

石氣

"Eternal Energy"

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Historical and Philosophical Background



WHAT IS T'AI CHI?

T'ai Chi is a way of life that has been practiced by the Chinese for thousands of years. We should look into three areas in order to fully understand the historical background of T'ai Chi: (1) its philosophical foundation, (2) how it developed as a martial art, and (3) how T'ai Chi instruction has been passed on from generation to generation.

For those who are interested in the vivid, rich heritage of Chinese culture, and especially those who wish to communicate with and understand those persons from the other side of the globe, it is necessary to study the philosophy of T'ai Chi: that invisible, immense, and most powerful thought that threads its way undiminished through the entirety of oriental history. We are able to do so thanks to a few good individuals in each of

countless generations who were unselfishly dedicated to keeping the spirit of T'ai Chi alive.

First, we may need to shed some of the beliefs and assumptions we have inherited. Human beings, knowing that they are not perfect, desire perfection and search for a better life. Historically, people have always made mistakes in this search because they have misunderstood the nature and potential of human life. Each generation has interpreted this potential differently; some have made religious assumptions while others have ignored or even denied the value of human life. As various social and organizational hierarchies develop and evolve into traditions, fundamental mistakes continue to be made. These accumulate and are often themselves perpetuated as tradition. If we naively follow our own tradition we may someday find out that we have made yet another mistake—the mistake of not questioning our traditions.

Even though our modern technology has brought us into the space age, the motivation of human life remains mysterious. Human achievements seem very small in the light of the historical progress of civilization. Yet even our theories of evolution are still in doubt; in spite of all our technology we still look up at the immense sky and wonder how it all started.

When we watch with pride and enjoyment the flight of a jumbo jet shrinking the earth beneath its wings, it is all too easy to forget that its flight is an imitation of the birds—merely the use of aerodynamic principles that were thousands of years old before humans first walked the earth. Our advanced medical technology has rocketed us to the super-sophisticated level of organ transplants, but we still have to succumb to the most basic and primitive needs: we must breathe air and eat food to survive.

We, the human inhabitants of this earth, may come to realize that fundamentally we have not progressed very far from the original inhabitants of this planet. We may come to see that we cannot change very much about ourselves.

A close look at our world's history reveals obvious cycles in which the development of the total person was either emphasized or ignored. When idealized human nature was emphasized, this yielded a very strong, creative civilization, one in which society progressed and people became spiritualized. Yet many mistakes still took place during this journey.

Several thousands of years ago, such idealism emerged in China. The Chinese of this period were searching for the highest form of life of the human mind and body. In their own unique manner, they achieved their goal—unlike Western civilizations, which separated body from mind and allowed spiritual development only in terms of religious, mystical ecstasy.

The Chinese conceived the human mind to be an unlimited dimension, but the scope of human activity to be moderate. The focus of their goal was a unified philosophy of human life and a simplification of beliefs. This was the birth of what we know today as T'ai Chi thought. T'ai Chi became the invisible power that guided the movements of Chinese history for thousands of years. It gave tremendous impetus to that fabulous culture, showing its influence in areas ranging from medicine to diet, from art to economics. Even the order of human relations was designed according to T'ai Chi ideals.

T'ai Chi means "the ultimate." It means improving, and progressing toward the unlimited; it means the immense existence and the great eternal. All of the various directions in which T'ai Chi influence was felt were guided by the theory of opposites: the *Yin* and the *Yang*, the negative and the positive. This is sometimes called the *original principle*. It was also believed that all of the various influences of T'ai Chi point in one direction: toward the ultimate.

According to T'ai Chi theory, the abilities of the human body are capable of being developed beyond their commonly conceived potential. Civilization can be improved to the highest levels of achievement. Creativity has no boundaries whatsoever, and the human mind should have no restrictions or barriers placed upon its capabilities.

One reaches the ultimate level, or develops in that direction, by means of the ladder of balanced powers and their natural motions—*Yin*, the negative power (yielding), and *Yang*, the positive power (action). From the viewpoint of this theory, it is the interplay of constructive and destructive forces that causes the essence of life to materialize, the material world to manifest. And the spiraling movements of these forces seems endless.

That the two equal powers, *Yin* and *Yang*, oppose and yet complement each other has confused many throughout history. Explanations of the meaning of life have ranged from the theory

that humans were born with sin already a part of their nature, through the hypothesis that it is not education but the fear of punishment that creates a good person, down to the view that if there were no civilization at all there would be no evil in the world.

The very fact that there is argument reveals the truth of the concept that two balanced powers exist. Our universe is programmed in such a way that the two powers exchange their essence, and existence comes from this. This natural law, obvious as it is, is ignored by most humans. We can easily rationalize our ignorance with the excuse that we ourselves are programmed to possess only one of the two powers—either male or female, for example.

This human tendency to ignore all other aspects and focus on only one side of an issue brought Western civilization into religious worship. Western religions did, as a matter of fact, stabilize civilization and the social order for thousands of years, but they also gave rise to a series of tragic and bloody wars between differing religious factions. Formal religions were often guilty of extreme and dogmatic attitudes. They sought to dominate by force rather than to promote harmony. They wielded influence so strong that humans could not easily shake it off, thus causing a wave of thought pollution whose effects still persist today.

In the sixteenth century, there were many free thinkers, such as Galileo, who tried to enlighten people, but religion held the reins. Talking and thinking were not enough; lifestyle changes were needed. So the cultural darkness of the Middle Ages was only finally broken by the Industrial Revolution, which in turn brought about dogmatism. This dogmatism is now being eclipsed by the free-minded, educated generations of today. The women's equal rights movement is an indication of the fact that women's power—the negative, the Yin—has been ignored, abused, deprived, oppressed, and misunderstood for centuries. The contributions of the negative power are as important as those of the positive power, just as the function of electricity consists of two opposite powers.

The Chinese have long realized that the two T'ai Chi elemental powers must interact, and the harmonious result could bring progress and unlimited development. Yet they have had no better

luck at utilizing their knowledge than Westerners. While people in the West are freeing themselves from the shadows of religious idealism and creating the opportunity to experience the realities of the T'ai Chi principle, the Chinese have not yet been able to release themselves from the mental pollution of their own T'ai Chi-influenced culture.

About two thousand years ago in China, following the Spring and Autumn Age, the T'ai Chi principle began to be misused, or ignored. There then followed several hundred years of Dark Ages, during which time the development of human relations and political power took place in a very familiar fashion.

T'ai Chi encourages the fulfillment of the individual person, yet also emphasizes that this goal should be achieved through moderate, natural ways of living. Examinations of Chinese history shows that at a certain point this idea began to be applied only in terms of political power struggles: to be the ultimate person was to be the most powerful ruler. The idea of a simple, natural human nature was ignored.

The Ch'ing Dynasty cast the mold of authoritarian control and slavery that was to become the tradition throughout ensuing Chinese history. To the rulers—the Yang, aggressive powers—went the benefits, the ultimate power; while those who were yielding, cooperative, obedient, and who encouraged harmony—those possessing the Yin power—were forced to become the subjects. Women were educated to be weak and helpless, the designated slaves, and men were trained to be followers of the ultimate power who was, of course, the king. To become the ultimate power oneself, one merely had to resort to the use of violence—extreme Yang power. Competitiveness and aggressiveness were encouraged but moderated, all for the benefit of the rulers. Ironically, it was this social tradition that carried on the T'ai Chi principle for hundreds of years. As a consequence, even though T'ai Chi was discovered and initiated in China so early, it followed the same sad destiny as did Western philosophy.

Whereas religion was to become the core of Western civilization, it was either ignored or abused in China. Although the Buddhist religion was imported from India and then absorbed by the Chinese culture, its spiritual philosophy was de-emphasized, while its ceremonies and rites became fashionable. In

Chinese Buddhism, the ideal of self-control was emphasized. The emperor used this ideal to suppress the common people, so that religion became known as "the ruler's favorite tool." T'ai Chi philosophy, however, offered beliefs that fulfilled human needs, even though its ideals were also abused by generations of the powerful and greedy.

For the Chinese, who have received all of the influence of T'ai Chi culture but also, sadly, all of the pollution of a social system abused by power, there is much to be learned from Western culture. Westerners have already been released from the bondage of religious influence yet are still trying to put their ideals into actuality. Really, all people search for the ultimate today; we seek a peaceful way, a natural way, a way to motivate our civilization toward the ultimate. Coincidentally, our ideals perfectly match those of the T'ai Chi way.

Hundreds of years ago, those who searched for a way to elevate the human body and spirit to their ultimate level developed an ingenious system known as the T'ai Chi Exercise. This system, which was inspired by the T'ai Chi outlook and which was based on principles not clearly known or understood by its founders, has since proved to be the most advanced system of body exercise and mind conditioning ever to be created.

While the Chinese ruling class was interested only in T'ai Chi's productive benefits, those who cared nothing about authority were adapting the philosophy to their personal lifestyles. They were applying the idea of a natural harmony to the development of the body and mind. Since this was of relatively little interest to the rulers, there is no real historical evidence of just when T'ai Chi as a mind and body system actually began.

All of the traditional Chinese arts, such as brush painting, calligraphy, literature, poetry, and cooking, emphasized the Yin/Yang principle as the means of reaching the ultimate. The complete philosophy of T'ai Chi therefore became an integral aspect of these arts. However, the T'ai Chi system of mind and body discipline was unique in that it explicitly applied the original T'ai Chi principles in a progressive, organized manner. Therefore, it has become the only complete system to preserve this great philosophy for hundreds of years—all the way down to today's complicated world.



THE SYSTEMATIZATION OF T'AI CHI

For thousands of years, the system of political rule in China was based on brutality and corruption. Those who were dedicated to the truth called themselves Taoists or "mountain men," and they lived a life similar to that of the monk. They carried on the spirit of T'ai Chi philosophy and in no way interfered with the ruling authorities. Since T'ai Chi formed its own independent system and had nothing to do with political structures, it was able to enjoy growth and freedom of development, even if only in small, isolated communities of dedicated men.

While these groups had no ties with the governing authorities, their studies were nonetheless respected by the rulers, first as a body of accumulated knowledge and later as a form of religion. Gradually T'ai Chi came to be considered a highly advanced form of folk art, to be studied exclusively by intellectuals and to be passed on from generation to generation.

Approximately 1700 years ago, a famous Chinese medical doctor, Hua-Tuo, emphasized physical and mental exercise as a means of improving health. He believed that human beings should exercise and imitate the movements of animals, such as

birds, tigers, snakes, and bears, to recover original life abilities that had been lost. He therefore organized the folk fighting arts into a fighting art called the Five Animals Games. This was the first systematized martial art in China. Since then, the Five Animal Games have been popular with the Chinese, who practice them for health and exercise.

Around 475 C.E., Ta-Mo (Bodhidharma) came to China from India to spread his religious teachings, and he resided in the Shaolin Temple in the Tang Fung area of North China. Besides religious worship and meditation, he included physical training in the daily routine. He used the Five Animal Games to develop in his followers a balanced mental and physical discipline. Dedication toward Buddhism, combined with an abundance of time for practice, allowed the Five Animal Games to develop in this context to a very high level of achievement as a martial art.

When the followers of Ta-Mo spread their religious beliefs throughout China they also carried with them their martial art achievement. The system developed by the monks from the Shaolin Temple came to be known as the Shaolin martial art system. It emphasized physical toughening and strengthening, as well as spiritual development. This was the dawn of the systematic development of the *external* martial arts in China.

The mental discipline aspect of the Shaolin system was based mainly on Buddhist meditation. To those Chinese steeped in sophisticated Taoism and Yin/Yang philosophy, it was, and is still, considered to be simply a physical fighting system.

In 1200 C.E., the Taoist monk Chang San-feng founded a temple in Wu-tang Mountain for the practice of Taoism, for the ultimate development of human life. Master Chang emphasized Yin/Yang harmony as a means to advance the development of mental and physical ability, natural meditation, as well as natural body movements propelled by an internal energy which would be developed at a certain level of achievement.

Since the Shaolin system had already been spreading throughout China for hundreds of years, the idea of adapting Taoist theory to everyday life instead of making it into a form of religious worship was readily accepted by Chinese society. T'ai Chi thought and its Yin/Yang philosophy soon developed as a temple-style organization based on the model of the Shaolin

Temple. A modified form of monastic training was adopted in order to promote the sophisticated system in missionary fashion.

From its inception, the temple system at Wu-tang Mountain emphasized internal power and the development of wisdom. Thus, the Chinese have commonly referred to the T'ai Chi system as the *internal* system, to distinguish it from the Shaolin fighting art system.

Through the years, there have also been systems that combine elements of both the T'ai Chi and Shaolin arts into moderately developed martial arts. These are known today as *Hsing-I*, the Form and Mind system, and *Pakua*, the Eight Diagram martial art system.

Since a great deal of effort and concentration, as well as firm dedication, were required in order to reach even a fair level of achievement in T'ai Chi, a monastic system soon developed, and enrollment became an exclusive privilege. Those who reached high degrees of achievement became the leaders of the system, and, followed by their enthusiasts, they evolved a unique training relationship between master and disciple.

This tradition played an important role in passing on T'ai Chi knowledge and wisdom to society, and the immense power of its influence was able to pour deeply into all social classes. Supported by the common people, and at times even by the emperors (as when Master Chang San-feng was summoned to advise the rulers on Taoist philosophy), the temple-style T'ai Chi system shaped the strong image that T'ai Chi was the ultimate art of life. Masters of T'ai Chi were regarded as the symbol of wisdom. They received great respect, especially since they practiced justice, charity, education, and the medicinal arts as part of their lifestyle.

Those who practiced T'ai Chi at times played a role in the enforcement of China's codes of human morality. For hundreds of years, the Chinese depended on only these codes as the law of the land. They were obeyed by everyone, even the emperors, and they were the foundation of the peace and social order of the Chinese civilization. Rules of basic human conduct—kindness, respect for one's elders, fidelity to parents, and love of one's kin—were enforced as strictly as written laws. Whereas the laws of today's industrial society say nothing, for example, about the

immorality of deserting an elderly and needy parent, in the Chinese society of several hundred years ago such an act would have been considered a serious offense and would have been severely punished.

Followers of T'ai Chi believed that people should discipline themselves to be spiritual, healthy, kind, and intelligent; to be responsible for assisting others to reach the same levels of achievement; to enjoy the truth; to fight fearlessly against immorality and injustice; and to protect the needy and the weak. It was with these goals in mind that the martial art aspect of T'ai Chi came to be developed and emphasized.

T'ai Chi theories were easily applied to the martial arts. Mind and body harmony, in tune with the natural order of things, was at the core of T'ai Chi. This offered a direction of development completely different from that of other forms of fighting techniques. It also yielded awesome results in terms of human abilities coming from the power of the mind. Thus T'ai Chi Ch'uan became the most powerful martial art ever known.

Throughout Chinese history, periods of unrest always led to local power formations and the use of force. In some cases, even T'ai Chi practitioners became involved in the enforcement of peace in their areas, with the result that instruction in the martial art aspect of T'ai Chi was urgently needed. The philosophical and meditation aspects of the art were gradually ignored by most people, with instruction in T'ai Chi becoming almost completely limited to its martial art aspect.

The true, dedicated masters of T'ai Chi remained in the mountains, and, along with their followers, they led a monastic life in order to carry on the pure art. They meditated and practiced daily in order to attune the spirit, condition the mind, discipline the body, and elevate the essence. In this way the original system was preserved more or less intact, with both mind and body discipline still being included in the training.

During the times when peace was re-established and the need for self-defense training faded away, those who had taught the art professionally carried on their dedicated careers as a type of family business. They taught only those who were most seriously interested, especially any of their own children who wanted to study the art as their profession. Herbal medicine and acupunc-

ture were also offered to the local community on a charitable basis. Financial support depended on contributions by the local people whom they served, and by their students.

Family surnames came to be associated with the different styles of T'ai Chi that were being passed on, mouth to ear, from generation to generation—for example, the Ch'en style, the Yang style, and the Wu style. Many of these are still known today. Each style was distinctive, but all followed the classic T'ai Chi principles. Today, temple-style T'ai Chi is still considered the most authentic system, but since the rapid changes of industrial society allow little space for such a sophisticated system to grow, it has declined and is disappearing. Family-style T'ai Chi is also diminishing.

About 350 years ago, in 1644 C.E., the Manchurians invaded the Chinese empire and established the Ch'ing Dynasty. Although the dynasty was founded by force and for the benefit of the rulers, the Manchus were soon absorbed into the Chinese culture. They adopted a Chinese lifestyle, reconstructed a peaceful order of society, and started a period of corrupt rule that was to last for centuries.

In the early stages of the dynasty, episodes of hostility and conflict between the Chinese and their Manchurian rulers were serious and often brutal. Even though the Manchus tried very hard to learn the culture and adapt themselves to the Chinese ways, native Chinese still regarded them as barbarians. The people's feelings of responsibility toward their nation diminished; passive resistance and refusal to cooperate with the "outsiders" resulted in the stagnation of the country's economic development.

As soon as the Ch'ing empire builders heard about the sophisticated art of T'ai Chi, they drafted the most famous master of the times, Yang Lu-chang (1799–1872), founder of the Yang style or Yang family system, into royal service. Unwilling to teach the Manchus, Master Yang deliberately modified the T'ai Chi meditation forms, converting them into a kind of slow-moving, outer exercise and completely ignoring the inner philosophy and mental discipline which is the key to T'ai Chi.

Master Yang knew that if the royal family learned of his unwillingness to teach them, and of his modifications, the em-

peror would take retribution for this offense and appease his anger by murdering not only him, but his entire family. Since Master Yang felt he could trust no one except his own sons, it was to them and to no one else that he taught the genuine art of T'ai Chi. In this way he avoided implicating anyone else in his personal decision to deceive the royalty.

From that time on, the family style of T'ai Chi became more restricted, with masters teaching the art only to their own kin. It was said that some masters would not even dare to teach the art to their daughters; when the girl married, a new relative could be linked with the Imperial Family, or could be someone whom the master felt should not be allowed into the art.

While the family style of T'ai Chi decreased, the exercise style was encouraged and practiced by members of the Imperial Family. It soon became the fad of the leisure class throughout China, and it remained so until the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty.

When the revolution of 1900-1910 succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt rulers, the noble families, deprived of their power, scattered throughout the country. T'ai Chi, of course, traveled with them. Practitioners claimed the authenticity of their art, stating that it had been taught to them by masters of the Yang family, or of other T'ai Chi families, and the public naturally accepted their claims.

In this way, the modified form of T'ai Chi became today's T'ai Chi Ch'uan, or the so-called T'ai Chi Exercise. This is the T'ai Chi practiced publicly in China today; it is the T'ai Chi Dance, also called the Chinese Ballet by some Westerners. In these modern times, a person may receive instruction in and practice the art of T'ai Chi for years, and, regardless of which style is being taught, still stand a very good chance of learning only "public T'ai Chi." In other words, most of the T'ai Chi practiced today is not the original T'ai Chi, and it is devoid of meaning.

However, Master Yang Lu-chan's forced instruction did serve a useful purpose. Although public T'ai Chi is merely a shadow of the original, classical, temple-style T'ai Chi, it offers the greatest opportunity for the Chinese people and for others of the world to be introduced to the art. As a matter of fact, if the Ch'ing Dynasty's rulers had not become interested in T'ai Chi,

it might have disappeared altogether under the rising tide of industrialization.

It is when a person becomes serious in the study of T'ai Chi that the search for the authentic art, the temple style, begins. One can only then appreciate the courage and dedication of the masters who have preserved the line of temple T'ai Chi down through the centuries. This is our heritage.