

Taijiquan as Martial Art

by Alec Jones

*This is the fourth in a series of articles covering the four main reasons that draw people to this practice.

Ask a member of the public what comes to mind when you say 'Martial Arts' and you'll hear comments like 'Karate', 'Kung Fu', 'Bruce Lee', 'Jackie Chan', 'Kung Fu Panda', etc. The common concept is about fighting, the focus being on *Martial* (War-like/destruction), very few would relate to the *Art* (creativity). True Martial Arts have very little to do with fighting and because Taijiquan is rarely seen publicly at speed or anything other than a solo activity it is not generally thought of as a martial art, even when groups of people are seen practising together there is rarely physical contact. Most people are surprised that there is a martial aspect to Taijiquan at all.

Although my initial reasons for going to a Taiji class were grounded in a shy and fearful personality, it didn't take long to realise the futility of learning Taiji from this basis and that hiding my fear behind a protective wall of technique would have no meaningful affect on my life. It would certainly create problems for the future by re-enforcing defensive qualities and deluded ego structures.

Now, over 30 years later, I do consider myself to be a Martial Artist, but with the emphasis on *Artist*, rather than *Martial*, i.e. *Martial Artist*. The difference being I am more interested in the Art of it, the deeper awareness and understanding it develops:

- awareness of how my body moves
- how each part of the body is integral to the whole
- how simply breathing from my centre changes the alignment of balance

- how negative thoughts distort the body
- how worry and fear cause tensions that drain away energy

The list is endless... the more I listen/feel the more is revealed, the more deeply I understand who 'Alec' is and what makes him/me 'tick'.

For me, if I focused on the 'Martial' part, it would just cover up all the things that stop me being happy, relaxed and living my life in a conscious, aware manner.

Chapter 76 of The Dao De Jing (道德經) says:

*"Men are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.*

*Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life.*

*The hard and stiff will be broken.
The soft and supple will prevail."*
Translation by Stephen Mitchell

Every movement in any Taijiquan Form contains fighting applications. Some of these are very practical and can be applied to defend oneself (which in itself raises questions about whether there is really anything to defend), others are completely impractical as well as potentially technically challenging. It is not necessarily the movements themselves, rather, the essence and principles they contain that would be applied in self-defence, and whether they can be directly applied or not, each movement is about connecting all parts of the body together as a whole, and uniting

this with the mind or intention. This requires attention to detail, a great deal of mental and physical relaxation, the ability to look deeper and deeper into oneself, patience, perseverance, and compassion.

Taijiquan has a martial foundation so to be able to teach it to any depth, a teacher needs to know the function of each move from a martial perspective, even if only teaching a class for health and relaxation, otherwise it is an empty 'dance' with no reason for the shape of the movements. Even if students are interested in the martial aspect, in my experience, teaching martial applications is very unhelpful to beginners. I do sometimes show a possible application if it helps to clarify the shape of a posture, or give deeper meaning to a principle, but until there is some embodiment of the underlying principles of body alignment, relaxation, moving from the Centre, then the reactive mind will just try to defend against any oncoming force using strength and tension to stay 'safe' even if practised slowly.

The Short Form gives you time to feel for and develop some of the inner connections and alignments before attempting any kind of martial application which is why, in this school, they are only explored once you move beyond this beginners stage and on into Long Form, where understanding martial function gives definition, purpose and structure to each movement.

To succeed in learning how to move in a flowing manner in relation to another person through *Push Hands*, *Da Lu*, or applications, is a means of training oneself to flow with all situations in life and is much more than a physical training. To be able to transfer the skills beyond a formal class situation, it has to include mind and spirit as well.

There are different qualities explored within the training process and, as in life, there are times when it is appropriate to stand your ground and allow any pressure to

be absorbed and 'bounced' back to where it came from, at other times you move *with* an oncoming force to neutralise its power giving it nowhere solid to land. Even in these circumstances the practice is to remain centred in oneself, to be joined, fully connected to the other person or situation. In order for training to be called Taiji it has to contain both yin and yang aspects.

Standing your ground appears to be more yang than yin, but both have to be present. If yin is 'yes' and yang 'no', *Rooting* is said to be 'No' on the outside (you will not be moved) and 'Yes' on the inside (to ground and absorb the oncoming force). *Sticking* is very light, totally alive in the moment, completely connected to the situation and able to 'dance' with the rhythm of what is happening. When *Rooting* and *Sticking* are combined they create *Yielding*, which is said to be 'Yes' on the outside (allowing no pressure to applied to you) and 'No' on the inside (staying to your centre). You can only *Yield* around something that has central stability (Root), and this can be a physically and/or mentally stable structure.

There is a need for Discipline (see previous article *Taiji as a Spiritual Practice* for a definition of Discipline) and of course, Taiji is about balance in all things, so alongside Discipline there needs to be Playfulness (which is why we say 'play' Taiji rather than 'do' Taiji); a playful approach to practice, a playful approach to life. The ego thrives on drama so the more playful you are the fewer opportunities your ego has to 'feed'.

To be a Martial *Artist* means living a creative life, ready for anything, completely relaxed, completely alive, residing in your centre where choice is always available.

* Taijiquan as a Meditation in Movement,
Taijiquan as a Health Exercise,
Taijiquan as a Spiritual Practice
each of these articles can be found here:
www.dragonspringtaiji.co.uk/resources