

The tao of tai chi

Roy Wilson



It has been my privilege for the past 15 years to be a student of Wolfe Lowenthal, attending his workshops in Europe and the US. Although it could be said that I had been his student long before then, due to the influence of his three books about his studies with Cheng Man-ching: *There Are No Secrets*, *In Search of the Miraculous*, and *Like a Long River*.

I have been practising Cheng Man-ching's tai chi for 40 years. Many years ago I had a dilemma. I loved tai chi but I wasn't sure that the study of tai chi had the same spiritual depth as, say, Zen meditation. Wolfe Lowenthal's writing, and his teaching have convinced me that it does. The study of Wolfe's tai chi, in my old age, provides the compass for my spiritual life. There is evidence in Cheng Man-ching's teaching that he conceptualised tai chi as an art that can lead us to our original nature, the uncarved block of Taoism, sometimes referred to as our 'true' self.

Here is a poetic account of a moment of spiritual revelation during tai chi practice. Introducing an on-line course in tai chi Kenneth Cohen tells a story: "One winter evening – way back in the 1970s – I decided to take a walk outside. Snow was falling and hanging heavy on the pine trees. I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to practise tai chi in this setting?"

"As I began practicing, something very odd happened. Normally, I experienced tai chi movements as arising from deep within, seemingly generated by the breath and by the slow shifting of my weight. But this time I disappeared; I was not doing tai chi. Rather, the falling snow, the trees, the air, the ground itself were unfolding through the various postures. I became a sphere of energy whose centre was everywhere. This was a kind of spiritual rebirth...mind and body were empty, subject and object disappeared in a unified field of awareness.

"I cannot claim the experience as my own, because the experience was without 'I'. But I do know that my tai chi has never been the same."

Taoism is one of the key influences on the development of tai chi chuan. And the notion of 'spirituality' is not absent from Taoist thought. The core Taoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*, holds that the world is spiritual:

*Trying to control the world?
I see you won't succeed.*

*The world is a spiritual vessel
And cannot be controlled.*

*Those who control, fail.
Those who grasp, lose**

Before considering Wolfe's views on the spirituality of tai chi, let's fill in a bit of background.

Wolfe Lowenthal was a direct student of Professor Cheng in New York in the 1960s, becoming for several years, in Wolfe's words, a 'tai chi bum', taking a part time job and spending many hours every day at the professor's school, first on Canal Street, and later in the Bowery. Those were heady days of social and cultural change in America, with the growth of the anti-Vietnam war movement, (in which Wolfe played a part) and the advent of psychedelia, recreational drug use, and the counter-culture. Into this volatile social milieu came, in 1964, a traditional Chinese gentleman deeply immersed in the classical Chinese thought of Confucius, Lao Tzu and the I Ching, who found expression of these ideas in the art of tai chi, as well as in traditional Chinese medicine, painting, poetry and calligraphy.

It was his encounter with Cheng Man-ching that liberated Wolfe from the rather alienated and constricted notion of masculinity that had characterised the 1950s in America, and showed him another way to be. Wolfe has written that Cheng Man-ching and tai chi led him back to the better part of himself.

* (Ch 29, Lao-Tzu (trans. Addiss, S. and Lombardo, S.) (2007) *Tao Te Ching*, Shambala, Boulder).



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Professor Cheng viewed tai chi as a study of the Tao. He had taken the form and pushing hands he learned from Yang Cheng-fu, and re-fashioned them to fully embody the principles of classical Chinese thought. He shortened and simplified the Yang long form, to reflect the principles of simplicity and naturalness that he found in Lao Tzu. There is a revealing passage in an essay on calligraphy where Professor Cheng writes about taking the wrong course in his calligraphy. It had come to exhibit a certain seductive ease and decorativeness. With this realisation the professor went back to the beginning to return his calligraphy to a style with more integrity, by practising for years brushing a simple vertical line and then a horizontal line. Professor Cheng wrote: "I have searched for 'stability' for over forty years now and still have trouble writing a balanced horizontal line and a straight vertical line" (Hennessy, M., 1995, p.12).

Professor Cheng advised: "Practise what you know is true regardless of the difficulties – just like Chu Ting who practiced a balanced line for three years. There is certainly nothing eye-catching about a balanced line, and those calligraphic acrobats who disdain the balanced stroke are mistaken. Balance enables the transformation towards transcendence and true sublimity. A straight vertical line must likewise be acquired" (ibid.).

In writing about calligraphy Professor Cheng seems also to have had in mind his approach to tai chi chuan, given his tai chi form's naturalness and simplicity, its lack of any rococo flourishes, and its emphasis on balance and verticality. Douglas Wile (2007) notes:

"The goal of self-cultivation for both Confucians and Daoists is reversion to an original state of sincerity and simplicity...Zheng called his new abbreviated tai chi chuan form 'simplified tai chi chuan' (jianyi taijiqian). The significance of simplicity here goes beyond just shortening the form, but has to do with structural changes in the postures that facilitate sinking and relaxation. Relaxation is the precondition for true simplicity."

Wolfe follows his teacher, Professor Cheng, in conceptualising tai chi as offering the opportunity to return to our basic nature, to align with the movement of the universe. And key principles that aid this development are relaxation and naturalness:



“Naturalness is key...Lao Tzu speaks of being aligned with the Tao as a return to our basic nature, the true self which is unencumbered by the burdens of tension and hardness, of fear and aggression” (Lowenthal,W., February 2018).

It is a tenet of Eastern and Christian mysticism that our true self is obscured by the everyday self with which we meet the world. We have identified with too narrow and isolated a sense of who we are. Our true identity is far more expansive than we generally conceive, one with the divine principle, the Tao. It is my belief that tai chi can represent a path for gradually realising our true self, and that Cheng Man-ching conceptualised tai chi in this way. Wolfe, too, teaches tai chi as offering a path to wholeness, and oneness. Uncovering our true nature, our oneness with the universe, releases us from the grip of the fearful ego. And this, I think, is a spiritual project.

Robert Smith reports Cheng Man-ching expressing a view about the importance of ‘naturalness’ and the ‘intrinsic you’ in tai chi:

“Professor Zheng would go on to say that structure and flow together – the technique – make up only 30% of tai chi. He would then ask, ‘What is the missing 70%?’ It is the same as in many arts, in calligraphy – the queen of Chinese fine arts – for instance. 70% of tai chi is naturalness, the intrinsic ‘you,’ which can only come from inside you” (1995, p.56).

Professor Cheng reports that although he had studied tai chi chuan for fifty years, it was only ‘the year before last’ that he finally grasped the meaning of the word ‘relax’ (song) (Wile, 2007, p.95). Professor Cheng explains the meaning:

“If we go into a Buddhist temple, the main hall will have

a statue of Maitreya, with a big belly, laughing, and carrying a cloth sack. The inscription over the statue says, ‘Sitting there is baggage and walking there is baggage. What a joy to put down our baggage.’ What does this mean? It means that not only are we ourselves baggage, but everything – sons, daughters, wives, accomplishments, fame, fortune, official positions – are all baggage. But the most difficult baggage to put down is oneself” (Wile, 2007, p.96).

Wolfe’s teaching, following the professor, is all about putting down the burden of the ego, with its incessant fearful excursions into the past and the future. Through Wolfe’s tai chi we can relax, spine suspended, balanced, taking up our proper position between heaven and earth, in ‘the centre of time’ – the present moment.

In his writing and his teaching Wolfe elucidates those elements of the tai chi passed down to us from Professor Cheng, that lead us back to our natural, true self.

One of the key Taoist ideas inherent in Wolfe’s teaching is the notion of ‘wu wei, which could be translated as ‘not doing’ or ‘not forcing.’ Wu wei undermines the assumption that we are ‘doing’ the tai chi, ‘doing’ ourselves...It suggests that the roots of our actions spring from another level of our being, a deeper level than our fearful egos. And in fact tai chi practice deepens as we let go of trying too hard and allow our bodies to relax, align with gravity, to balance and flow. We need to get out of our own way.

By emphasising key principles, Wolfe’s teaching supports our experience of our deeper selves, the self aligned with the flow of the universe.

Wolfe’s emphasis lies in softness and non-competition.



Wolfe Lowenthal (L) pushing Roy Wilson

In form, pushing hands and fencing we seek increasing levels of relaxation and letting go. Letting go of what the professor called “The desperate will to succeed”. In the form, letting go allows our bodies to come into balance and align with gravity, to song (relax) and chen (sink). The lack of tension and competition encourages our bodies to settle and open to the flow of chi, and our minds to relax and become spacious.”

In pushing hands, Wolfe frequently reminds us of two key pieces of advice from professor Cheng: “Don’t use more than four ounces of force, or allow more than four ounces to build up on you,” and “Don’t resist, don’t insist.” In push hands practice we can easily be swept up in the fear of losing and the wish for the endorphin rush of winning. Both are characteristics of the fragile ego. Wolfe advises that, instead, we follow the advice of professor Cheng – to relax and ‘invest in loss.’ “Lose, lose, lose until you have nothing left to lose, then you will have gained everything” the professor urged. We can see here how the two person practice of pushing hands, becomes a spiritual exercise. Wolfe often reminds us that our study is of ‘the greatness of the chi’. And indeed, informed by his love of classical Chinese thought, and traditional Chinese medicine, the professor’s teaching on tai chi gives primacy to the development of the chi. The professor points to the importance of ‘the heart/mind and chi mutually guarding one another in the tantien’. The chi, led by the mind, concentrates in the tantian. Force blocks the chi, and leads to the chi rising in the body rather than sinking. Wolfe notes that the word Professor Cheng used can be translated as ‘idea’. All we need is the ‘idea.’ In professor Cheng’s own words:

“Refine your chi by first learning to sink it to the tantien, which is 1.3 inches beneath the navel – closer to the abdomen than the spine. Breathe in attentively and sink this chi slowly; abrupt breathing causes chi to rise. The four secret words for proper breathing are: fine, long, calm, and slow. Once you can do this remember to do it always and everywhere.” (Cheng Man-ching, 1999, p.21).

Energy gates

Wolfe and professor Cheng both emphasise three specific body points to develop chi, what Wolfe refers to as the three jewels. First the ni-wan point at the top of the head.

Second are the yongquan points in the middle of both feet which enable you to tap into the earth’s chi.

“Whether you are walking, sitting, or just standing, be

aware that your feet adhere to the ground. Continue until you feel your feet almost sink into the ground and connect to the earth’s gravitational pull. This too will develop a root” (ibid).

Third is the tantian point below the naval.

“Remember that Lao Tzu believed that softness keeps us young. It makes the waist lively and flexible, which enriches our urogenital chi, which bestows longevity. So whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or sleeping, keep your mind and chi mutually on guard in the tantien’ (ibid., pp.15-16).

To give you an idea of the elegance and spirituality of Wolfe’s writing, I’ll finish by outlining a recent piece he wrote in his on-line journal *Tai Chi Thoughts* (December 2021). It deals with our relation to time, our desire for ‘things’, and our resistance to the way things are (fighting).

Time: Wolfe warns that past and future are projections of our ego/mind:

“If our mind is slumped in its seat in the theatre of time, caught up in the past or future, we are going to miss the present. So in martial application, we will get pushed or we will get cut. But even more ominously, we will be immersed in fear.”

Desire for things: “Here we come to what Professor Cheng considers his central insight into the teaching of Confucius: ‘In order to illuminate the luminous virtue, one must eliminate the desire for things’.”

Wolfe notes that Professor Cheng directed us to invest in loss, and to relax:

“It’s not supposed to be a struggle. What happens to the breath when we struggle to maintain balance, when we struggle to gain victory or prevent defeat? The breath tightens up, so we become uptight. Not good! Bad for health, bad for martial ability.”

Fighting: Perhaps there is a time for fighting, but then Professor Cheng suggests a different way of looking at it: “Less oppositional, more with a sense of the ultimate spiritual connection that unites everything.

We fight as if we were joined with our opponent in the universal fabric of life”

Cheng Man-ching points the way. The four character secret: “Don’t resist, don’t insist.” The four ounce secret: “Don’t use more than four ounces nor allow more than four ounces to build up on you.”

In conclusion

After many years of daily practice of Professor Cheng’s tai chi, and under the guidance of Wolfe Lowenthal, I have come to experience the blessed relief of letting go, not ‘trying’ too hard to ‘do’ tai chi; the relief of letting the form reveal its essence to me. ‘Song’, relaxation and correct alignment, allows the chi, breath and mind, under the influence of gravity, to sink through the body to rest in the dantian. It is a dropping into the depth of the self to rest where the ripples on the surface have ceased – stillness in movement. 🌿

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