

TAIJIQUAN AS AN EXPERIENTIAL WAY FOR DISCOVERING DAOISM

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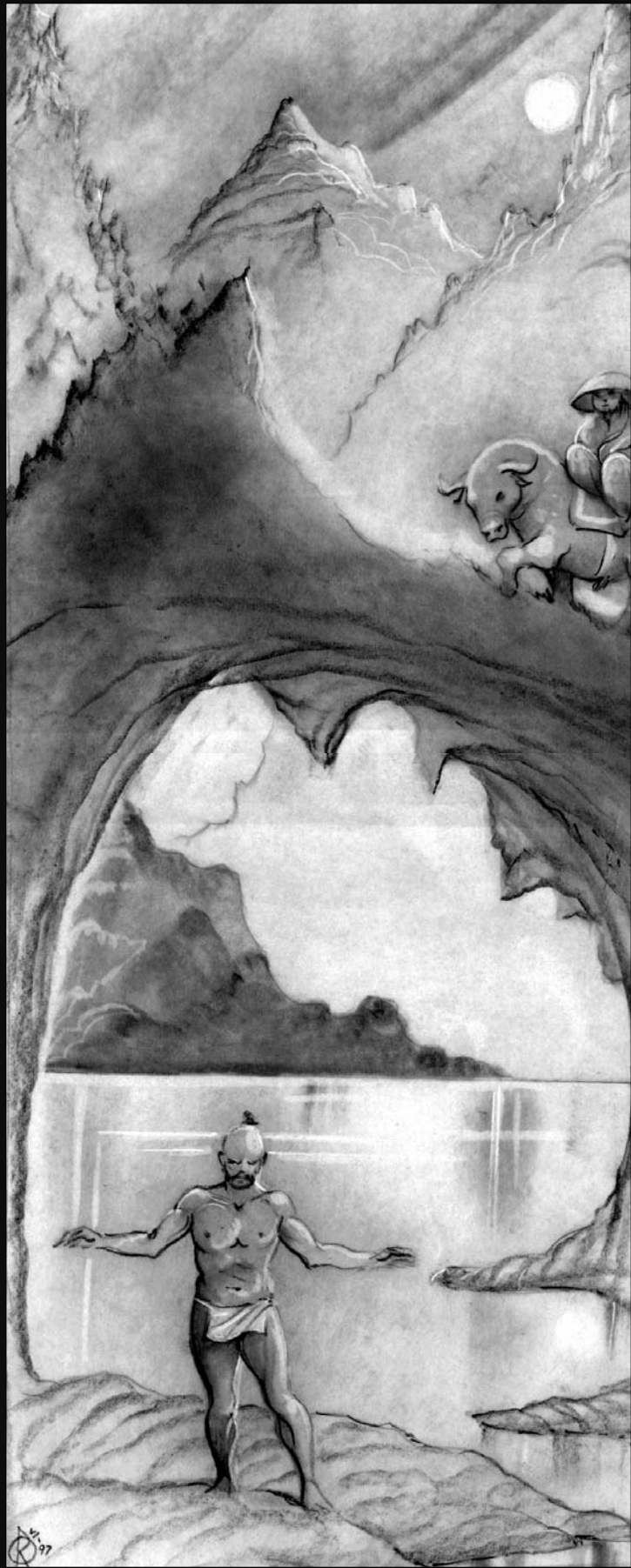


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太極拳老子道德經



EDITOR'S NOTE:
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HOWEVER, THE ARTISTIC
RENDERINGS ACCOMPANYING
THIS ARTICLE INVITE THE
READER TO CREATE A
PERSONAL INTERPRETATION.

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MICHAEL A. DEMARCO, M.A.



INTRODUCTION

If someone without any previous exposure to Daoist philosophy began to study taijiquan, what would he or she learn regarding taiji's fundamental principles? And how closely would the resulting philosophical insights concur with Daoist tenets?—The following presents a way of directly discovering taiji boxing's philosophical principles through experiential involvement in the art itself. There certainly is no real need for delineating historical roots with footnotes here, but only rooting our feet in taiji.¹

We will first look at the learning process involved from a student's viewpoint. The philosophical insights gained through this practice will be indicated as they arise during this learning process. A summary of these philosophical principles can then be compared to those found in the Daoist tradition.

LEARNING TAIJIQUAN'S SOLO FORM

Regardless of the taiji style being taught, a new student begins by learning a solo routine that contains a series of movements which, depending on its length and tempo, takes five to forty minutes to perform. While learning the solo routine, the student's main objective is to become aware of how the body moves. During this initial stage, martial applications are usually not taught so that the student may focus on himself without distraction. The instructor simply demonstrates a movement and lets the student repeat it. Consecutive movements are shown one-by-one according to the student's readiness until the complete series of movements is memorized.

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The learning process here involves little or no discussion between teacher and student. A student learns by copying the master's techniques and repeating them thousands of times. The understanding of how the techniques are executed is gained largely through intuition and awareness resulting from hours of devoted practice. What is learned through this practice gives an evolving definition of "taijiquan," a definition which changes with time according to one's ever-deepening insights into the art. However, practice of the solo form should demonstrate all the fundamental principles for which taijiquan is noted.

In order to simplify a presentation on taijiquan practice, the following material focuses on the Yang Style, but similarities would be found in other branches as well. Traditional Yang taiji is composed of over one hundred movements strung together in three sections. From the beginning posture comes the first step, then the second step, and the form continues in a flowing sequence of movements which closes with a posture that is exactly like the beginning posture. The compositional structure of the sequence itself is very similar to a symphony with its own melodic flow of changing passages held together by repetitive bars to form an overall unity. Even though a symphony may contain a highly complex inner structure, its unity can be recognized as a singular "masterpiece."

After many months, regular practice brings a familiarity with the solo form and the practitioner becomes more and more comfortable with the routine. The movements seemingly begin to flow of their own accord, releasing mental and physical stress found in students at the beginning level. By the time the complete routine is learned, the student can enter the door of discovery that allows an experiential sensing of taiji's philosophical core.²

PRINCIPLES DERIVED FROM THE SOLO ROUTINE PRACTICE

Upon first observing the traditional Yang routine, most new students are apprehensive of the number and complexity of movements. They ask, "How is it possible to remember all those movements in sequence?" They later realize that the movements are not as difficult to learn as they first appeared, especially when learning only one movement at a time. Within the routine itself, many movements are repeated in whole or in part.

By the time the student has completed learning the routine, he has a distinct sense for the three sections. Furthermore, he sees individual movements as parts of sequences. Where there was once "brush knee, twist-step left, twist-step right, twist-step left," there is now simply the "brush knee sequence." The same, for example, can be said for "the three kicks," "four corners," or "cloud hands." As the practitioner gains greater familiarity with the routine, he sees such sequences as forming parts of even longer sequences.

Analyzing the individual taiji movements, we find that each movement is brought about by a simple change in body posture, with one simple change leading to other changes. Shifting of body weight in the legs and feet is easily sensed, particularly in taiji routines which are practiced in a very slow manner. As one leg becomes "full" with weight, the other is "emptied" and

capable of moving in any chosen direction. The body's trunk remains in balance over the legs as the hands follow the waist in deflecting left or right; striking, pressing, or pushing forward; rolling-back or "repulsing monkey." These horizontal movements are coupled with vertical movements as well. This is particularly noticeable in "snake creeps downward" and "rooster stands on one leg," since these are extremes of low and high following one another. But vertical movement should be equally sensed throughout the routine, commencing with "taiji beginning."

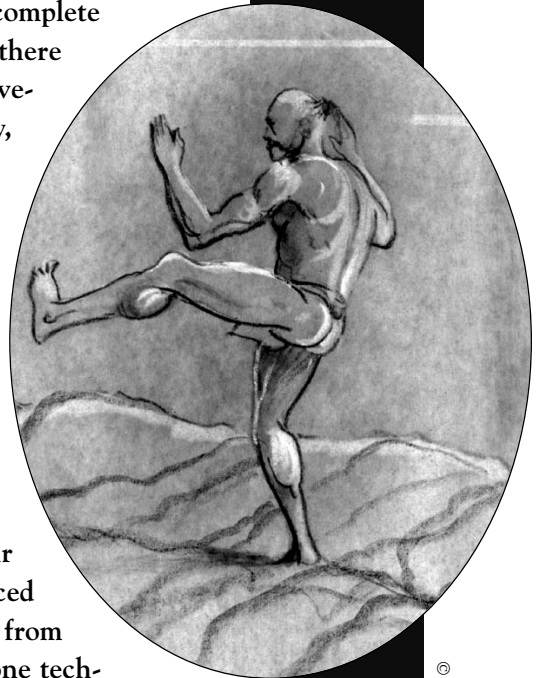
Whether we look at the complex composition of the complete Yang routine or the individual movements which form it, there develops an underlying sense of flow that unites all the movements. The taiji solo routine is often compared to the slow, steady flow of a long river. It is this flow which provides the continuity and wholeness of the routine. All of the movement from "beginning" to "conclusion" is performed in smooth even tempo with no clear demarcation to signify where one technique begins or ends.

Reflecting on the learning process involved in taiji, the student becomes aware that taiji's complexity is simplified by grouping certain movements into sequences. In turn, these small sequences form part of larger sequences, often simply referred to as the traditional "three sections" for convenience. However, all taiji movements find their source in the most basic principle of change. At an advanced level, the practitioner finds himself changing effortlessly from one movement to another. An observer cannot tell where one technique ends and the next begins. The sequence of movements connects as a single thread and the exercise feels like a unified routine.

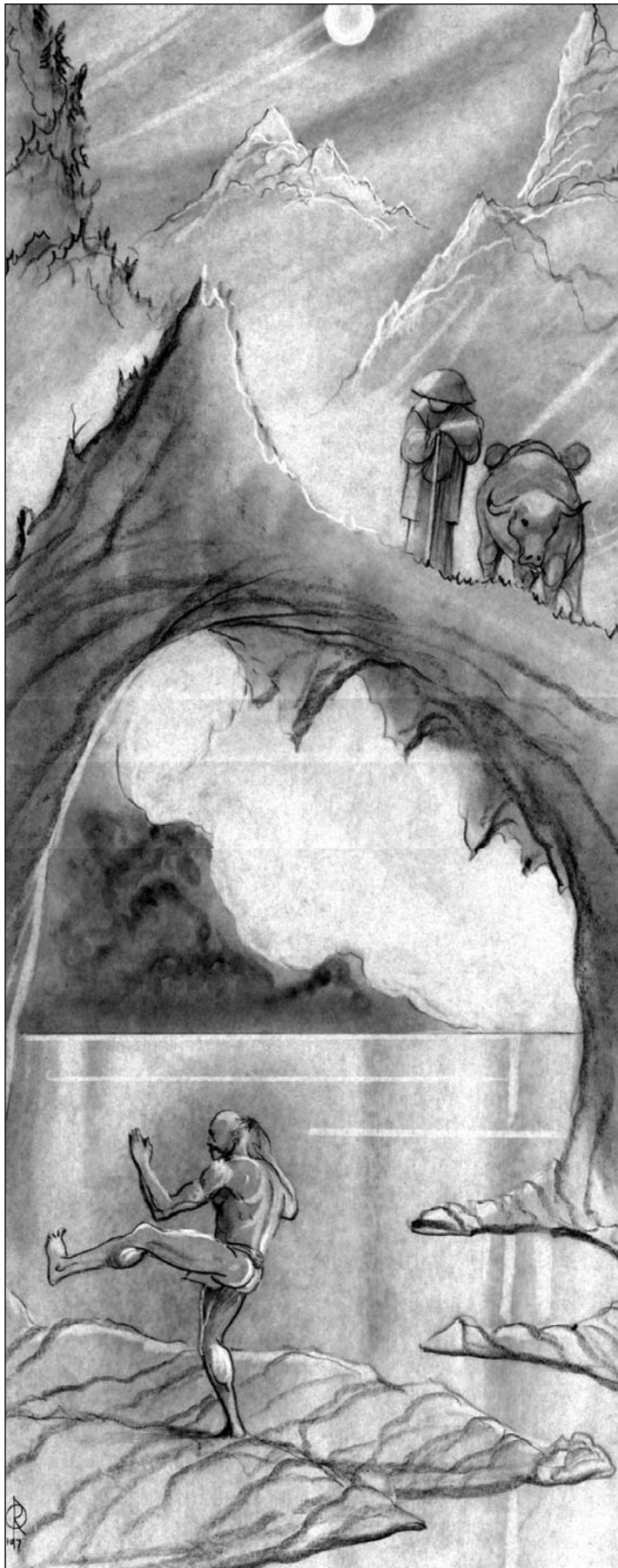
Taiji as practiced by an accomplished master looks easy to do, but the necessary skills take years to hone. For the beginner, practice is characterized by tenseness, staccato movements, and off-balanced postures. How do these evolve into taiji characterized by balance, smoothness, and relaxed grace? Taiji body mechanics can be summed up in one word: naturalness. The slow-motion Yang style routine magnifies the awareness of each movement, which, in turn, allows the practitioner to feel what makes his movements cumbersome and offers direction for making appropriate corrections within each movement. Consciously and subconsciously, the movements can be transformed from a rustic set of physical exercises into a true martial art routine.

SOLO ROUTINE PRINCIPLES AND DAOIST TENETS

The preceding section outlines a typical mode of learning Yang style taiji and presents some of the common psychological insights associated with the practice. These insights are gained through the practice itself, but what of the Daoist flavor is expressed, if any? Any similarities or differences between the two we can find by comparing the contents of the preceding section with principles long held as the most fundamental to Daoism.



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TEN THOUSAND THINGS IN THE WAY

The Chinese have traditionally viewed the world as composed of “ten thousand things.” Things, infinitely numerous in shapes and sizes, dazzle our senses with an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colors, sounds, aromas, tastes and textures. From birth, we are forced to find our place within this ever-turning world. The philosophy we develop can provide the wisdom and skills that determine how successful we will be. It is our means for survival.

During the formation of early Chinese culture, it was recognized that, in order to solve any complex problem, the “ten thousand things” surrounding the matter must first be simplified. What is the most important aspect of the problem? What roles do other factors play which are really significant? Through such questioning the Chinese were actually developing a highly sophisticated mode of logic and reasoning. They found it useful to categorize the “ten thousand things” to better adapt to their environment.

A parallel can be found in taijiquan practice, in which the student is initially confused by the “ten thousand” movements. Here the student is challenged to find a way to properly master the complexity of all the movements. A step along this path involves the discovery of categories by which the taiji movements can be better understood and performed.

THE WAYS AND MEANS OF FIVE FORCES (WUXING)

Stopping to contemplate the world, insightful Chinese viewed the “ten thousand things” that appeared between Heaven and Earth. They looked closely in every direction. As a person peers outward, he realizes that he himself forms the center of his existence, the center of the universe. Perhaps this orientation between man and his universe led the Chinese to the idea of *wuxing*.

Likewise, a taiji practitioner is the ever-present center of the moving art form of taiji.

An analysis of the characters *wu* and *xing* helps us clarify the general meaning usually given to the compound term as Five Forces. Wu simply stands for the number five. In ancient times, it was written like an “X,” where four lines indicated the directions from a common central focus. Later, a line was placed above and another below the “X,” symbolic of Heaven and Earth. This is similar to man’s position on Earth. Only from his own viewpoint can he look out into all directions under Heaven.

Xing carries with it such meanings as to go, operate, conduct or set into motion. Combined with wu, we have five active forces, or movers. They represent five basic phases through which matter continuously transforms itself. As a concept, wuxing stands for abstract forces, five movers which keep the “ten thousand things” in operation.

Besides being associated with the five spatial directions (north, south, east, west, and center), the wuxing concept was conveniently and suitably applied to other aspects of nature. A partial list indicates its significance as a comprehensive tool for understanding the “ten thousand things.” In particular, it often was associated with the seasons, animals, weather, bodily organs, numbers, musical notes, colors and even flavors.

How do the Five Forces work? According to Daoist philosophy, they work quite easily! Just as one season naturally follows another, any one phase is connected to the next. Plus, all phases are interrelated in some way, each having its own characteristics and influences. In short, each plays its part in an overall process of construction and destruction that keeps the “ten thousand things” in movement. Due to cause and effect, they flow in cycles, passing from one phase to the next until completing a circuit. By an intimate understanding of the laws involved in such changes, man can better adapt himself to the continual changes in the world.

The Five Forces theory became so important that an independent school of philosophy arose under its name during the fourth and third centuries B.C.E. In the third century B.C.E., a strategist named Zou Yan made it a regular feature of political theory. Kingdoms, under the influence of a given wuxing phase, rose and fell in predictable order much like earth produces wood, which in turn is destroyed by fire.

The theory of Five Forces was applied to all fields of study, including astronomy, divination, medicine, agriculture, politics, art, and religion. It served as a valuable schematic upon which subjects could be analyzed and understood within their specialized sphere of changing relationships. Thus, within their changes, an underlying order and permanence could still be found.

China’s ancient philosophers were seeking the wisest way to obtain the insight and skills necessary to master life. Although the wuxing theory proved very practical, its application was actually still so complex that only the most gifted of sages could successfully employ it to advantage. It is too easy to become entangled by five everchanging variables. Lao Zi was clearly aware of this, writing:

The five colors cause one's eyes to go blind. . . . The five flavors confuse one's palate. The five tones cause one's ears to go deaf. Therefore, in the government of the Sages: He is for the belly and not for the eyes. Thus he rejects that and takes this.

– Henricks, 1989:64 (Ch. 12)

The wuxing were understood to be the simplified basis of the “ten thousand things.” In order to be more workable, would it be possible to simplify further? Chinese sages did just that—they categorized the world into two: yin and yang. In so doing, the wuxing became easier to understand and, therefore, so did the “ten thousand things.”

In a similar manner, the taiji practitioner eventually finds order within the complexity of movements comprising the routine. Some practitioners become so infatuated with individual techniques that they miss the overall importance of the system! They do not heed Lao Zi's advice and get lost in the “ten thousand” movements. Others focus on the complete routine. After the routine is categorized into sections and sequences become familiar, the routine is performed with less difficulty. From the starting movement the practitioner feels as if he is moving through sections of the routine rather than many individual movements, until the end which completes the cycle.

THE BI-WAYS OF YIN AND YANG

We walk a road with two feet, view the world through only two eyes. In the fourth century B.C.E., at roughly the same time the wuxing theory developed, the Chinese also formulated a polar view of the world with the theory of yin-yang. By the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), this Yin-Yang School absorbed that of wuxing. Together they offered a comprehensive system useful not only for analysis, but also in the control and manipulation of all areas to which they were applied.

There are earthy roots to the yin-yang theory. It is believed that the ancient characters derived in part as symbolic images of the daily fluctuation between day and night, or more precisely, light and dark. The yang character shows the sun on the horizon, radiating its brilliance down on the earth. Yin is composed of *jin*, meaning “now” and *yun* meaning “cloudy.” As a result, yin became associated with cloud-like characteristics, including cold, night, shade, dark, and water. Similarly, yang came to imply a varied list of sun-like attributes, such as hot, day, clear, bright, and fiery. The written characters have changed over the centuries into their simplified modern versions. However, the implications do remain the same as those of the original characters. Oddly enough, no written character can fully express the meaning with which yin-yang became associated.

Since the symbolism of language failed to convey the meaning of yin-yang, a more appropriate symbol was required. Of all of the cosmological diagrams invented in China, the taiji symbol is no doubt the most famous. It also remains the most useful symbol for expressing the yin-yang theory. The characters for taiji should first be analyzed before discussing the symbol itself.

When the characters for *taiji* are broken down, the individual character *tai* we find refers to something “very big” or “extreme.” It resembles a stick figure who is stretching his limbs out to their limits in four directions. *Ji* is more complicated. It also has a significance of “extreme,” but more importantly a “pole,” the extreme of any axis. In ancient times, *ji* was a common word for “ridgepole” upon which the structure of a house would rest. With reference to cosmology, *taiji* is the “Supreme Ultimate Principle,” the cosmological ridgepole which supports the whole universe.

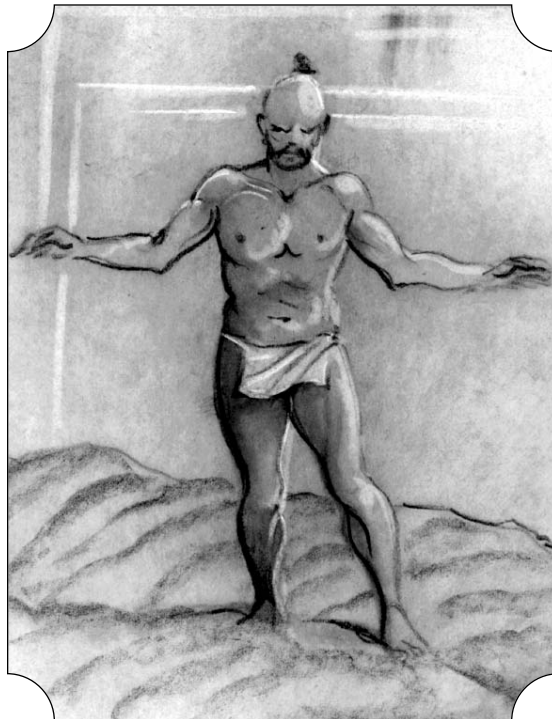
In philosophical terms, the *taiji* is the Absolute. It is the most basic principle upon which wuxing and the “ten thousand things” rest. An Absolute is so limitless and pervasive that it does not have any visible signs to be perceived. For this reason, yin-yang became its first visible attributes. The symbol for the *taiji*, or Supreme Ultimate, is the intertwining of yin and yang. The parts are not static, but are constantly in movement, varying their relationship in fluctuating percentages or even transforming one into the other. Through the varied interactions of yin-yang, the universe is kept in motion. No aspect of creation exists without their signature. Lao Zi wrote:

The ten thousand things carry yin on their backs and wrap their arms around yang. Through the blending of *qi* (their energies) they arrive at a state of harmony. – Henricks, 1989:11 (Ch. 42)

The yin-yang interplay is the foundation of *taiji*’s boxing routine. It is the impetus of the flowing movements. Throughout the *taiji* routine, practitioners experience the fluctuating pulse of yin and yang. How this categorization functions in *taiji* is shown through the following examples:

Yin

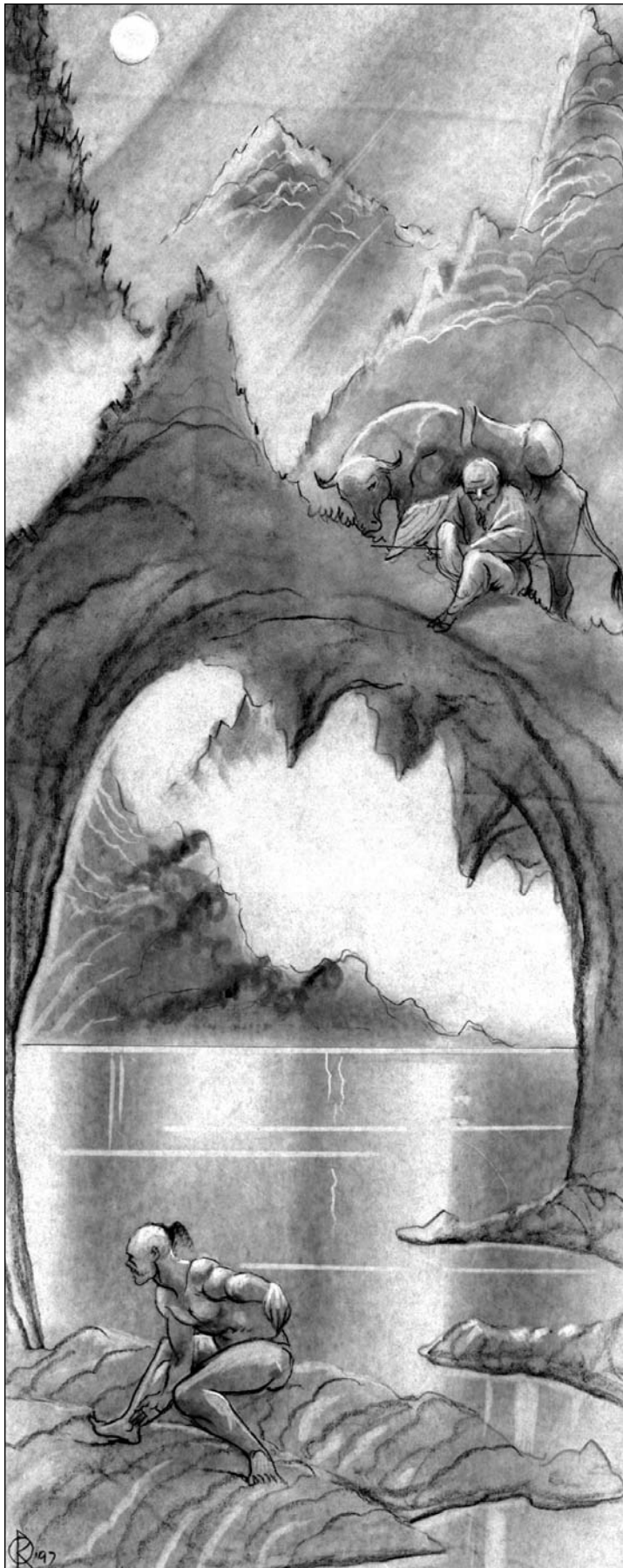
closed
inward
hidden
slow
soft
mind
sinking
down
low
passive
back
inside
light
north
empty
defensive
receiving
curved
round
pull
retreat



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Yang

open
outward
shown
fast
hard
body
rising
up
high
active
front
outside
heavy
south
full
offensive
giving
straight
square
push
advance



In Daoism, wuxing and yin-yang serve to categorize the “ten thousand things.” This helps one to understand the universe in its varied aspects. Wuxing and yin-yang also demonstrate how the universe operates. The experience of taiji boxing likewise illustrates the flow of movement through positional phases and fluctuations between yin and yang. On an even more subtle level, movement is brought about from stillness. Stillness is found in the Dao.

DAO: THE HIGH-WAY OF DAOISM

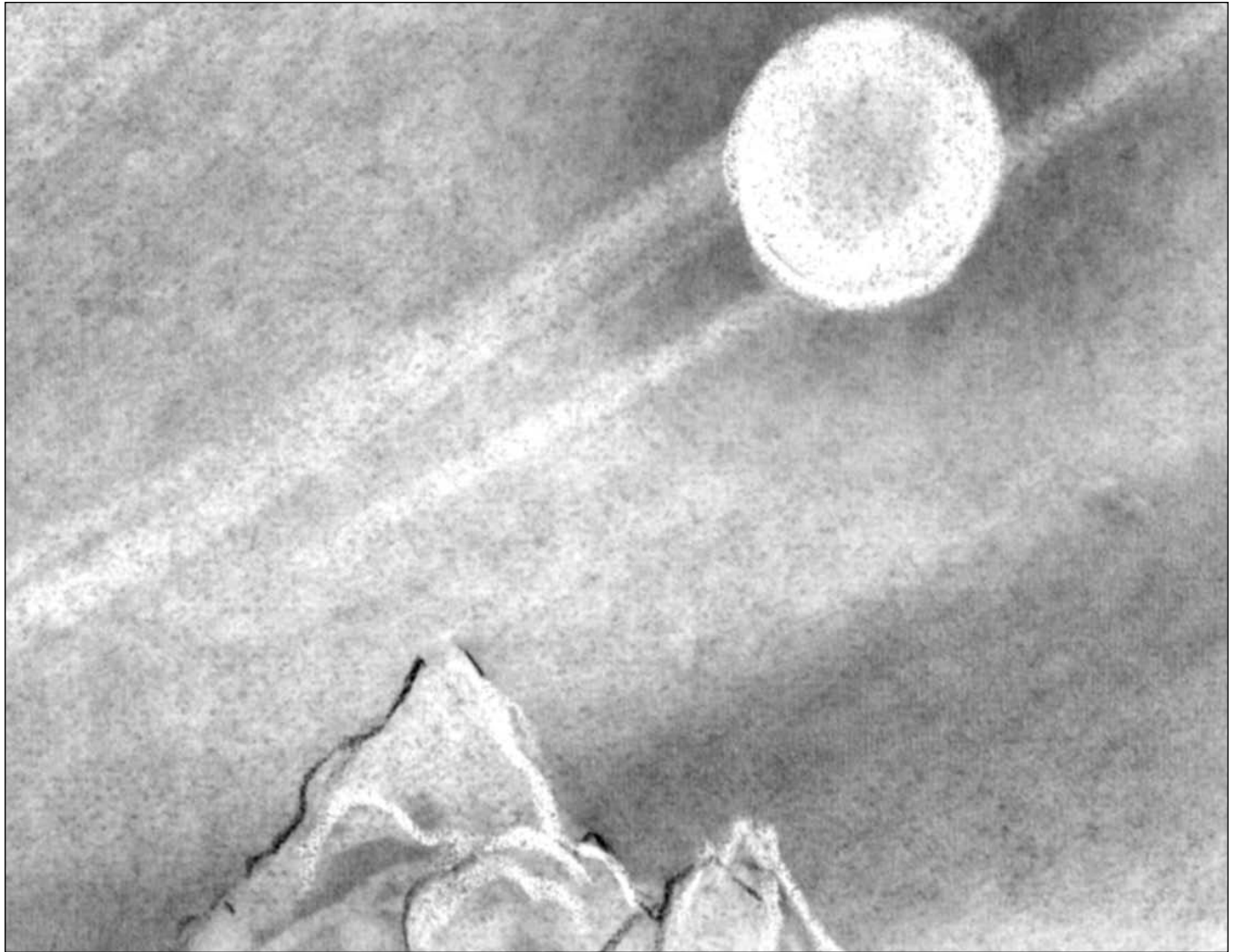
The *Daodejing* states:

There was something formed out of chaos,
that was born before Heaven and Earth.
Quiet and still! Pure and deep!
It stands on its own and doesn't change.
It can be regarded as the mother
of Heaven and Earth. I do not know
its name: I style it “the Way.”
– Henricks, 1989:77 (Ch. 25)

Carl Jung said that the “value of Dao lies in its power to reconcile opposites on a higher level of consciousness” (Chang, 1970:3). We find this in the highest levels of taijiquan practice. It is made known when the practitioner transcends the complexity of the “ten thousand” movements, transcends the arbitrary groupings of sequential techniques, transcends even the mind-body duality. This is a mystic state which does not limit itself to taiji boxing.

A dominant thought existing in Lao Zi's time is found in the *Book of Odes*: “Heaven in producing mankind annexed its laws to every faculty and relationship. Man possessed of this nature should strive to develop his endowment to perfection.” A “Heavenly Identity,” or Dao-realization, comes to one through polishing the mirror-like mind, cleansing away its mundane dust. Zhuang Zi called this a process of “purifying the mind.” Lao Zi further advised one to rid himself of desires in order to observe the Dao's secrets (Lau, 1963:57).

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Dao realization is of great importance because whoever attains this state takes on all the attributes of the eternal Dao. Why this is important in taijiquan and other martial arts can be discerned from a quote from the *Dao-dejing*, Ch. 16: “If you’re one with the Dao, to the end of your days you’ll suffer no harm” (Henricks, 1989:68).

The Dao is described in Chinese literature as being complete and whole. As such, it is the abode of stillness and tranquility. It is the “mother of the ten thousand things.” “The Way [Dao] gives birth to them, nourishes them, matures them, completes them, rests them, rears them, supports them, and protects them” (Henricks, 1989:20).

Daoism	Taijiquan
“10,000 things”	Over one hundred movements in the Yang Taiji routine.
Five Elements	Three sections into which the Yang Taiji routine is divided.
Yin-Yang	Duality inherent in each taiji movement.
Dao	The oneness of the unified taiji routine.
De	The virtue/power expressed in taiji movements.



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CONCLUSION

A student of taiji boxing passes through various psychological stages in experiencing the complexity of the routine. At first a mysterious hodgepodge of techniques, the numerous movements within the routine become easier to understand and perform as regular practice brings a familiarity with the set. The wuxing and yin-yang concepts help one understand the underlying process of change within the routine. We also learn the inherent relationship that exists within the unity of all body parts as utilized in the movements.

However, at the highest level of practice the completeness and wholeness of the taiji routine find a parallel in the oneness of Dao. When the dualism of mind and body are transcended, the taiji routine seems to flow of its own accord. It is as spontaneously natural as a flowing river. This is taiji in the state of “non-doing” (*wuwei*). A solo performance in this state is characterized by tranquility and freedom from thought, which for the martial artist has other implications as well. It makes the power (*de*) of Dao available, for in self-defense it is necessary to move spontaneously with the accuracy and strength possible only through the complete unification of human thought and movement.

What we have analyzed in this paper is the discovery of Daoist principles in the taijiquan routine. Here, the inner workings of the individual are found, presenting the physical and mental operations as they are seen in the solo routine. There are also other taiji practices, such as push-hands and a paired form. These practices seek to let the individual discover his relationship with others. For the Daoist, this may be the ultimate reason why the name “taiji” was chosen for this boxing style.



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NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the 73rd annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society on March 21-24, 1996, in Covington, KY.

Lao Zi writes: "Throw away knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold" (Henricks, 1989: 71). In Daoist fashion, I have tried to minimize the academic documentation in this present version in order to focus on actual experience.

² There is a strong tradition among Western scholars to categorize Daoism according to its use in Chinese society, with philosophical and religious Daoism forming the two major categories. Again, I have chosen to ignore the standard approach in favor of the Daoist unitary vision. This holds true even with the philosophical concepts mentioned in this article, since they may fall under other philosophical schools of thought as well, e.g., Confucianism.

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