

## **Two Mountains: The Spiritual Legacy of T'ai Chi Ch'uan**

The origin of internal martial arts claims two mountains as sacred sites for the development and proliferation of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: the Shaolin Temple, the famous Buddhist Temple, and Wudang Temple, the equally famous Taoist Temple. Contemporary narratives frequently mention T'ai Chi's link to these two spiritual centers, but despite those historical associations with Buddhism and Taoism, the spiritual side of T'ai Chi often remains in the shadow of martial training and the overall health benefits. Proper T'ai Chi training, though, includes training the mind and generating Chi—all of which originate in Buddhist and Taoist sources—and are central to spiritual cultivation as well. The two figures that link T'ai Chi with the Shaolin and Wudang Temples—Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng, respectively—may be more legend than historical truth, but these two figures offer insights into the spiritual legacy of T'ai Chi Ch'uan as well as how the potential for spiritual growth can be actualized in present day practice.

### **Bodhidharma and Chang Sanfeng**



Bodhidharma was an Indian Prince and the 26<sup>th</sup> lineage holder of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, who arrived at the Shaolin Temple circa 530 CE. When he first came to Shaolin, he encountered Buddhist monks who were sickly and weak, so much so that they were incapable of maintaining the high level of energy required for sustained meditative practice. Bodhidharma retreated to a cave for seven or nine years (depending on the version of the story). When he emerged, he had developed a number of Chi Kung

(qigong) exercises to be incorporated into daily practice, namely “Yi Jin Jing” (Muscle Change Classic) and “Xi Sui Jing” (Marrow Washing Classic). Through the figure of Bodhidharma, who is recognized as the first patriarch of Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism laid claim to the inter-relation of meditation and the internal martial arts. While there is much debate about the authenticity of Bodhidharma being the author of these two Chi Kung classics, the stories explicitly link Ch’an with the cultivation of Chi and the harnessing of that Chi for enlightenment. For Bodhidharma, internal martial arts and Ch’an practice constitute the yin and yang of spiritual development. Both were means to the same end of full awakening with both practices fueling and bolstering the other.



Zhang Sanfeng, a Taoist Priest and wandering hermit who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is credited with the creation of T'ai Chi Chuan through the blending of Ch'an Internal Arts practices and Taoist Neigong principles. The legendary story which has been retold since the 17<sup>th</sup> century tells of Sanfeng's discovery of the principles of T'ai Chi through the observation of a battle between a snake and a crane. During the fight, he studied the principles of the Tao at work: yielding, evading, circling, and counter-attacking in a dance of Yin and Yang. From his observations, he created T'ai Chi, which weaves together the principles of the Tao with martial prowess. The explicit goal is to cultivate and transform Chi into the spiritual elixir of enlightenment and, by extension, immortality, which is the gist of Sanfeng's saying that "The Chi should be roused and the spirit gathered within." Through the figure of Zhang Sanfeng, T'ai Chi was regarded as a valuable means to generate and transform chi in the vital energy

(Jing) of enlightenment. T'ai Chi not only enacts the principles of the Tao, for Sanfeng, it is the Tao.

Both stories may be more fiction than fact, especially since both Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng were credited with the development of their internal arts centuries after their deaths. Despite such historical discrepancies, various branches of the Internal Arts claim legitimacy through a direct lineage with Bodhidharma and Sanfeng and their respective Buddhist and Taoist traditions. Given the continued assertion that T'ai Chi has evolved out of Taoism and Buddhism, it is worth exploring in what ways T'ai Chi overlaps with and perpetuates the principles of Taoism and Buddhism.

### **Mind Training**

For Bodhidharma and Sanfeng, training centers upon the mind. Bodhidharma remarks in the "Breakthrough Sermon," that "The most essential method, which includes all other methods, is beholding the mind." Special emphasis is placed upon meditation as a means of first becoming aware of the processes of the mind (known as the Five Aggregates: Form, sensations, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) and the recognition of Buddha Mind, the unencumbered mind of total awareness. Essentially all activities (walking, working, meditating, chanting) are utilized in the practice of mind awareness, which is the essence of what is called the Eight Fold Path . These eight guidelines are the means to cultivate concentration (known as "Samadhi"), wisdom ("Prajna"), and moral conduct ("Shila"), which are the means to realize Buddha nature and sustain awareness. The eight are broken down as follows:

1. <a href="#">Right View</a>	Wisdom
2. <a href="#">Right Intention</a>	
3. <a href="#">Right Speech</a>	Ethical Conduct
4. <a href="#">Right Action</a>	
5. <a href="#">Right Livelihood</a>	
6. <a href="#">Right Effort</a>	Concentration
7. <a href="#">Right Mindfulness</a>	
8. <a href="#">Right Concentration</a>	

Morality, wisdom, and concentration are not independent entities, but are woven in such a way that each informs the other. Concentration, for example, yields insights (wisdom), which in turn affects behavior. More, acting in an ethical manner is an extension of wisdom (understanding) and refines the process of Right Effort and Mindfulness. The entire process returns again and again to the mind and how it manifests as intention, action, effort, and the like.

Sanfeng also emphasizes the mind as central in his remark that “things are first in the mind and then in the body.” With the mind at the core, the individual must penetrate to the mind to discover “Yi” or intention in order to then manifest and direct the Chi. Becoming aware of the Mind leads to *Wu Wei*, the often misunderstood doctrine of non-action. “*Wu Wei* does not mean to avoid all action,” according to Holmes Welch, “but rather all hostile, aggressive action.” Wu Wei is marked by the sustained awareness of intention—the Yi—and this leads to the discovery of *Te*, the virtues of compassion, moderation, and humility, and the return to *P’u*, one’s natural self. For Both Buddhist and Taoist practice, the core is the mind out of which everything else flows.

## Body Training

Most discussions of T'ai Chi are dedicated to body mechanics and the sequence of postures rather than mind and spiritual cultivation. This is hardly surprising since the body mechanics—known as Shen Fa—constitute the foundation of the practice and mastery is essential for subsequent development. But it should be emphasized that the physical lessons can be the training ground for the mind too. For example, the comprehension of the principles of yin and yang and yielding in Push Hands training ultimately translates into an understanding of the interplay of emotions and how to respond appropriately. Concentrated T'ai Chi practice trains the body and the mind not to respond hastily; and like the principles of Push Hands, one reacts in a manner that is both necessary but remains faithful to the code of socially responsible and ethical behavior (*wu wei*). Subsequently, the physical principles of the Tao are transformed into behavioral norms. In this respect, T'ai Chi practice is a tool to cultivate wisdom, concentration, and morality (or *wu wei*, *p'u*, and *te*)—that begins in the body and then penetrates to the mind.

Tung Yieng-chieh speaks of this process of discovering the full range of T'ai Chi in his teachings that

In T'ai-chi Ch'uan, the ability to cultivate oneself physically and spiritually, but not to defend oneself, is civil accomplishment. The ability to defend oneself, but not to cultivate oneself, is martial accomplishment. . . . The ability to teach people the art of self-cultivation and self-defense, both cultivation and application, is complete civil and martial T'ai-chi.

To study the body mechanics of T'ai Chi emphasizes effort, awareness, and concentration, and with proper guidance and dedication, that study can be directed inward to cultivate right effort, awareness, and concentration; in this way, the individual cultivates the mind, body, and spirit—what Tung Yieng-chieh calls “complete civil and martial T'ai Chi.” In this respect, mind training is already embedded in the essence of T'ai Chi, but for it to fully flower, that training needs to be made more conscious.

### **Body in Mind/Mind in Body**

The T'ai Chi Classics frequently assert that training the mind should accompany training the body. For Ch'an and Zen, that training happens through sustained, concentrated meditation. But the prospect of initiating a seated meditation routine may seem outside of the ken of T'ai Chi beginners. Nevertheless, the Ch'an-based meditation technique called “Training the Mind in the Move,” which harkens back to Bodhidharma and Sanfeng, can be translated quite easily into T'ai Chi practice and, more importantly, is an expedient means to return T'ai Chi to its roots as “moving meditation.” The exercises are quite simple, but the results are deep. The training is done in three stages and can accommodate all levels of T'ai Chi practitioners.

### **Mind with Move**

In the beginning stage, a T'ai Chi player concentrates upon the movements so that the mind remains in a heightened state of physical awareness. At first, the focus may be of how the body moves and weight shifts in the execution of a stance. Eventually, the attention deepens to include the yin and yang of the body as it performs a move, and finally the coursing of the Chi through the form. This technique, which establishes the foundation and strengthens the bridge between mind and body, echoes the Ch'an

practice of walking meditation and Taoist “jogging” in that it is both awareness of body as well as strengthening mental concentration.

### **Mind Leads the Move**

Once the player is comfortable with both the proper postures as well as the sequence of the form, attention is directed to the mind leading a move. For example, in performing Single Whip, the mind clears the space and leads the left hand as it arcs to the apex of the whip. The process might be visualized as if the body had strings like a puppet, and the mind “leads” the component body parts like a puppeteer through the culmination of a move. This technique enhances the awareness of the physical body, and reveals the extent to which the mind is the “Governor,” or as the T'ai Chi classics read, “The Mind is the commander, the Chi is the flag, and the waist a banner.” As Sanfeng writes, the “Yi leads the Chi.”

### **Mind Before the Move**

With the training of awareness and concentration of the mind, as a move is performed, the mind is no longer simply an agent, but is pure awareness of the physical movement, the yin and yang, the flow of chi, and the Yi. The mind is an awareness that does not attach to anything but flows in a stream of heightened concentration. This technique requires the mastery of the physical movements and sequence in such a way that the awareness is not “of” something; the awareness is being, and marks the return to the source. This state is akin to the deepest state of Samadhi—the wisdom of seated meditation. This level is extremely difficult to attain and sustain, and comes closest to complete awakening and enlightenment since it is an exercise in cultivating what Buddhists refer to as one's inherent Buddha Mind.

From an instructional and practice standpoint, these three meditation techniques are very versatile, easy to utilize, and can be utilized by all levels of T'ai Chi players. Even though different individuals may be practicing the same move, the novice can attend to the physicality of the move and can use the stretching and the concentration as a warm up for meditation; a more advance individual may use the same move as a way of deepening mind training and enhancing and boosting Samadhi; and for the most advanced student, the movement is meditation and the cultivation of the field of awakening.

By returning to the roots of T'ai Chi as a mind *and* body practice, the individual player perpetuates the spiritual legacy of Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng. And T'ai Chi becomes the pathway—the Tao—for the cultivation of the countless virtue of ones original nature.

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