

Taijiquan, My Spiritual Practice

This is the third in a series of four articles covering the four main reasons that draw people to this practice. And although I'm talking about Taiji, it equally applies to the Qigong forms and how we approach them in this school.

The previous newsletter article 'Taiji as a Meditation' (which can be found in the Resources/Articles section of the website), will set the background for this article as this is really a continuation of that process.

What makes a practice Spiritual?

I'm sure the answer to this question is different for everyone so I can only share my own personal experience and perspective.

Oneness

When I recognise there is more to 'Alec' than the thinking mind and physical body, 'I' am already expanding into a greater sense of being where there is less space and distance between myself (my being, spiritual essence) and others. From this place even the physical level has more depth, for example, when I'm in the same room as someone else we are both breathing the same air, this is an exchange which, on one level, is quite intimate; the energy waves of our speech vibrate deep into each other, not just into our ears, but on a subtle level, into our cells; the words themselves can affect us emotionally and change our mood. There is also the visual stimulus of what I am seeing and how I think about what I'm seeing in others.

Compassion

My Spiritual Self understands that the human condition involves ego, and therefore separateness. When I am in touch with this Self there is a great deal of compassion available to my small ego-self. This puts into perspective the everyday events that the ego-self makes into huge dramas when its feelings are hurt or its position as 'the centre of the universe' is threatened.

Connection with Dao (Tao)

When I identify with my separate ego-self (just the small speck of me as an individual on the small speck of 'dust' called planet Earth in a small galaxy in a vast universe), my thinking and decision making can easily make life difficult because it is limited by my isolation. When I am more connected to Dao, life flows smoothly, I am not in my own way, simply in the flow of the Great Way. Taiji is my chosen method for accessing my Spiritual Self and connection with Dao.

Moving prayer

One aspect of my Taiji practice is to use it as a moving prayer, an offering of myself, a surrendering into the flow of the universe as it expresses itself in 'Alec-ness'. I am not trying to achieve anything, not trying to be 'spiritual' or special, quite the opposite - to quote the Dao De Jing, "Do nothing and nothing is left undone". This doesn't mean becoming lazy or inactive, just less controlling, more naturally easeful.

The Paradox of Taiji

By becoming 'nothing', I become everything, without pride, without ego, without importance, just another aspect of nature. I have experienced this very fleetingly a couple of times in my Taiji practice (as an example see article 'Alec the Dao and the Bamboo'). It only happens when 'I' am not in the way; then there is only the Way and 'I' am one aspect of the whole, no more or less important than any other person, blade of grass or bacteria.

Discipline

"It was character that got us out of bed, commitment that moved us into action, and discipline that enabled us to follow through." Zig Ziglar

Some definitions of Discipline

- To train oneself to do something in a habitual way
- An activity that provides mental or physical training
- To accustom to regular and systematic action

Spiritual practice requires a commitment to practise my chosen method regularly whether I feel like it or not. Ironically, those times I can't wait to practise are probably the times I least need to; when I feel good, whole, balanced, I am already more connected to Dao. When I am caught in negative emotions and the drama's of the ego, I am separated from my true self and others. This is when the discipline of regular practise pays off.

For me, Taijiquan is the perfect vehicle to give myself time each day to touch and rest in the place where body, mind and spirit can connect in wholeness; it has physical movement (Body) that needs awareness/intention/concentration (Mind), and a surrendering into something greater, something that puts 'Alec' into perspective (Spirit).

Awareness / Intention

To develop the practise of Taiji in this way requires the ability to observe oneself (Awareness) and be honest about what is observed, firstly, being aware of the physical body and how it moves, where it is disconnected and how to reconnect it into wholeness using intention. Secondly, being conscious of how thought patterns influence the body and using intention to encourage the positive and discard the unhelpful.

The Path

A path is made by continually walking the same route over and again. Each time I play a Form the path becomes clearer and deeper. However, if I wander even slightly off by not paying attention there is no longer a path under my 'feet' and it can feel as though I am just wandering aimlessly without purpose.

Now I know enough to begin

As each year passes and New Year approaches I look back along the path that has led me to this point. Each year I hear myself again saying, 'Well, *now* I feel I know enough to begin.' When I first started Taiji and Qigong this wasn't really surprising, but now after more than 30 years, those same words are still true, the more I learn the more I see before me still to understand. As with all things 'Taiji', this has two apparently opposing aspects: it can be seen as inspiring and exciting, or depressing and pointless as I'll never reach the end. This is just another chance to observe how I respond, which part of 'me' sees it as an opportunity, which part sees an insurmountable obstacle and recognising that there is always a choice.

When is a good time to start?

If you are drawn to use Taiji or Qigong in this way, the best time to start will always seem to be when you were younger.

Now is the second best time to start no matter how much or little of these practices you've done.

Make a path... start walking... one step at a time.