

# Being Tao: Independent Contract

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The ability to know how to be a good person is so often neglected in our current schooling. Students are pressured to specialize and become masters at a particular task. This kind of learning has its place in education, but it must be balanced by learning that encourages people to understand their essential nature as individuals who are part of a greater whole. This is a spiritual education, that teaches you to be good at living.

Chungliang Al Huang's teachings address this very need. His students learn to feel the music of their bodies through song and dance, movement and meditation. He strings hearts together and helps us listen for the note of every moment, hoping to learn the magic of every Tai Ji movement.

*Tien shan!* Our hands go up towards infinity; *Di Xia*, down they come with gravity. Linking heaven and earth we stand, human marionettes suspended between the ever lasting and always changing.

*Wai* : our arms float open to our environment; content and happy we wonder at life's horizon. *Nui*: we invite the world into us.

*Qian Jing*: we march forward, bellies first, faces full of glory. *Hou Tui*: back we go, reflecting, letting life flow, allowing accomplishments to catch up and settle down.

*Zhuo Gu, You Pan*: looking left and right to observe life's contrasts, then we always end with ...

*Zhong Ding Nui Guan*, in order to integrate opposites and collect the gems of the moment. Before we let all of it go, allowing a new experience to enter our awareness. We are empty vessels ready for new learning.

*Chao* (focusing towards) *Dong, Nan, Shi, Bei, Dong, Nan*. The class spins around in all four directions, focused and engaged in the rising and the setting of the sun. Doing our best with the *Ba Gua* (Eight Trigrams from the I Ching), we transition into the five moving forces of nature — rooted, flexible, always stretching to feel fire, water, wood, gold, and earth as they flow through the body.

Then everyone gets ready for the four Circles, a flow of movements designed to lift the spirit to new heights to harness *Qi (Chi)* and channel it into life's adventures. Each circle is an adventure, a metaphorical journey. Every pose is a story full of hidden meaning. As hands open, the wings of cranes unfold. A simple step is an entering into another place and state of mind. We jump to get on a horse, or kick and grab hold of personal tigers. The movements have a way of exercising the mind and imagination. It helps the mover to understand how to live a well-rounded and meaningful life, and how to confront challenge with joy and ease.

At the end of a Tai Ji session, the room feels better. People shine with brighter eyes. Our understanding of life comes from a higher state. There is more *Qi* flowing. The self is bigger, expanded to incorporate a larger self. It is as if the room is 'tuned in' to the sacred understanding to why life matters, and why we keep living in spite of our fears, worries and depressions. I so often feel at odds with the world around me. Separate from it, not in a physical sense, but in a psychological one. Tai Ji helps to remind my body that such odds are an illusion. I am the world around me and the world is I. The challenge is to stretch my understanding of self to recognize this.

The jewel of the Tai Ji that Chungliang Ai Huang teaches is that it empowers its students to embrace and harness their own nature. The movements, his inspiring attitude, and the creative blend of ancient Chinese wisdom and contemporary flair, support a deeper message to love life, and a desire to learn the lessons that it offers. He integrates his own experience seamlessly with his rich cultural lineage. This reminds me that each of us is also shaped by a rich lineage that extends far beyond our own life spans, and that embracing this is an important aspect of life.

The symbol for Tai Ji suggests a stretching towards opposites from a balanced center, a unifying of extremes, and the ability to be present to the stillness and the motion inherent in the universe. There is an assumption in Western thought that when we encounter opposing forces we need to choose one side over the other, rather than attempting to stretch or broaden ourselves to reach for both. All Tai Ji movements are centered in reaching for, and connecting opposites. Each one is a unique expression of this concept. They are a way of linking the different aspects of the self to work in tandem with one another. At its core it is a spiritual exercise that helps us reaffirm the unity of existence and the holism of the self.

In theory I know we are holistic creatures, that there is no separation between our heads, and our feet, and that all things ultimately impact everything else. However, to live life holistically in a way that embodies this understanding is a challenge. Even in our own bodies most of us identify with certain aspects of ourselves. Many of us don't even see our bodies as more than just biological organisms run by DNA and chemistry. Modern science rarely addresses the fact that we have a psychic body which impacts our biology, and that beyond our skin there is a subtle energetic body that manifests as a kind of magnetism or tingling sensation. The Chinese refer to this as Qi. Tai Ji – as well as Qi Gong — are designed to enhance the flow of Qi through the body, and to increase the vitality of this flow. Once one lets go of the need to control the body this Qi can also move the body. In a sense the body begins to think for itself if the mind allows it.

I identify primarily with my mind. All too often my awareness gets stuck in my thoughts. It is a common misconception that the most important elements of consciousness are located in our heads. Yet, the nervous system travels down the spine into our organs and limbs. Why should the mind stop at the base of the brain?

In Chinese thought there are three centers of awareness, called *Dan Tiens*. The first is located below the navel, the second in the chest near the heart and lungs, and third in the forehead. The ancient Indian Chakra system illustrates a similar understanding of the body, which contains seven centers of awareness, each one associated with a particular archetype that represents an element of our humanity. To do Tai Ji properly it is important to be simultaneously aware of at least three centers of awareness. The idea is to remain connected to the earth, present to the needs of humanity, and conscious of the limitless nature of the universe above.

The arch in the feet and the centers of our palms are also important centers of awareness in Tai Ji practice. The idea that the mind is confined to the head ignores a portion of who we are. I do not feel fully present when I do not have an awareness of my body. Constant thinking deprives me of the entirety of the moment. Each Dan Tien informs us about a different layer of our intelligence. To neglect them makes one vulnerable, and unable to fully assess any given situation. I do not believe that the rational thought process alone is sufficient in allowing us to understand ourselves.

Another key element of Tai Ji is the balance of action and non-action. The Chinese call this *Wu-wei*, roughly translated as 'the action of not-acting contrary

to the natural flow of life.' I like to think of it as engaged relaxation, when one is fully present to one's actions in any moment, but relaxed enough to allow for those actions to flow naturally. When we do Taiji postures we have to be *Wu-wei*, engaged in observing our form, but relaxed. For example in the opening movement of our practice we send the arms up for *Tien san*. First we reach for the heavens and then release any tension in our shoulders; we drop our tailbone to allow the heavenly Qi to fall into our bodies. When we stand, we can focus on being *Wu-wei* by releasing tension in our muscles, and allowing the natural structure of our bodies to hold our weight. Another good example of *Wu-wei* is breath. The moment of release after an inhalation, when our body naturally exhales, is *Wu-wei*. This principle of engaging, and then releasing is key to practicing a good Tai Ji move, and subsequently is an excellent practice in our daily lives.

The most enjoyable aspect of learning in the course was the connection between the movements we learned and the myth that is connected to these movements. *Wu shing*, or the five moving forces, was the simplest sequence we learned, but extremely rich. It is a good example of the power of embodying metaphors. In this case, it is the five forces of nature recognized in Chinese cosmology as: fire, water, wood, metal, and earth. Each element is associated with a movement. In the sequence one imagines them flowing through our bodies, as metaphors. When I do the *Wu shing*, it trains me to express and acknowledge different elements of my character, and helps me to balance them. Fire ignites my will and passion; water helps me to settle down and observe my emotional state. Wood opens me to the scenery and grounds me into my center. Metal connects my awareness to my essential self; and Earth is a reminder to let the entire experience go. Whenever life's burdens get too heavy, earth is always available to take some of the load.

The four circles have a similar effect and are as much about enacting a personal narrative as completing a sequence of movements. By enacting these four circles, one embarks on an inner journey that is full of rich symbols. Each represents different elements of the self as well as the challenges we face. In the first circle we move through three doors and then return to where we began with new insight to share. The doors represent different levels of discovery. It is a common theme for humans to venture into the unknown and glean things that can be shared with others. Joseph Campbell talks about this process as the Hero's Journey.

The second circle represents situations that require more immediacy. In this sequence there is no time to look around; one has to seize the moment and jump in with two steps and a punch, before diving into the ocean to find the 'golden needle' — a symbol of our personal talents and strengths.

The third and fourth circles continue to get more and more complex incorporating potent metaphors and greater challenges, such as grasping tigers, and riding horses. The meaning and metaphors assigned to each posture are subject to the needs and desires of the individual performing them. The essence is the same. It is an acting out of a myth that reminds us that we are dynamic people, who face an array of challenges in life. We can draw on our imaginations to act out narratives that increase our vitality, and fill our bodies with *Qi* allowing us to be more confident and stable people.

The Calligraphy element of the course provided some deep insight into the nature of Chinese symbols. Chungliang's main interest in showing us words like *Tai Ji*, *Wu Wei*, or *Qi* was not so that we would know its literal meaning, but so that we could feel and understand its gestalt and kinesthetic significance. We would review the symbols not by reciting what they meant, but by performing or enacting their strokes in order to experience how they made us feel. The information that is transmitted through Chinese calligraphy is analog as well as digital. It is connected both to cultural learned meaning and intuitive or natural understanding. If you really tune in you can feel the *Qi* of the symbol influencing your awareness. The concept of meditating on specific symbols and gaining a deep understanding of them is a powerful tool for lasting empowerment.

When I attempted to paint the symbols *shui* (Water) and *huo* (Fire), I was amazed at how the *Qi* guided my brush across the page. The feeling of Fire and Water were present in the movements. The central tenant of Taoist philosophy is expressed in Chinese calligraphy. Life is a constant flow. Calligraphy connects as a seamless process. The strokes that appear on paper are only one level of a three dimensional movement that the calligrapher preformed. The brush touches the paper when the movement of the calligrapher's movement approaches it. Calligraphy is Tai Ji with a brush and ink. The process and principles are the same. In a sense, all the symbols learned were a kind of Tai Ji movement map or Qi flow.

If there is one thing that the West needs to learn, it is how to feel *Qi*. *Qi* is a universal, not a particular. It is the Energy or feeling of a moment. It cannot be contained, yet it is contained in all things. To become aware of it, and to wield it,

you have to allow it rather than control it. To know it you have to believe it. One who is not open to sensing it will simply not know that it exists. Not knowing how to draw good *Qi* into life is a sad story. *Qi* is “Universal Life Force.”

Most of us find ways to increase our *Qi* in art, music, relationships, and nature, even if we are unaware that *Qi* is what we are seeking. However, having a label to name “the force” helps us to know how to manage our life in a way that enhances life, instead of depleting it. This is a key lesson that I learned in Chungliang’s seminar.

It is important to open to the poetry in life, and use art to enhance what life means to you, rather than believing in a meaningless universe. Life may only have meaning because we give it meaning, therefore we should do so. It makes us richer and more vital people. This is why humans do art. The poems, paintings, stories and calligraphy that I was exposed to during the course, reminded me that surrounding oneself with art helps to lighten the spirit. It provides the body with good *Qi* flow, fertilizes the psyche by reflecting the divine into our awareness. It connects us with the world at large, and pushes us out of an egocentric mind frame.

Our heart and mind naturally reach to understand life. Each one of us strives for knowledge and can’t help but ask: “who am I?” We want to know what it means to be human and alive. Education should be centered on facilitating people’s basic desire to ask: how? and, why? To be effective, educators have to find creative ways to open people to mystery and wonder. Exposing the self to a lot of knowledge is good only when we can remember to return to not knowing. Tai Ji helps to do this. It reminds us that life is breathing. If we want to live life well, we have to be good at breathing, not just through our lungs, but in all aspects of our life.

This is what Tai Ji has taught me. To be balanced one must know how to center the self between the opposing elements of life. Practicing balance is challenging in a society that is perpetually out of balance. Yet there is no hope for human civilization unless its citizens are educated to know the art of stretching the self to reconcile the opposing elements of life and embracing it as a whole. This is my understanding of what it means to be fully human.

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