Studying the Dao with Jesus: Taijiquan and Christian Spiritual Life

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This article originally appeared in the Taijiquan Journal 4/4 (Fall 2003) and can probably still be ordered as a back issue. This issue also contained articles by a Daoist author, A Buddhist teacher, and a student of the Jewish Talmud.

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Over the last century, cultural winds have carried the seed of taijiquan beyond the borders of its native China, and it has taken root in Western lands. Many of these new learners consider the art of taijiquan to be somehow related to spiritual life. However, neither the principles of taijiquan nor the concepts of philosophical Daoism are necessarily wedded to any particular religious doctrine or practice. Indeed, our taijiquan family includes people of every faith. But what is the nature of this connection of taijiquan and spirituality? How does taijiquan mesh with Western concepts of spirituality? In particular, can an Asian martial art created by a culture influenced by Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism be compatible with the Christian faith? As a follower of this faith it has been my experience that taijiquan is not only compatible but that it can also enhance spiritual growth within a Christian context.

A Personal Path

This writer did not come to taijiquan as a Christian; rather, from my childhood I had a deep interest in spiritual things and an attraction to all things Asian. As a youngster, I discovered a translation of the ancient Indian text of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras subtitled: How to Know God. With the goal of mystic union with the divine absolute, I was soon a fledgling yogi. In the late 1960s, I supplemented my yoga practice with Daoist and Buddhist forms of meditation. In 1973, I made a pilgrimage to India in search of spiritual instructions and would have gone on to Tibet and China, had my resources and the political situation of the time permitted.

In my journeying and studying I heard tantalizing reports of taijiquan: an art which I was told combined the philosophical base of Daoism, the energetic principles of yoga, and the yielding martial function of judo into a kind of moving meditation. Such descriptions appealed to me, suggesting an art which might embody an auspicious conjunction of my interests. When I finally found a teacher in the Yang style lineage of Professor Zheng Manqing (Cheng Man-ch'ing) and began my formal studies, taijiquan fit in nicely with my practice of other Asian spiritual disciplines.

This was partly due to Zheng's emphasis on the practice of taijiquan as a dao, a way of personal and spiritual cultivation. In practicing the principles and the martial techniques of this dao with flesh and blood "opponents," I sought to overcome what I regarded as my more troublesome adversaries: my own pride, selfishness, and spiritual ignorance. As Robert W. Smith, the first Western student of Professor Zheng, puts it, "True taijiquan destroys nothing but the ego." Gradually, I came to regard taijiquan as my chief spiritual discipline and became deeply absorbed in its practice.
Then, in 1979 something happened that radically changed my world. A friend asked me who I thought Jesus was, and the question stimulated an inquiry that culminated in a life-changing personal experience. I met Jesus, not merely as a historical figure or as a great religious teacher, but as a living person--the "out-ranging" of the divine nature. This unexpected encounter brought me to a turning point. I had seen myself as a "spiritual seeker" but now was faced with a choice: either to ignore my own experience or to admit that my search had found its object.

My decision to follow Jesus prompted me to reevaluate everything in my life. Over the next four years, I struggled to reconcile my taijiquan practice with the new direction and my desire to wholeheartedly follow this spiritual path. Some of my new Christian friends, fearing that I was being misguided by Eastern "mysticism," counseled me to renounce all my former spiritual practices, particularly my martial arts training.

Thus, I found myself faced with a deep dilemma. My world had been turned upside down. The thing that had formerly been at the center of my spiritual life was being called into question. In spite of my friends' concerns, I couldn't find anything objectionable in taijiquan. I reasoned that the art promotes health, has a calming and non-religious meditative component, conforms to biblical principles, and seeks peaceful and non-violent solutions to human conflict. It seemed that perhaps the only real problem was my own inordinate passion for the practice of taijiquan. I had to admit that it was taking up a lot of my time and I certainly didn't want to give it up!

In trying to resolve this dilemma, I consulted counselors and spoke with other Christians who had practiced martial arts. Mostly, I searched the scriptures and prayed, endeavoring to perceive a sense of spiritual direction. Taijiquan seemed to be a positive thing in my life. Yet, from a Christian perspective, even good things should not take precedence over the most important things. As Jesus said, "No man is worthy of me who cares more for father or mother than for me. By losing his life for my sake, he will gain it."¹ What I wanted to do was to continue my daily taijiquan training as I had for years. But what was the right thing to do?

**Investing in Loss**

In 1983 in a crisis of conscience, I came to the point of feeling that it was necessary for me to give up everything and anything that distracted me from wholeheartedly following Jesus. For me at that time, this meant ending my practice of taijiquan and other Eastern disciplines, getting rid of my library of esoteric texts, and severing my relationship, perhaps forever, with my first taijiquan teacher. This was a man who had shown me great kindness and generosity. Saying goodbye was one of the most difficult things I had ever had to do. However, upon acting on this decision, I felt a great sense of freedom as well as a sense of total commitment to my spiritual path.

I noticed with some sense of irony that, by yielding and giving up my precious taijiquan practice, I had experienced a deep application of the taijiquan principle from the Taijiquan Classics that Professor Zheng called "investing in loss." Laozi's *Daodejing* expressed the underlying principle this way: "He who would take must first purposely give."² I had surrendered my practice with no strings attached. As far as I knew, taijiquan was gone from my life forever, as my new spiritual path seemed to lead in an entirely different direction.

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But my story does not end here. After a year had passed, during which I was completely immersed in and devoted to Christian spiritual practice, an unexpected thing happened. I felt free to resume training in taijiquan; however, this time it was not to be the "center" of my attention and devotion but rather an adjunct to my spiritual practice. Then, while seeking life-direction in an intense time of fasting and prayer, I was surprised to feel that I received direction in terms of taijiquan. Taijiquan had become an allegory of my spiritual journey and a vehicle through which guidance and instruction could come, illuminating the principles of Christian living.

And so, in a strange and unexpected turn of events, the thing which I had been called upon to give up seemed to have been given back to me in a new and different form. In the process, the concepts of yielding and investing in loss had taken on a whole new meaning for me.

In this way I began an apprenticeship in both the dao of taijiquan and the art of living with my master in all things, Jesus. Of course I am deeply indebted to my taijiquan teachers here in the States and in Taiwan. They represent a variety of world views and faith traditions, some quite different from my own. They have guided me in my martial studies, and I have benefited tremendously from their wisdom and their kind and generous teaching. But as I receive their guidance, I also listen to the "inner voice" of spiritual instruction.

Endnotes

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