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The *Journal of Daoist Studies* (JDS) is an annual publication dedicated to the scholarly exploration of Daoism in all its different dimensions. Each issue has three main parts: Academic Articles on history, philosophy, art, society, and more (limit 8,500 words); Forum on Contemporary Practice on issues of current activities both in China and other parts of the world (limit 5000 words); and News of the Field, presenting publications, dissertations, conferences, and websites.

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# Daoist Principles in the Martial Arts

## Their Relevance for Illness Prevention

MICHAEL M. TOPHOFF

In times of diminishing resources and of soaring costs in mental and somatic health care, public health services should focus more on prevention rather than on the treatment of illness. Through health maintenance and illness prevention, public wellness can be enhanced and individual suffering reduced.

Western techniques for health maintenance more often than not reflect the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind in addressing either physical or mental health care. Chinese martial art and other cultivation practices, on the other hand, encompass the complexity of human existence in its physical, mental, and spiritual wholeness. Martial arts, while clearly pointing towards application in situations of warfare and conflict, can yet be instrumental in fostering health and preventing illness. They have a dual focus: enhancing health in its most encompassing (even spiritual) sense, they are excellent tools for the training of mindfulness. Mindfulness is today recognized as one of the most important ingredients in the prevention of stress-related diseases and recurrent depression (Kabat-Zinn 1996; Teasdale et. al. 2000; Tophoff 2003).

Although there is much overlap between forms, Chinese martial arts divide generally into external and internal styles (*wai/neijia quan*) (Wong 1997; Diepersloot 1999; Lu 2006). External styles emphasize muscular increase and skeletal strengthening; internal styles mainly address body energy and mental cultivation. External fighting styles are frequently associated with Chan Buddhist roots in the Shaolin monastery; internal styles are linked, romantically, with Daoist shrines and monasteries on Mount Wudang. Internal styles emphasize change on a more personal level, rather than increase of natural abilities like speed and force; they seek to increase these qualities by modifying their usual patterns of response (Lu 2006, 8). Deeply rooted in Daoism, which puts health and longevity in the center of its teaching (Kohn 2004; 2006; 2009;

Tophoff 2003; 2006), internal martial arts imply the cultivation of a healthy way of behaving in the day-to-day world in order to prevent illness and suffering.

## Legendary Origins

The origins of Chinese martial art forms are a point of contention between Chan Buddhists and Daoists. Both claim that they go back to their religions, presenting various legends of various kinds. Thus Chan Buddhists point to Bodhidharma (Damo), the Indian missionary monk, who travelled leisurely on a leaf of grass in crossing the Yangtze on his way to the Shaolin monastery. Here he encountered studious monks who, following the original Buddhist tradition, shunned the physical activities of daily life in their hope of becoming a *paccekabuddha*: a personally enlightened being (Kloppenborg 1974). Since their noble striving frequently led to illness and untimely death, Bodhidharma introduced physical exercises into the monastic schedule to enhance health and prevent illness. As a byproduct of their physical activity, the monks gradually acquired such degrees of fitness that they could defend themselves against potential aggressors, albeit without arms (see Diepersloot 1999; Liang and Yang 2002; Hung and Klingborg 1969; Shahar 2007).

The benefits of physical exercises, however, have a much longer history in Daoism, where they are first mentioned in the Zhuangzi of about 300 BCE and are detailed in various medical manuscripts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (see Kohn 2008). The earliest classic of Chinese medicine, the *Huangdi neijing suwen* (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine, Basic Questions), also from the Han dynasty, similarly emphasizes illness prevention. It says, "To administer medicines to diseases which have already developed... is like beginning to dig a well after getting thirsty" (Veith 1972, 105).

Following this tradition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century physician Hua Tuo emphasized physical exercise in the form of imitations of animal movement to improve health (see Wang and Barrett 2006). While the exercise tradition continued to unfold, records also document that Daoist monks of the early 7<sup>th</sup> century were so well trained in the martial arts that they could fight for the rising Tang rulers (Shahar 2006). The internal martial arts of Mount Wudang, on the other hand, are said to go back to Zhang Sanfeng and his observation of a battle between a crane and a snake (Liao 1990).



The practices and their methods are generally hard to trace, since techniques were kept secret and passed down from master to student in one family or lineage.

## Basic Ingredients

The most fundamental ingredient in the dynamics of macro- and micro-cosmic change is *qi*. The Chinese character depicts steam or vapor rising from cooked rice (Lai 1968, 29). It is translated variously as "air," "pneuma," "ether," atmosphere," "power," or "energy". Definitions tend to be pre-scientific, metaphorical, and vague. *qi* is the eternal power that moves the universe (Waysun 1977); it is vital (Wong 1997) or bioelectric energy (Liang 2002). In primordial, undifferentiated chaos before creation, *qi* is present as "pure energy-matter which [has] not yet emerged" (Schipper 1993, 84).

Within the human body, this energy-matter 'humanizes' within the fetus at the moment of conception. At birth it splits into the Three Treasures: *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. *Jing* is closely associated with sexual energy as "the raw source of sexual desire and the feeling essence of earthiness" (Winn 2006, 158). *qi* is cosmic energy personalized in the individual. *Shen* is spirit and consciousness, and as energy force it directs mental functioning.

In the process of aging, the Three Treasures gradually are exhausted: beginning with birth primordial energy leaks away. Internal energy negatively correlates with age; people experience it as a decrease of health, illness, weakening, and death. Leakage of generative energy is caused by sexual activities, e. g., loss of semen. Vital energy diminishes with the development of emotions, whereas *shen* decreases with increasing mind activities (Wong 1997).

Within this mechanistic model of leakage, the cure is obvious: one has to stop the leakage and recover the lost energies. In order to accomplish this, the process that led to the person's birth has to be reversed, "and thus to return to the pre-birth, subtle state of unity with the universe" (Breslow 1999, 139).

The Three Treasures unify the human being within his very existence between Heaven and Earth. The dialectical connection of the person in the polarities of mind and matter reflects a holistic world-view also exemplified in the internal martial arts. Western approaches to

health maintenance through fitness- and sport programs, however, usually are quite unilateral in their physical goals such as cardiovascular strengthening. In this way they fail to address an important part of the essential causal factors in stress related pathology.

## Dialectics

Daoist teachings center between the opposites of stability and change. Microcosmically, human beings are stabilized between Heaven and Earth, and yet they are part and parcel of an eternal macrocosmic flux of yin and yang. The circular nature of these processes can be illustrated through the Daoist paradigm of change, which is essentially expressed in the *Daode jing* as the Law of Opposites:

What is in the end to be shrunk must first be stretched.

Whatever is to be weakened must begin by being made strong. (Waley 1958: 187; see also Fung 1937)

In this process of change, the complementary tendency toward stability must always be taken into account. If “change” is emphasized too much, the opposing state of stability will paradoxically be strengthened, and vice versa. In other words, the opposing forces have to be acknowledged and respected before they can be applied to the process of change (Tophoff 2003, 35).

In Daoist practice, however, the circular model of change is certainly not always respected. Instead, a causal-linear model of change is dominant in certain techniques of alchemy that literally serve to prolong life and lead to immortality. Masters recommended the ingestion of cinnabar, now known as mercuric sulfide, a quite poisonous substance. If the dose was adequate, the adept attained immortality (Tophoff 2003, 44).

In contrast to this, the paradigm of nonaction (*wuwei*) incorporates a circular model of change: change is not produced but “happens.” Here immortality as the linear extension of life is not an option. However, the model allows for an “immortal” way of being, beautifully illustrated by Zhuangzi with the metaphor of one who “wanders through all of creation, enjoying its delights without ever becoming attached to any part of it” (Watson 1968, 6). In other words, the delights of creation include life as well as death. The free and easy wanderer dies, as does the sage of the

*Daode jing*, who "lives long because he models himself on nature; because he models himself on nature, he has to die" (Welch 1966, 93). Nature here appears both in the literal and analogical sense—it is observed and contemplated. For this reason, the contemplation of inner as well as outer nature plays a fundamental role in internal styles of martial arts.

## Inner Force

The concept of force in the internal martial arts is complex. On the one hand, there is the force coming from the opponent. In full congruence with the paradigm of nonaction, this force should never be directly opposed; it is to be met by the other person with its opposite: no-force. If force is encountered, yielding is the answer (Diepersloot 1999, 225). This, in fact, reframes the force of the attack into a gift of energy, which one gladly receives, and which—in a situation of combat or conflict, whether verbally or non-verbally—might be returned without effort.<sup>1</sup>

The person's own force comes in two forms: muscle force (*li*; lit. strength) and inner force (*jin*; lit. suppleness). Shaolin external styles center on the development of muscle force; however, it is limited in time and power, being exhausted as and when the muscles start to acidify.

When *qi*, "an energetic quality that nourishes, warms, transforms and rises, (as) the life force of the human body" (Despeux 2006, 52), is allowed to freely circulate and to increase in the body so that tendons, sinews and ligaments become supple through training, then inner force arises. Inner force is an expansion force, characterized by resilience and vitality, produced through the integration of the entire body as unity. It is directed by intention (*yi*), the directional aspect of the conscious mind, generated by clear thinking and one-pointed focus.

Where muscle force follows a linear pattern, inner force operates in a circular way. Through this inner force the body manifests the dynamics of apparent opposites—stillness and motion, tension and relaxation. As

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<sup>1</sup> In Japanese Zen, even the existence of an enemy is debated and conceived as an image of the mind. As Zen Master Ganno points out: "If an opponent fights you, it means you lack true insight. Solve the *koan*: 'Originally not one thing exists' and nothing will obstruct you" (Stevens, 2001, 17).

Brecher notes, the stance in inner force is “like a flywheel which, when turning extremely fast, looks static” (1998, 95).

*Qi* cannot flow freely not when the muscles are tense; it only flows when they are relaxed. The intention, moreover, can direct the inner force outwards, where *qi* acts like gunpowder: its explosive force is called “bringing forth force” (*fa jin/fali*). It is the highest level of martial arts training (Brecher 1998). The explosive character of inner force produced in the form of outer force comes from the body as a whole, going instantaneously from a state of extreme relaxation to a momentary state of extreme, highly focused tension, only to return directly to stillness, thus reflecting the yin-yang paradigm of change.

## Attitude

In martial arts, the right attitude conducive to healthy living follows the Daoist view of the body and its cultivation—a microscopic replica of the macrocosm, it is also “the image of the country... and corresponds to the Daoist vision of the inner world and to related physical exercises” (Schipper 1993, 104).<sup>2</sup>

The *Daode jing* expresses the Daoist perspective beautifully:

Who deals with the state. .. as though it were his body  
Is the best person to be entrusted with the rule.  
Who loves his subjects as if they were his body  
Is the best person to commit the state. (ch. 13; see Waley 1958, 157)

Illness prevention means to keep the person healthy in a state of proper *qi*. Balance or inner harmony refers to the dialectics of calmness and move-ability where *qi* is constantly refreshed and nourished. The process of free-floating *qi* in the body, however, implies a profound metabolic interchange between inner and outer world in order to nourish and to renew the vital energy. While the intention directs the *qi* outward as in “bringing forth force,” the person also receives *qi* from the

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<sup>2</sup> This view stands in stark contrast to the Buddhist teachings that view the body as a hindrance to true insight and a source of illusions and false consciousness: “This physical body of yours,” Chan master Linji says, “can neither expound the dharma nor listen to it” (Sasaki 1975, 8).

environment. Here again, a prerequisite for this to happen is mindfulness, which enables the person to experience the incoming stimuli as "a gift" in whatever form. In this way, incoming energy can be invested in one's own reservoir of inner force so that a positive feedback-loop can be established.

The concept of mindfulness is based on the Sanskrit *smṛiti*, which originally means "remembrance" and is translated into Chinese as *nian*—which consists of the words for "now" and "mind." In a Buddhist context, the word means recollect, reflect, or a moment (Soothill and Hodous 1937, 258). Characterized by awareness and an attentive openness toward the present moment, mindfulness is a continuous meditative state which is, so to say, continued into the action itself (Tophoff 2003, 123).

This state has to be cultivated carefully. To do so, one can make the body the basis, the root, the foundation of the cultivation process, anchor oneself in physicality and transform the very nature of bodily existence (Kohn 2006, 3). In general, one could state that all internal styles of Chinese martial arts are mindfulness training in their cultivating the stillness of the here-and-now and the lively movement of *qi*. This cultivation is not to be limited to sparse moments; it has to develop into a lifestyle where stillness and movement, activity and rest are interwoven within a cyclical dialectic.

## Movement in Stillness

Within a healthy organism, the dynamic equilibrium of yin and yang is always maintained in a healthy dialectic of expansion and contraction, of movement and stillness. This co-existence can be experienced through several ways of martial or standing meditations. Unlike the more quietist Buddhist sitting meditations, here the entire body is trained in its vital functioning of connecting tissue, joints, ligaments, tendons, cartilage, and muscles. In standing meditation, on the outside, the person seems to be almost in complete stillness, yet on the inside there is the vigorous interplay of tension versus relaxation, contraction versus extension.

The non-ultimate or "no poles" state (*wuji*) is like the empty, primordial state of the universe, before yin and yang separated and took form and structure. Since *qi* here does not have yin and yang, it is transparent to the entire universe (Liang 2002). In "no poles," the person

stands straight and upright for fifteen minutes, with the eyes open.<sup>3</sup> Since the levels of emotion decrease in stillness, it is pre-eminently appropriate in situations of stress and tension.

The “three body posture” (*santi shi*) originally refers to humanity in the context of the polarities of Heaven (yang) and Earth (yin). It is a more demanding form of standing meditation. The constant action-in-non-action of contracting and extending the connective tissue in the same stance is a demanding form of work or *gongfu*. As connective tissue in the entire body is exercised, *qi* flows easily and the inner force increases. Using intention, we focus the mind without focus: it becomes an open mind, beholding the world and its wonders. Reflecting the Buddha’s “no fear” mudra, this posture leads to the state of non-analytic thinking, which enables the adept to respond spontaneously to the total configuration of any given situation, rather than focusing on any single aspect (Diepersloot 1999, 37).

“Standing form” (*zhanzhuang*) is another of standing meditation that was developed by Wang Xiangzhai (1885-1963), the founder of “Mind Boxing” (*yiquan*). Here the practitioner emanates stillness as the activity of standing is total, affecting every organ, bone, and tissue (Dong 1993, 70). As a way to train the inner force, it serves both martial and health development. In fact, Wang remarks, the acme of martial arts ability lies in the paradox that only the movement (of *qi*) cultivated in stillness can produce stillness (of mind) in physical movement (Diepersloot 1999, 74).

## Stillness in Movement

Where standing forms of meditation within the martial arts manifest outer stillness and inner movement, movement forms in martial arts manifest the ‘opposite’ in stilling the mind while the body moves.

Qigong (or the martial context Wugong) is the practice of *qi* cultivation that integrates breathing, movement, and meditation. It is the foundation of the internal force (Hung 1969). Here, intention plays a central role: the more the mind is focused, the more *qi* develops (Cohen 1997, 93). Breathing in qigong is usually natural and not “produced,” however,

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<sup>3</sup> In Daoist sitting meditation, such as oblivion, the eyes are semi-closed or closed, to better observe internal processes. “No poles” is the begin stance of the martial arts. Here wakefulness is of high importance and the eyes are wide open to the surroundings.

some alternate breathing techniques also occur, such as Daoist reversed and embryonic breathing. Originating in "no poles," the primordial state of emptiness, Dao takes form in yin and yang and translates into a series of gongfu movements that are both applicable in combat and conducive to illness prevention. It is at the core of the internal martial art style of Great Ultimate Boxing (*taiji quan*).

Martial applications here emphasize welcoming the opponent rather than resisting him. This can be experienced as a flowing and gentle interplay of inner and outer world, as a metaphor for the power of yielding, reflecting the teaching of the *Daode jing*: "The best officers of court (...) circumspect they seemed (...) watchful, as one who must meet danger on every side (...) yet yielding, as ice when it begins to melt" (Ch. XV, Waley, 1958, 160).

In contrast to Great Ultimate Boxing, which uses defense as attack, the martial art of Form Intention Boxing (*xingyi quan*) uses attack as defense (Liang 2002, xxi). It dynamically integrates movement with intention, using the system of the five phases (Lu 2006, 29-30). Here, too, practitioners realize contraction in relaxation and manifest relaxation in contraction. In striking out, inner force as directed by the intention takes form as an almost explosive "bringing forth force." Training in this form works toward developing a strong, focused mind in an alert, agile and resilient body.

The martial art of Mind Boxing (*yiquan*) interweaves stillness and movement while cultivating conscious, focused intention. It is the art of no-form. Its founder Wang Xiangzhai advocates the practice of stillness and the cultivation of mind and intent as primary practice. In this way, the organism can rediscover its innate ability of natural movement (Diepersloot 1999). Starting with the "standing form," the practitioner moves into a series of slow movements that flow with manifested intention. Although physical effort here is minimal, concentration, attention, and mindfulness are intense. The practice leads to surplus energy building up in the body (Dong 1993).

## Applications

Feasible and practicable applications of martial arts make their way into daily life in different ways. Some basic standing meditations may well be

practiced specially in the morning, others, like “no poles” can be done at odd times, such as in the checkout line in the supermarket.

Likewise, natural and mindful breathing and qigong exercises may become part of one’s daily repertoire. Moving in the way of Great Ultimate Boxing not only benefits health but prevents stress in contact or conflict with the outside world, because it exemplifies going with the flow instead of resisting it. The still positions in Mind Boxing help to train the connectivity of tissue and muscles and it fosters strength of mind and intention. The interplay of relaxation and tension, essential for health maintenance, can be practiced in Form Intention Boxing

Adepts can use these relatively easy practices within a lifestyle that also involves preventing illness through healthy eating, avoidance of intoxicants, and appreciation of landscapes—both inner and outer. All this is done, as Kristofer Schipper describes it, in order to remaining alert, master of oneself, upright and lucid—to enter life with a firm step and leave it with an equally firm step (1993, 214). It greatly contributes to making us—as much as possible—the artisans of our own destiny.

Immortality in this context does not happen in the future, but right here and now. It does not imply the negation of biological processes and does not deny death. Instead, it points to a healthy life where we experience each moment in its completeness, in a way “as if” there is no end. This “as if” quality is fundamental not only to understand immortality but also to internalize it in daily life. This perspective of immortality allows us to prevent illness by maintaining a healthy life from one moment to the next. To realize this, developing one’s own autonomy goes hand in hand with building a profound and nourishing connection with the outside world.

“To enter and leave life with a firm step”—this means that death is a reality even in the context of immortality. In the Daoist paradigm, I may argue, energy-matter becomes human in the fetus at the moment of conception and “de-humanizes” again at death. The cyclical nature of change takes form in a potentially never ending process of transformation, as one wave follows the next one.

Death itself may be a source of a deep anxiety and often contributes to feelings of isolation and depression. Naturally, the death of a loved one or one’s own imminent death causes grief and sorrow. The *Zhuangzi* has the story of Qin Shi, who went to mourn Laozi and left after giving three short wails. A disciple asked him whether he thought it was proper



to mourn Laozi like this. He said, "Of course," continuing: "The master's coming to earth was timely and his departure, natural" (ch. 6; Wang 1999, 47). A timely coming and natural departure have nothing to do with joy or sorrow. Ancient Daoist texts praise a detached perspective as the key to the emancipation from bondage.

Likewise, one tries to hold on to life, to grasp it, to freeze the moment before death in an immortal eternity. Daoist principles, however, brought to life in the martial arts, are valid in their application to such moments of crisis. They imply the profound understanding of the nonaction paradigm, where change flows along in naturalness. In that sense, and in martial arts terms, we may conceive of death as a gift of life. Accepting the dialectics of birth and death means the realization of inner freedom in the sense of both true personal autonomy and intimate connection with nature and the universe.

Applying internal styles of Chinese martial arts to illness prevention thus enables us to meet death as a healthy person when the moment has come. It is the privilege of our personal freedom when and how we decide to meet him.

## Research Evidence

The health benefits of martial arts practice include increased self-reliance among the elderly, fewer falls, higher exercise capacity, better balance, and various benefits to the immune and autonomic nervous systems (Burke et al. 2007; Macarie and Roberts 2004). Practicing martial arts tends to enhance self-esteem (Weiser et al. 1995) while reducing anxiety and depression (Cai 2000). Also, traditional martial arts are effective in reducing aggression (Zivin et al. 2001). These benefits are a consequence of enhanced self-regulation (Lakes et al. 2004). For this reason, Woodward suggests using martial arts as a treatment modality for youths who are at risk for violence (2009). In reviewing the research literature, Binder summarizes studies about the longer-terms effects of martial arts practice. The findings of most of these studies show that this practice leads to positive psychosocial changes in the participants (2007).

Beyond the physical practice, meditation and mindfulness are rich in delivering benefits, as is demonstrated in a vast body of research. Effects include positive changes in the cardiovascular system (Delmonte 1984), blood pressure (Cort 1989), and blood chemistry in the sense of

lowering levels of stress hormones (Sudsang et al. 1991). In addition, mindfulness meditation is effective in reducing pain, pain-related behaviors, recurrent depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and changes in mood and symptoms (see Kabat-Zinn 1996; Teasdale et al. 2000; Specia et al. 2000; Segal et al. 2002; Hölzel et al. 2011). Mindfulness training through Sensory Awareness showed significant changes in the sense of improvement on: increased awareness of global bodily states, heightened subjective feeling of wellbeing in the body, in interpersonal relations and social role (Tophoff 2003).

## Conclusion

Internal styles of the Chinese martial arts, both in terms of physical practices and as tools for mindfulness training, are highly useful instruments for the prevention of ill health. Rooted deep in Chinese history, they integrate and activate certain key Daoist principles and make active use of the dialectic reciprocity of movement and stillness in both meditation and training. Easily integrated into daily life, they enhance health and vigor well into old age. Seen from their practical application, the Daoist concept of immortality appears as a state of mind in the present rather than a transformative, spiritual, or mythological goal. It is a way of describing the goal of learning to meet life in all its dimensions—and thus also death—as a fully healthy individual. Modern research confirms the efficaciousness of these techniques and the validity of their applications.

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