

Body and Mind Curt Eriksen

Anyone born outside of the range of direct influence of Oriental concepts such as the unity of body and mind will have a hard time assimilating this basic premise. And that is largely because what is given and embodied in the banality and rituals of an Eastern daily life—by the mere fact of having been born of an Eastern womb and delivered into an Eastern culture where the distinction between body and mind is at best blurred—will always remain purely conceptual to an outsider, until and unless that outsider finds some means by which the concept of the whole being as one can be made tangible.

We in the West are determined in our thinking and understanding of ourselves and the world that surrounds us first by Plato and his idealized Forms and later by Descartes and his famous declaration, *Cogito ergo sum*. In between we have been bludgeoned with the belief that the mind or spirit can be separated from matter by the authority and teachings of a Church founded upon the premise of a physical death and miraculous Resurrection.

My intention is not to criticize any of that which has formed the first basis of my own understanding of my world and existence, but simply to point out how challenging it is to gain a new and entirely other understanding, one that accords better not only with the trend in contemporary physics and biochemistry, but with the age-old wisdom preserved in the Chinese martial arts, particularly Taiji Quan.

Since we must know ourselves before we can know anything else, it is important to recognize where we have come from. Hence the reference to the Western philosophical tradition and the influence of the Church. An appropriate analogy would

be that of leaving the country where one was born and spending some time in another country where different cultural attitudes, and perhaps even a different language, prevail. This provides the same sort of perspective that is gained from the moon: you can look back upon where you have come from and see that the place of your origin is surrounded by a far greater space than you would have ever imagined in which many equally unimagined possibilities exist. Above all, once you make this ‘trip’ you can never regard where you have come from in the same way, as if there were no more to the world than your own backyard in your own hometown. This is what I mean by knowing oneself and recognizing where one has come from as the first step in a journey that might lead somewhere else.

For most practitioners of the Oriental martial arts, that somewhere else is, at least in part, the Orient and the Eastern worldview and understanding where one of the fundamental principles is that of the unity of body and mind. In terms of Taiji Quan, a martial art that derives its modern name from one of the most ancient and influential texts in the long history of the most continuous cultural experience in the world, the *Yijing*, this insistence upon—and embodiment of—the principle of unity is imperative. If your body and mind are not united in the practice of Taiji Quan, then you are simply not practicing Taiji Quan.

But what do we mean by the “unity of body and mind,” a phrase—mere words—that have been bandied about in any number of New Age publications?

As a teacher and practitioner of Taiji Quan what I mean by the “unity of body and mind” is that the two phenomena that can only be separated with the aid of Cartesian dualism work together always as one whole. The Classics say that the mind directs the qi and the qi directs the body, but all of this happens simultaneously, even instantly. There is no cause and effect here, but rather the physical movement is *imbued*

with the mental intention, and in this way the two—assuming we can regard them as distinct—are inseparable.

There are at least two ways in which I can illustrate what I am trying to say. The first is slightly removed from the actual practise of Taiji Quan, but is no less important. And it is the Western science of biochemistry that provides us with the undeniable evidence that our emotions—what we think and feel, our mental activity—are related to chemical, i.e. *physical*, processes. The discovery and study of neuropeptides and their relationship to human behavior and emotions, suggests that everything we think or feel is simultaneous with the release of certain chemicals. That is why, as Kenneth Cohen points out in *The Way of Qigong*, the same neurons are fired when one imagines performing Taiji as when one actually does it. In effect, our emotions—anything we think or feel—are embedded within, and one with, the very tissue of our being. This is an understanding that is not new to Chinese medicine, wherein organs are regarded in terms of their functions within the fundamental paradigm of yin-yang analysis and symptoms are traced back to some underlying and not always evident imbalance in the system. In Western terms, most ailments are psychosomatic and have an underlying emotional element or original cause which tends to be ignored, save in the homeopathic approach to wholeness and well being.

Peng is a type of energy cultivated and developed with the practise of Taiji Quan, and particularly in the practise of zhan zhuang, or standing meditation. Peng is often translated as ‘ward off’ because it is an energy that operates like a skin to keep external elements or threats from penetrating our protective layer or coating and attacking within. Peng is physically analogous to an inflated balloon that absorbs and/or deflects any attempt to push in towards the center of the balloon, and rebounds as soon as the assault is repelled. But peng is not, of course, merely physical. In the West

we say someone caught a cold—in a room or nursery school where others exposed to the same virus did not catch that cold at that time—because his or her defenses were low. In Chinese terms the peng was weak, and hence the external threat got inside and disrupted the flow of qi somewhere creating a blockage or imbalance of yin and yang that eventually made that individual sick with the symptoms of a common cold. The same can be said of carcinogens, to which we are all exposed, throughout our lives, whereas only some of us succumb to cancer. A healthy and vigorous peng goes a long way to keeping us safe.

Another way to illustrate the inseparability of body and mind is to consider the learning process involved in the practise of Taiji Quan. Usually, when a person decides to try Taiji they are first and foremost preoccupied with the physical aspect of the training, with learning the postures and coordinating the simplest of movements, but only because this is the most *obvious* aspect of the training, the one aspect most susceptible to being detected and comprehended by our five senses. Some instructors might guide a student through the various levels of training by trying to separate this physical aspect from the other aspects of the practise and thereby presumably making it easier on the student, buy my own approach is more holistic. By this I mean simply that I try to make my students aware that there is more, far more, to the practise of Taiji Quan than the choreography, that in fact the fluidity and grace in the choreography depends upon mastering certain underlying principles. This means my students advance slowly in terms of the choreography, and many of them give up the practise entirely. Of necessity our practise involves, from the very first day, zhan zhuang, by which the student is introduced to the foundation of the mental aspect of Taiji Quan. Some students have told me that the meditation was the most difficult part of the practise, at least at first. But even in zhan zhuang the new student is above all concerned with the

physical aspect of the stance, as their muscles tense and cause the legs to tremble violently after only a few minutes until they have stood in the posture enough times to begin to learn to sink and relax into it. Never mind the monkey in their minds.

But the intention and attitude of the student are always there from the very beginning. And by instructing the student in the principles of rooting, structure, connection and the mental ‘letting go’ that permits the joints to swing freely, the physical practise is imbued from the first day with concentration. One of the typical mistakes new students make is that of thinking about what they are doing while trying to do it. After many years of teaching I can see this. It’s there in the look (and the orientation or direction) of their eyes, in the way their head tends to fall forward, undermining their structure and snapping the imaginary silk string by which the head is supposed to be suspended through the bai hui. It’s as if they were searching for pennies on the floor. They gaze at their hands and feet in order to see whether or not they are doing it right, but that very awareness of doing it prevents them from actually doing it. All of this shows in the collocation, or the placing of the torso on the axis of the hips, the sensation of sitting and settling the whole body, with the weight sinking into the ground through the yong quan in the soles of the feet.

It is said that when we move in Taiji the force or energy, the power, begins in the feet and travels up the legs to the hips, where the energy is directed to flow through the torso and arms until that force or energy is finally *expressed* in the hands. I emphasize this because most students tend to concentrate on the hands themselves and in this way they mentally short-circuit their own system of balance, grace and movement. When students try to move their hands in a certain way instead of relying upon the body’s commander (the hips) to direct the movement, their arms usually become tense, wooden and powerless. This is in sharp contrast to the *song* or looseness

in all the joints that enables the hands to finally express the end of a movement begun in the feet and strike, if necessary, with the force and precision of a whiplash.

When we move in Taiji the tip of the tongue touches the roof of the mouth and in this way an internal energy circuit is completed. The breathing is natural and easy, but always directed down towards the dan tian, the center of our energetic, emotional and physical equilibrium. The mind is loose and should be emptied with as much fuss as you might make to empty a trash can which is bound to fill up again. The mind is stilled, and yet the yi determines the application of intention, while remaining otherwise nonattached and certainly not concerned with the actual movement itself or how it is being achieved. And the proof or test of all of this, the real practise of Taiji Quan, lies in the martial application, which is simply there, always possible, at any moment, so long as we are rooted, connected, truly loose and relaxed while being fully aware.

That full concentration always imbuing every movement, one with and inseparable from the movement and its potential application of the inherent martial aspect of the art, the whole body become like the symbol of the Dao rounded and impenetrable, with the yin and yang alternating softly and forever like a self-generating dynamo or a pair of gentle pistons empowering the binary movement and providing the real effect of the martial application as well as the whole range of health benefits: that is the fullest expression of the unity of body and mind in the practise of Taiji Quan, the outer beauty and elegance of the movement that is one with the inner calm and harmony that generates the movement and perpetuates the inner peace. That is what I mean by the unity of body and mind.