi-

NATURAL LAW - THE KEY TO POISE

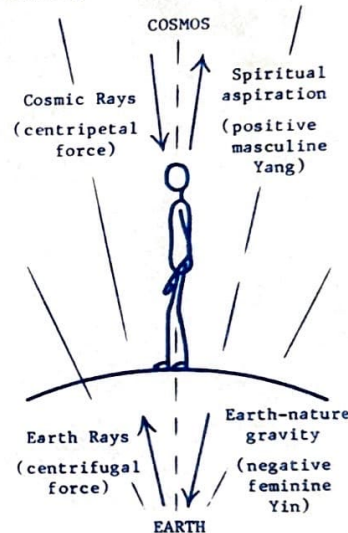
Consider from the Cosmic viewpoint the position of Man as a physical being - a vertically designed and aligned creature. His feet root him to the Earth by the centrifugal force of gravity and his lower spine points downwards to the Earth centre and his physical origin. His head moves in space poised lightly over the upper or cervical spine, pointing upwards towards the heavens or outer Cosmos which is his spiritual origin and centre. With his feet - symbolically his Earth-nature, he is limited, earthbound; relatively, there is not far he can go. With his head - symbolically his Spirit-nature, he is unlimited, and with all creation before him to experience and through which to evolve.

Consider the diagram of Man standing on the Earth :

a In the sphere of Cosmic Energy movements, he is subject to rays of light and wisdom pouring downwards from the outer Cosmos via his head centres, and to rays of centrifugal force radiating out from the Earth centre. Cosmic forces thus affect and enter his body from both above and below. His very existence is the result of the interaction of these two forces.

b In the sphere of his own awareness, he is spiritually aspiring or raising his thoughts, but also rooted by gravity into the Earth. His interests therefore are movements in two basic directions : his aspirations, his finer more spiritual inclinations (Positive aspect) by which he attunes himself and vibrates to a higher order of being, so facilitating his own evolving ; his Earth nature, his physical nature (Negative aspect) which is the essential counterpart of the spiritual Self, which may, until he finds the balance, lead him to indulgence in excesses and gross attitudes and behaviour.

All depends upon true understanding and balance in every avenue of life. Aspiration must be balanced with rootedness, and as this awareness develops, so can the Cosmic and Earth rays more effectively blend in Man's being and positively stimulate his growth.



From "T'ai-chi Spirit and Essence"

cance, and evolved in essence from the creation mime plays of a long cultural development, undoubtedly reflects the evolutionary process. In embodying cycles within cycles and sequent change without beginning or end, the art clearly expresses the rounds of experience, the cosmic and evolutionary processes of life and incarnations, even down to the tiniest details — the mysteries of which take many years to be revealed.

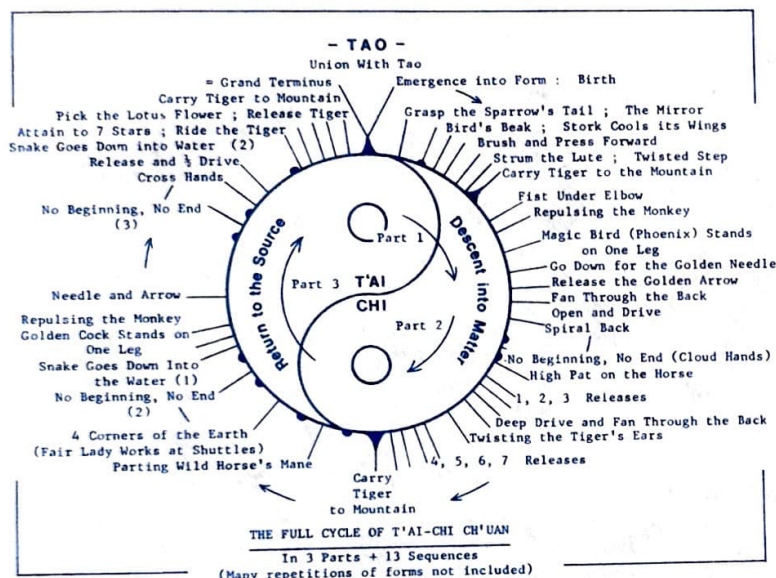
It is fundamental to begin with the appreciation that all body movements and gestures are the outward expression of inner symbols, archetypes and spiritual movements, as well as the body language of the individual psyche. Many of the colourful names of forms have already survived some 2,000 years or more (see Fig.4.); they are keys to the inner nature of the forms if one perceives the holistic, cyclic sense of the art. In time, and given sensitive and inspired teaching together with long practice, the spirit of the art can speak through intuition and feeling, for the full art is a school of inspiration and spiritual understanding as well as physical reform. It is a mirror of life and awareness.

T'ai-chi has occasionally been described as Chinese Yoga, but this could be misleading, for it needs to be recognized as of a totally

different order from Indian Yoga. Although a process of movement towards the same ultimate end of integration and unity, it embodies and expresses not only different but in some aspects opposite principles: e.g. there are no postures, no holding in any way, and no stretching. The 'ultimate' of T'ai-chi is the Way of simplicity and pure natural flow, born of a different cultural and climatic environment to the Indian. Although expressed through the Chinese genius 'in a nutshell', T'ai-chi is a masterpiece of a wide variety of cultural, artistic, and spiritual developments drawn together and integrated over many centuries, and should not be thought of (or taught as) a Chinese version of Hatha Yoga, which as readers will know is only one of many yoga disciplines, and dealing chiefly with the body.

STYLES

The most common and leading style of T'ai-chi is called the Yang (after an instructor in Peking), characterized by smooth and quiet continuity, and the vertical spine essential to all meditation. The long solo form spans an average of 25 minutes to practice, depending upon breathing (individual metabolism) and the actual



form and length of the cycle. Its design includes the repetitions which as true reflections of life are necessary to physical and psychological balance. Studied both 'to the right' and 'to the left' to experience and attain full balance of mind and body usage, it may then be practised 'in mirror' with a partner, bringing a new centre, dynamic and dimension to the art. Ideally the solo form should be practised daily, or on alternate sides daily as is suitable, and in the open air when practicable.

Short forms of T'ai-chi, although good physical exercise and focus, are not recommended for the serious student. Being chiefly Western short-cut introductions lacking the repetitions, they lack the depth and structural balance necessary for full therapeutic and spiritual value.

As the T'ai-chi practice is not an exertion but an unfolding, it is available to everyone of every age group, including the elderly. Only severe arthritis (especially in the knees) prohibits its study. It is particularly valuable during pregnancy, and for heart, breathing and circulatory problems. The time required to learn the basic structure is not important, being relative to individual need and teaching; to learn and assimilate the complete form may take two years and more, but the emphasis must be on care and quality — letting go, not acquiring.

All depends upon attitude of mind, acceptance of self and limitation in a positive way, and relaxation. Although too often projected in the modern world on a superficial level, it is an art of masterly subtlety, and its beauty and profound wisdom can only be attained gradually through sound teaching and full commitment over many years.

Unlike the great majority of therapies, health and development through T'ai-chi is the product of *individual responsibility and endeavour*. A true teacher points the way through careful, subtle instruction and *example* in both the form structure and the laws of life, so that natural health and realization may be attained through personal experience. Taught fully as an holistic study, it is probably the most complete, natural and relevant therapy available in the Western world.

STUDY

T'ai-chi is a developmental study requiring consistency of attendance, preferable in a group, for at least 1½ hours a week. Benefits should begin from the first lesson. Study in the School of T'ai-chi Ch'uan commences with breathing and movement exercises and meditations for relaxation and centring ('ch'i-kung' and 'kung-fu'), creating inner space and focusing mind and feeling. This extends into general flowing movement practice to loosen the body, and eventually into the framework of forms.

It *cannot* be learnt from a book: a complex living art requires personal practical guidance especially in body alignment and relaxation, and the need to perceive its inner Way of Life via personal example. All of the more practical aspects of study should be accompanied by and exemplify the projection of natural/spiritual law: this is important, and badly needed in our present time.

HOW TO START

Since forms and instruction vary, you should make personal contact with the instructor and watch a class if possible before enrolling, in order to sense whether instruction and orientation are of acceptable quality. The student is usually 'led' to the kind of tuition which he needs. A good instructor inspires respect; there will be good knowledge of T'ai-chi philosophy and its expression in everyday life, careful and effective teaching, awareness of good body alignment, relaxation, meditation and breathing processes, peaceful and well organized classes of *limited* size, and good interpersonal communication and relationships. Remember that there are few properly trained and dedicated teachers, and that it is better to learn half the form or even only Part 1 properly, than to 'get' the whole form in a rushed way. That is the negation of the exercise! Under *no* circumstances should an unqualified student volunteer or be pressed into teaching; the effect is not only inadequate, but corrupts the art. Wait until an instructor of at least three or four years experience is available.

Keep in mind that the forms are not the T'ai-chi, any more than your body is you! But they are the *key* to the Way, and as the framework of a fine art they must be taught thoroughly and with insight and practised regularly if the maximum benefit is to be attained. A good teacher inspires and points the way, but the art will be discovered according to your application.

This article is of course little more than a brief summary of some aspects of T'ai-chi. If you would like further information and guidance, please send an S.A.E. to The School of T'ai-chi Ch'uan, c/o 49 The Avenue, London NW6, or telephone 01-459 0764. A talk and Demonstration will be given on Friday 24th September at 7.30, and new Introductory classes commence from 28th September at 82a Chiltern St., London W1.

Recommended Reading

"T'ai-chi Spirit and Essence" by Beverley Milne
(£3 to Beverley Milne, 49 The Avenue, NW6)

"Embrace Tiger Return to Mountain" by Al Chung-liang Huang
(Real People Press, Utah, U.S.A.)

"T'ai-chi the Technique of Power" by Tem Horwitz and Susan Kimelman
(Chicargo Review Press, U.S.A.)

"I Ching" — Richard Wilhelm Translation
(R.K.P. London)

"The Way of Life According to Lao Tzu" (i.e. "Tao Te Ching")
(Capricorn Books) — Witter Bynner translation.