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Investing in Loss

Softness Principles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan

*"Therefore, let me say that to study
T'ai Chi Ch'uan, one must begin by
'investing in loss.' At its highest
level, learning to invest in loss
produces precisely its opposite."*

- Cheng Man-ch'ing

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Several centuries ago the principles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan were developed. The true origins of the art are lost in time, but popular theories attribute the development to Chang San-feng of Wu-tang Mountain in the fourteenth century, or to Ch'en Wang-t'ing (founder of the Ch'en style of T'ai Chi Ch'uan) in the seventeenth century. In either case, it can reasonably be assumed that T'ai Chi Ch'uan is an art that has spanned at least four centuries.

Inseparably tied to Taoism, indeed a direct outgrowth of Taoism, T'ai Chi Ch'uan is a martial art that was, like the religion that fostered it, truly indigenous to China.

Recently in the history of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, certain patriarchs of the art have allowed us to view and participate in a martial art that for long centuries was maintained only within the families of the practitioners and was strictly hidden behind a veil of secrecy. T'ai Chi Ch'uan masters such as Yang Lu-ch'an, Yang Ch'eng-fu, Chen Wei-Ming, Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo, and, most notably, Cheng Man-ch'ing have brought to us a legacy that, at times, was so jealously guarded that patriarchs would not teach their daughters the practices lest they marry and take the art outside the family.

T'ai Chi Ch'uan has admirably withstood the test of time with its uniqueness and usefulness, and credit is due to the great men that have diligently preserved the "Great Ultimate" through the passage of the ages.

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In the T'ai Chi Ch'uan Lun, one of the ancient T'ai Chi Ch'uan Classics it is stated:

(So light an object as) a feather
cannot be placed, and
(so small an insect as) a fly
cannot alight
on any part of the body.

The opponent doesn't know me;
I alone know him.

To become a peerless boxer results from this.¹

Herein lies one of the great essences of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, the principle of softness.

T'ai Chi Ch'uan not only purports itself to be a boxing style, but further claims to be superior to all other martial arts and, additionally, a rehabilitative exercise. Cheng Man-ch'ing, one of the great exponents of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, states "Thus there is good reason for calling this art the 'Great Ultimate.' Not only are its practitioners able to neutralize hardness and speed and enjoy first place among the martial arts, but it strengthens the weak, raises the sick, invigorates the debilitated, and encourages the timid."²

At first the principles of softness do not seem congruent to a martial arts system that purports itself to be a style of boxing. One typically views boxing and related 'hard' styles to be either devoid of soft principles, or to utilize them only as secondary sources. T'ai Chi Ch'uan, however, is one of the rare styles that utilizes soft-style principles almost exclusively.

So what is meant by the term "softness"? In T'ai Chi Ch'uan this means to meet an attack without resistance. Force is not met with force, but is avoided while the opponent is drawn into the T'ai Chi Ch'uan practitioner's realm of influence. The moves are typically circular and, most importantly, flowing. All moves are performed as if interconnected - the continuous flow of motion is never broken. The body is loose enough that it cannot suffer attack by force - the force is lost as the body yields and moves out of the way. The softness principle also allows for overall stability of the body. This is well described by one of the great masters of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Yang Ch'eng-fu, who stated "Seeking suppleness enables you to separate your body into pieces. If an opponent pushes against your forearm, your elbow doesn't move; if against your elbow it moves, but not your shoulder; if against your shoulder, it moves but not your body; if against your body it moves but not your waist; if against your waist it moves but not your leg. This process leaves you as stable as a mountain."³

Other styles of martial arts also recognize the usefulness of principles and techniques that are based on suppleness rather than strength. Pendakur Paul de Thours, a styl-

ist of Pentjak Silat Bhukti Negara, professes that his style is advantageous for older or enfeebled persons who cannot utilize styles requiring strength or physical conditioning. Techniques utilizing principles of body mechanics comprise a large portion of the style and provide a repertoire of defenses that can be utilized without a significant degree of strength. The principle of dissipating or yielding to an attack rather than meeting force with force is central to many of the moves in this style.

Bruce Lee, creator of Jeet Kune Do and a student of many styles, had similar ideas when he wrote:

"If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. Moving, be like water. Still, be like a mirror. Respond like an echo."⁴

and:

Nothingness cannot be defined; the softest thing cannot be snapped."⁵

One of Bruce Lee's contemporaries, author Joe Hyams, received a lecture regarding softness principles from his aikido instructor, who stated "He [the skilled aikidoist] is like water in that he falls through the fingers of those who try to clutch him. Water does not hesitate before it yields, for the moment the fingers begin to close it moves away, not of its own strength, but by using the pressure applied to it."⁶

The actual offensive and defensive techniques of T'ai Chi Ch'uan are practiced in an exercise called "push hands". Opponents face each other with forearms contacting and, as one opponent applies a pushing pressure, the other senses the movement and yields before pressure can be applied. This will eventually draw the first opponent off balance if he should continue to push. Once he has reached his maximum extension without losing balance, the roles are reversed, and he senses and yields to the move of his counterpart. The forearm contact is never broken between the participants.

"Push hands" is generally practiced using four of the basic T'ai Chi Ch'uan moves that are demonstrated in the Form, which are *ward off*, *roll back*, *press*, and *push*. After much practice the T'ai Chi Ch'uan student should be able to sense the opponent's move *prior to the move occurring*. This is the first phase of the training, listening to the opponent's energy. The next level occurs when the student is able to "interpret" the move of his opponent and actually move first, taking the advantage. The third phase of this training is more of a spiritual level, wherein mastery of the opponent is achieved without even needing to sense the opponent's energy.

It becomes quite easy to see how an opponent can be put off balance. But if softness is the principle, and use of strength is not allowed, then what are the methods of attack?

How can the attack be effective without the utilization of force?

In keeping with the Taoist influence and tradition of the art, attacks are performed with the use of internal energy. More specifically, internal energy (*ch'i*) is converted into internal power (*jing*), which is then used to attack the opponent. Attacks consist of the selective transfer of power (*fah jing*) to the opponent. External power (*li*) is not utilized. Even when a movement appears to be an application of external power (i.e. a punch, wrist lock, sweep, etc.) the true force is application of internal power.

This is the secret so jealously guarded by the masters of T'ai Chi Ch'uan for ages, and it is the reason that this slow-moving, seemingly gentle art can appear to have no martial application whatsoever and yet can be considered the "Great Ultimate" martial art. Both the healing and the fighting applications of T'ai Chi Ch'uan stem from the same manipulations of internal energy and power.

Chinese theory of T'ai Chi Ch'uan states that *jing* can be utilized in 34 different forms to cover a wide range of fighting situations. Some examples are:

Sticking Power (*tzan lien jing*): the most basic of the internal power applications, used to "stick" to the opponent for control.

Uprooting Power (*ti jing*): the ability to lift an opponent off the ground and push him backwards, thus disconnecting his "root."

Deflecting Power (*bah jing*): the ability to deflect the opponent or his power off to the side.

Twisting Power (*jzeh jing*): the internal power equivalent of a wrist lock, but in theory can be applied anywhere on the body. In practice this power often has the appearance of an external power wrist lock.

Spiral Power (*dzuen jing*): an internally damaging power, driven into the opponent like a screw into wood. Potentially lethal.

These are merely a few of the specialized forms of *jing* used for attack. Since there is no physical strength required for the application of internal power, the principle of softness is maintained.

It is also in keeping with Taoist influence that the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan should rely heavily on internal alchemy - the alteration of the body through manipulation of *ch'i*. The end goal is harmonization with nature and the universe. Harmony must be achieved both internally and externally. T'ai Chi Ch'uan is described as "a method by which external affairs are regulated (self-defense) while the *ch'i* (breath) is cultivated (yoga)."7 This is where the near-legendary ef-

fects of T'ai Chi Ch'uan on health are derived.

The practices and methods of T'ai Chi Ch'uan may seem esoteric and of dubious value against an accomplished martial artist of a hard style. Indeed, the training commitment required to achieve the fighting potentials of T'ai Chi Ch'uan require a near-monastic approach. But the art carries its own history of accomplished martial artists, who proved that the principles of softness and yielding do indeed have their place within serious martial artistry. One such master, Yang Lu-shan, originator of Yang Style T'ai Chi Ch'uan, became accomplished at the art and went to Peking to fight in martial tournaments against other great masters and acquired the nickname "Yang of No Equal." Another great T'ai Chi Ch'uan master, Yang Ch'eng-fu (the grandson of Yang Lu-shan) was a famous teacher of the art, and greatly responsible for its spread throughout China. A student of Yang Ch'eng-fu, Kwan Saihung, relates a story of an attack on the master:

"Two men dropped a 'pig-catching-basket' on him. It was a narrow, coarsely woven, rattan cylinder that imprisoned his arms and body tightly. Master Yang struggled a bit, until one of the men gave him a kick and the basket rolled unrestrainedly down a hill.

The two assailants, probably men who sought fame through defeating the great Yang Chengfu, quickly followed with drawn sabers. Two accomplices waited at the bottom of the hill.

'Are you all here?' inquired Master Yang when he reached the bottom.

The men responded by raising their sabers.

'All right,' said Master Yang. He inhaled mightily and flexed his arms. The basket ripped easily.

Master Yang stood up. By the dim glow of the street lanterns, he was suddenly a menacing juggernaut. 'You wanted to take my life,' he said in a low growl. 'It's too bad you haven't made it. Take a look around. Today is your last day on Earth.'

The men attacked savagely. In an unhurried, methodical way, Yang Chengfu sidestepped the saber attacks and killed the first two men by dealing each a single blow over their hearts. He killed the last two in rapid succession, by snapping their necks. It was a casual matter to him."⁸

Chen Wei-Ming questioned the ability of T'ai Chi Ch'uan to resist the attack of a fighter who is extremely quick. His master, the aforementioned Yang Ch'eng-fu, replied that "Other martial arts maintain a certain distance while fighting. But if the distance is too far apart the opponent will not be able to reach me. If he wants to hit me the distance between us must close so that the arms and legs can reach. When he closes you can stick and use listening energy. Then, if he is fast, you are fast; if he is slow, you are slow. At this moment you can't be afraid."⁹ Yang Ch'eng-fu was

obviously unafraid to do battle with hard-style martial artists. His application of softness principles had very hard and harsh results.

With the spread of T'ai Chi Ch'uan to peoples outside China, by far the most popular aspect of the style is the Form. Indeed, many practitioners learn only the Form and do not pursue proficiency in the martial aspects of the art. This is perhaps due to the degree of devotion required to attain proficiency. The sophistication of the style may also make it difficult for many to understand. As a child of Taoism, T'ai Chi Ch'uan is both lofty and esoteric. Although the masters of T'ai Chi Ch'uan claim that the practice of the art does not require faith, but simply perseverance, this is perhaps easier for persons of Eastern upbringing. The concepts of Yin and Yang, internal power, internal alchemy, etc., are Eastern in origin, and it is these philosophies that comprise their overall way of thinking, from medicine to science to martial arts. The West, in general, has either ignored or struggled to understand these principles. Integration of such principles into the Western man must, by nature, be more difficult since he was not raised to such ideas. Thus, there is the risk that the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan may become merely a dance, with only the wisest understanding the roots and origin and depth of the art.

As with many things relating to the quality of life, T'ai Chi Ch'uan carries more under the surface than meets the eye. For the serious martial artist it offers a means of internal cultivation that leads to greater prowess, and for the non-martial artist it offers the promise of greater health. But for all who study T'ai Chi Ch'uan there is the opportunity to follow in the tradition of masters who, for many long centuries, strove to dig below the surface of life and obtain the treasures that escape the casual view.

Footnotes

¹ Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo et al., *The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), p. 35

² Cheng Man-ch'ing, *Master Cheng's Thirteen Chapters on T'ai Chi Ch'uan*, trans. Douglas Wile (Brooklyn: Sweet Ch'i Press, 1984), pp. 8 - 9

³ Chen Wei-Ming, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan Ta Wen*, trans. Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo and Robert W. Smith (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), p. 27

⁴ Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Burbank: Ohara Publications, Inc., 1975), p. 7

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joe Hyams, *Zen in the Martial Arts* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 66

⁷ Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo et al., *The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), p. 9

⁸ Deng Ming-Dao, *The Wandering Taoist* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 133 - 134

⁹ Chen Wei-Ming, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan Ta Wen*, trans. Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo and Robert W. Smith (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), pp. 32 - 33