

# Tai Chi in Spirituality

BY BRUCE FRANTZIS | ISSUE 39

*Bruce Frantzis is a Taoist lineage with over 40 years experience in Qigong, Bagua, Hsing I and Tai Chi Chuan. Bruce trained in China for over a decade in these arts. Additionally, he has experience in various meditation practices including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Kundalini and the Taoist Fire and Water traditions.*

Tai chi is an art, not a religion. To practice Tai Chi you do not have to believe in gods, spirits, the Tao, or an afterlife. There are large numbers of Tai Chi practitioners of all religions. Yet many consider the practice of Tai Chi to be a spiritual practice. There are several reasons for this. The line between the art and spirituality is often very thin. Techniques of art can stimulate the creative forces and refine them. If that intensity is directed toward inner discovery, rather than external accomplishment, the training that the art provides me bridge the gap between the secular and the spiritual. If so, art thereby becomes a tool for spiritual awakening. This can be the case with the practice of Tai Chi.

Tai Chi contains within it much of the East's philosophy and wisdom that is immensely practical and useful for our daily lives. This includes the wisdom it applies toward health and relaxation; to chi energy in the human body and mind; and to strategies for dealing effectively with the practical matters of business, conflict, and human relationships. However, except in a few legends, Tai Chi does not claim to be divinely inspired. It is the wisdom of men and women seeking to make this earthly life work well. Yet, the line between wisdom and spirituality can also be blurred, as wisdom is often gained through various spiritual practices. For all these reasons, the philosophy underlying Tai Chi is often taken to be spiritual.

Although the energy work of Tai Chi originated with Taoist monks, I know of no evidence that Tai Chi was developed for spiritual or religious purposes after it emerged from the Chen village and was spread by the Yang family. I had informal conversations about the subject with the Tai Chi master Yang Shou Jung after he accepted me as a student. He was the great grandson of Yang Lu Chan, who founded the Yang style of tai chi. When I asked if he taught meditation, he said that this was not, and had never been, an aspect of his family's training, which was about chi development and martial arts.

## **Meditative Movement**

Tai Chi is commonly called moving meditation. This phrase is derived from the Chinese, gong jing, where dong means to move, and jing means to be still, which is a classic term in Taoism for the English word for meditation. The common meaning of the term in English, however, does not imply all that is meant in Taoist meditation. Moving meditation in English merely implies that Tai Chi's movements are done in a meditative way, which is how 99 percent of most tai Chi is done. For this reason, we will call such a meditative movement "secular Tai Chi," to distinguish it from the purely spiritual context of Taoist meditation. Secular Tai Chi means to maintain a relaxed focus, quiet one's internal conversations, and do movements in slow motion with a deep sense of relaxation.

The secular meditative movement aspect of Tai Chi is, however, only a shadow of the full implication of the deepest spiritual levels of Taoist moving meditation. There it connotes a deep inner stillness that can stably and permanently live at the heart of one's spiritual being. Inner stillness is a central goal of both Buddhist and Taoist meditation methods. From the classical Eastern perspective, meditation goes far beyond popular Western conceptions of spirituality. The full opening of your inner being (or soul), or enlightenment, is meditation's central focus. This opening allows your heart and mind to become truly free. It is a subject to be learned by deeply exploring your inner landscape over many years, using extremely sophisticated practices and techniques honed by practitioners over hundreds of generations.

Secular Tai Chi is an excellent way to build the foundations that all forms of meditation or deep levels of spirituality initially require. These include:

- Constancy of purpose.
- The ability to go within.
- The capacity to recognize and apply

progressively more subtle levels of your awareness.

- Focusing for extended periods on specific inner qualities with minimal distraction.
- Being relaxed, without which of the previous requirements are difficult to sustain.

### **Taoist Moving Meditation: Taoist Tai Chi**

The internal methods of Tai Chi were adapted from millennia-old schools of Taoist chi gung, which used entirely different movements. During the 19th and 20th centuries, some Taoist meditation schools adapted the spiritual techniques within long chi gung sets into tai chi forms.

In the Taoist tradition, the road to spirituality involves more than having health, calmness, and a restful mind. The goal of Taoist meditation is to directly connect with your soul and free the deepest recesses of your being. The highest purpose of meditation is to make you aware of the permanent, unchanging center of your being, that place of spirit and emptiness that is Consciousness itself. This level is beyond mere physical and mental relaxation; rather, it is relaxing into your soul, or your very being.

In this tradition, spirituality does not come like a bolt from the sky, just because you want it. It is a subject to be learned by deeply exploring your inner landscape over decades. Once you have health and peace of mind, you are ready to embark on three key stages towards achieving the goals of Taoist meditation. Only after you have more or less fully completed one stage, are you ready to embark on the next.

The three stages consist of the following:

1. Becoming a fully mature human being who is wholly free of inner conflicts and inner demons. Taoist meditation helps you completely release all the small and large conditionings, tensions, and blockages that bind and prevent your soul from reaching its full spiritual potential.
2. Reaching inner stillness. Taoist meditation brings about a place deep inside you that is absolutely permanent and stable. It does not waver, whether you are quietly sitting or are involved in doing fifty things at once.
3. Transforming the body, mind, and spirit through internal alchemy.

The stages of Taoist

meditation can only be taught by a living Taoist master and, depending on the school, may be taught as sitting, standing, moving, or sexual practices. As with any tradition, there are many schools and subdivisions within Taoism.

### **The Taoist Thai Chi Tradition**

There exists a rare tradition of people who use Tai Chi to achieve the goals of Taoist moving meditation. They interweave within Tai Chi's physical movements specific energetic techniques to help achieve the three stages of Taoist meditation. Many of the martial arts masters I met in China were aware of the tradition, but few knew Tai Chi masters who had transformed the practice of Tai Chi to a complete Taoist moving meditation method. Such meditation and Tai Chi masters share this tradition only with practitioners who had achieved a high degree of proficiency in the energetic aspects of secular Tai Chi (but not necessarily its martial aspects) and had a sincere desire to embark on a spiritual path.

The religious sage and Tai Chi master, Liu Hung Chieh, my last teacher in China, was one of those people. I was very fortunate to be accepted as his disciple in Taoist meditation and, specifically, Tai Chi as a practice for achieving the goals of Taoist meditation. Today there are a few recognizable schools of Taoist Tai Chi in the West. Very few masters know Taoist Tai Chi and are willing to teach it. Usually those who claim to do so are mainly teaching Tai Chi as meditative movement to achieve health and calmness. They are teaching secular Tai Chi, not Taoist moving meditation or Taoist Tai Chi.

### **Taoist Tai Chi's Meditation Techniques**

Taoist meditators believe that as humans, each of us have been given three spiritual treasures – our body, the energy which runs our body, and our spirit, called in Chinese jing, chi, and shen respectively. Each of these spiritual treasures is composed of energy – with body-energy being the least refined and vibrating at the lowest frequency, and spirit-energy being most refined, vibrating at a much higher frequency.

The overarching initial goal of practicing Tai Chi as Taoist meditation is to seek and find your spirit, i.e., Your soul: that which is



permanent and unchanging within you. You next allow your spirit to become fully open and clear, and then bring it to a state of stillness.

As a human, your energies at all levels of jing, chi, and shen are blocked from flowing freely and openly. For example, poor physical alignments, blood circulation, or nerve flow can block the optimum functions of the human body. Closed down acupuncture points or the inability to store chi energy in the lower tantien can block optimum chi energy flow. Spiritual obstacles can include being excessively self-absorbed, incapable of love, or fearfully consumed by feelings of alienation, morbidity, or events beyond your control.

High-level secular Tai Chi can be used to unblock the first two treasures of body- and chi-energy. Tai Chi, practiced as Taoist moving meditation, is necessary to fully unblock the third treasure of spirit. Taoist Tai Chi has many specific spiritual meditation techniques to help you do this.

#### **Moving from the external: Focus on Jing (Body)**

You train your awareness and ability to focus mostly on body techniques, with minimal chi energy and spirit work, until all your Tai Chi movements are so natural that you can do them automatically, even if half asleep. You must learn to be able to look straight ahead and extend your awareness until you can simultaneously feel your entire body and see it and comprehend what is going on outside it, without lapsing into distracting internal dialogue or “spacing out.”

#### **Going Internal: Focus on Chi (Energy)**

Your vessel (body) having been prepared, your focus now shifts to how to become aware of, open up, and control all the chi energies both within your body, and outside it in your external aura. You learn to notice ever more subtle energetic signals, which in turn can lead you to your tensions at the level of spirit. The more strongly your chi-energies flow, the easier it becomes to recognize the experiences lying at the roots of spiritual blockages.

#### **Moving to the Most Internal: Focus on Shen (Spirit)**

Here you learn to feel your most internal and refined energies of spirit and resolve the blockages that bind your soul.

#### **The Cyclic Nature of the Three Treasures**

Once you have a sense of the continuum between the external and internal, you learn to work simultaneously with all three treasures. You learn to understand how blockages at one energy level can comprise flows at other levels. For

example, blockages in your chi energy channels can deny you full access to the energy of your emotions that run within the same channels. This makes it harder to release and resolve negative emotions such as anger, hate, and paralysis, and replace them with emotions such as patience, compassion, and the willingness to engage. As another example, a block at the level of your spirit, such as malaise, may inhibit the flow of chi energy in your liver, potentially leading to weakness in the tendons and ligaments of your knees.

These interrelationships create opportunities for spiritual awakening. You can learn to gain access to a blockage at the spiritual level by first learning to recognize and then to resolve a related physical block. Or you can work at the spiritual level to unbind your blocked chi energy, or vice versa. The three treasures are cyclical. So, accessing the body gives access to your chi energy, which gives maximum access to your spirit, which then gives more access to your body, ad infinitum.

As you practice Taoist Tai Chi, gradually your awareness opens and stabilizes so that you become comfortable staying in the resolved open free space inside you where pure spirit resides. External pressures, and your own internal ones, no longer repeatedly cause you to return to the same blocked places inside you; such pressures no longer trigger old destructive patterns of behavior. You achieve longer and longer stable periods of functioning in the new open spiritual space. In a relaxed way, spirit begins to feel natural, and you no longer become caught up in the drama of having a “powerful experience” when you meditate. You begin to experience spiritual relaxation, the term Taoist have always used to describe the state of resting in emptiness, in Western parlance where the center of your soul resides.

In conclusion, secular Tai Chi can help your mind and body relax and achieve the quiet that many people associate with spirituality. These qualities help build the foundation for all forms of traditional meditation. In Taoist meditation, the goal of spirituality is to connect with the deepest recesses of your being and consciousness (the Tao). This spiritual path requires commitment to both learning and practicing. Within Tai Chi there is a rare tradition that teaches you to use Tai Chi to achieve the goals of Taoist meditation (Taoist Tai Chi). These goals are achieved in three stages: maturity, inner stillness, and inner alchemy.