



TAI CHI CHUAN AS A PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND ITS POTENTIAL ROLE IN BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Tai Chi Chuan is a self-defense, non-aggressive martial art, suitable for people of various ages, which may be considered an application of the 'philosophical' Taoism born in China about twenty-four centuries ago. The aim of this paper is to outline its potential role for the development of human abilities useful in real life. As a specific example, it addresses the question of whether Tai Chi Chuan can help the learning process required by Business Management, set of tasks related to the guidance and control of an organization at various levels of responsibility, which is supported by guidelines and best practices developed in the last half century, particularly in the Western world. The relationships between these two disciplines, apparently quite distant from each other, are examined from the perspectives of Tai Chi Chuan strategies which may be of value for Business Management as well as for our daily life, the personal characteristics that both a Tai Chi Chuan practitioner and a Business Manager need to have, and the common processes which are de facto implemented in their practice. At this level of abstraction, the analogies between Tai Chi Chuan and some basic functions of Business Management are quite evident. The conclusion is that for Business Managers the practice of Tai Chi Chuan and the understanding of its principles could be not only a valuable personal exercise but could also take on a significant role in their management development programs. Tai Chi Chuan can indeed provide them the ability to go through an 'experiential learning' of key strategies applicable in their field of activity, and can be also an opportunity to ponder them, if an appropriate way of teaching is implemented. Tai Chi Chuan practitioners in turn may be better able to understand the 'universal value' of the strategies of their discipline by having a short introduction to their potential application in a business environment.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Relevant aspects of Tai Chi Chuan (Taiji Quan)

Tai Chi Chuan is a non-aggressive, self-defense art, which originated in China more than two hundred years ago and is practiced today in many countries; its core teaching is to show how the 'soft' ('weak') can defeat the 'hard' ('strong'). Traditionally, it has been considered particularly beneficial to our health and quality of life. These benefits continue to be confirmed by contemporary medical research. Consequently, Tai Chi Chuan is also practiced worldwide by an increasing number of people of various ages who are not interested at all in martial arts.

The Tai Chi Chuan practice we refer to in this paper is composed of:

- ✓ The basic 'solo' exercise - the 'form' - which consists of a pre-defined sequence of 'positions' in response to the actions of a 'shadow' opponent. Its primary observable characteristics are slowness and fluidity of movements.
- ✓ The simplest level of martial applications - 'push hands'. This exercise may be practiced by everybody in a friendly atmosphere at a level that doesn't imply any significant risk. Its most visible aspects are the rapidity of reaction, the synchronism with the opponent and the attempts to neutralize his attacks at their start before issuing our energy on him.

To increase the vitality of our mental and physical resources, Tai Chi Chuan applies principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine - particularly those concerning our 'internal energies' and the control of their flow in our body - and techniques taken from 'Qi Gong' which is an ancient Chinese discipline based on the same principles. An essential feature is also the use for martial purposes of the 'internal strength' resulting from the body elasticity instead of the force resulting from the contraction of skeletal muscles.

In Tai Chi Chuan, the relationships between our mind and its counterparts - our body, our opponent, the environment - are a consistent implementation of the principles of the 'philosophical' Taoism, which was developed in China twenty-four centuries ago. Taoist principles strongly influenced Ch'an, the Chinese version of Buddhism, and consequently Zen in Japan, and have been incorporated by Neo-Confucianism in China about nine centuries ago. Western culture has discovered in relatively recent times its potential value for our society.

The Taoist vision and its applications

In the Taoist vision, the reference model is the world of nature when it is lively and prosperous, being generated by a continuous and cyclic transformation of entities which interact harmoniously with one another. This process occurs without intention and is considered the result of a dynamic and cyclic equilibrium of two opposite but not conflicting energies: one leading to growth (active, creative) the other leading to descent (passive, receptive). These energies are immanent, i.e. are properties of the same reality they are controlling, and are not originated by an external entity. Each energy contains the seed of the other, and when one of them gets to its highest level, the other one takes gradually place: when sun has reached its meridians, it starts to decline. Coexistence of opposites is also the foundation of our knowledge: in knowing the beauty we have the idea of what ugliness is; the ideas of height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one with the other. Any judgement cannot have an absolute value: If we feel uppermost, there can always be somebody higher than us.

In traditional Chinese culture, these energies are represented by two 'polarities': 'yang' - light, warmth, movement, expansion, activity... and 'yin' - shadow, cold, stillness, contraction, passivity ... - which coexist and complement each other. Their cyclic and peaceful balance represents the central Taoist principle, often referred to as 'balance of opposites' or 'union of opposites'.

The basic Taoist message to human beings is that they should interact harmoniously with their counterparts according to the 'way of nature', without emotional reactions, worries about the desired results and predetermined criteria, i.e. with simplicity and flexibility, adapting themselves to and taking advantage of the continual transformation of the reality around them. According to this vision, they should focus on the effectiveness of their relationships rather than on cultivating and reinforcing their ego. The preferred metaphor for Taoist thinkers is the water which, due to its humbleness, powerful persistency, flexibility and softness, can adapt to every circumstance and overcoming any obstacle.

Taoist principles have been for many centuries successfully applied to military operations. Knowing the enemy and acting in a way complementary to his - being yin when he is yang and vice versa - are the key elements of the strategy recommended by the 'Art of War' by Sun Tzu, the earliest text where these principles may be found. Through the centuries, this ancient text, which contains the famous statement quoted by Mao: 'attack when they are unprepared, and make a move when they least expect it' [Sun et al 2008], has been also selected by major leaders for guidance in other fields of human activity. The implementation of Taoist principles in Tai Chi Chuan is easily recognizable [Brandimarti 2008]. Their potential value for other aspects of our life - from politics to psychotherapy - has been explored.

In recent years, a considerable literature has been devoted to examining the potential value of the Taoist vision for Business Management, discipline frequently referred to as 'Business Administration'. This term is used here to refer to the art of making decisions at various levels of responsibility for the effectiveness and the efficiency of an organization, and ensuring their proper execution. It has been selected in this study as a specific example of the potential role of Taoism for personal development because its practice includes in a visible way all key aspects of our daily life.

The discipline of Business Management has been progressively developed in the western world during the last decades. In our days, it has a worldwide relevance with various connotations depending on the local culture. Business management experts have intensively explored its version successfully applied in the flourishing economy of China, influenced by the ancient Chinese schools of thought [Gallo 2008] [Zang et al 2008] [Yueh et al 2008] [Davis 2009], [King et al 2014] [Hout et al 2014].

On the other hand, even the possible value of the ancient Chinese culture for business management in the Western world has been explored [Gerstner 2008], [Coll 2014]. The Taoist vision is considered 'particularly attractive', because of 'its characteristic distinction from already existent concepts' [Hennig 2015]. The application of its basic concepts may lead to a holistic, system view of the business operations and to a cooperative and harmonious environment, where people can best exploit their capabilities.

A specific message which may be inferred from the ancient Taoist texts is related to a participative style of management, oriented toward support and empowerment rather than to interfering guidance and control [King et al 2014], which is a prerequisite for the 'engagement' and empowerment of human resources. Managers shall also be free of personal interests and ambitions. In 'Daodejing' (literally 'The Treatise on the Way and the Virtues'), text attributed to Laozi, the father of 'philosophical' Taoism, it is written ¹

(7)

¹ Quotations from 'Tao Te Ching' included in this report are taken from the translation by Jane English available on the web (['Tao Te Ching \(Lao zu\) - A comparative study'](#)).

*'The sage stays behind. Thus he is ahead. He is detached, thus at one with all.
Through selfless action, he attains fulfillment.'*

(51) *'Creating without claiming, doing without taking credit,
Guiding without interfering, this is Primal Virtue.'*

It may be of interest to notice that a similar message is present in the Christian tradition:

'In the house of the sage even those who exercise a command service really those who they seem to command. They do not command for domineering greed, but for having to do good to men, not for pride to prime, but for the sake of providing' (Saint Augustine - De Civitate Dei - XIX).

Taoist principles would also address other business management requirements, such as dedication to self-cultivation, flexibility and ability to cope with changes, search on a case by case basis for the most 'natural' and economic solution, focus on avoiding conflicts and the consequent waste of resources. On the other hand, their full application would have major pitfalls: an excess of individualism and relativism, inclination to a 'laissez-faire' attitude, absence of meritocracy and a shared value system. Therefore, they are de facto considered a vision that is worthwhile to explore for widening our understanding and balancing different perspectives, rather than as a source of an optimal set of rules.

An overview of their role in Tai Chi Chuan and of their meaning for our daily life as well as for Business Management is given later in this report ('Common Taoist Strategies'). Taoism is looked at from the point of view of a descriptive analysis following a process oriented approach, without exploring its social implications or its metaphysical foundations which are the subject of a rich and varied literature.

The potential role of Tai Chi Chuan for Business Managers

The practice of Tai Chi Chuan may be as beneficial to business managers as to any other person. Some of its benefits - particularly an increased ability to have positive relations free of prejudices and hostility, as well as a deeper inclination to search for calm and awareness - may be considered even more relevant for them than for other people.

At an operational level, a theme discussed with increasing attention is the potential value of Tai Chi Chuan as an experimental model for some of the best practices of Business Management. A well-known supporter of this thesis is Jack Ma, the entrepreneur who starting from China is creating the largest worldwide network of internet services and is a convinced advocate of the help business managers can get from Tai Chi Chuan principles and practice ².

² CHINADAILY ["Profit from peace"](#) August 7, 2017

It is evident that the key factor leading to this emerging opinion is the strong orientation of Tai Chi Chuan to the Taoist way of thinking, which, as mentioned above, business management experts have found particularly relevant to their discipline.

A purpose of this paper is to verify in some detail if there is a set of strategies related to the management of relationships and changes that are consistent with the Taoist vision and may be shared by Tai Chi Chuan and Business Management (Fig. 1).

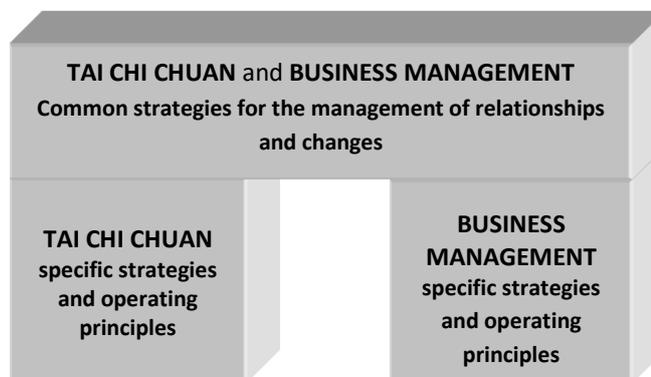


Fig. 1 - A structure of Tai Chi Chuan and Business Management strategies

Similarities between Tai Chi Chuan and Business Management are also examined from the perspectives of the personal characteristics that both a Tai Chi Chuan practitioner and a Business Manager need to have, and the change management processes which are de facto implemented in their practice. In the following, the analysis of these elements, based on empirical evidence, is done at an elementary level and focusing on their simplest and most immediate aspects, at a risk of oversimplification. I hope readers of this report will let me know their comments on any misunderstanding or missing point they may find in it ³.

There are general considerations on Tai Chi Chuan which support a positive evaluation of its potential application as a reference model for Business Managers.

The first one is related to its effectiveness. While Taoism is a school of thought, Tai Chi Chuan is a practical application which doesn't rely upon unrealistic assumptions. Its potential effectiveness has been confirmed by the level of ability reached by its 'Grand Masters'. The controversial question regarding its advantage over 'external' martial arts, which implement different strategies and are based upon the use of muscular strength, is overwhelmed by practical considerations, primarily by the search for the most effective and efficient exploitation of our resources in situations where we are far from having a predominant role. The history of military operations in the Far East during the second half of the last century is a remarkable example of the potential effectiveness of the Taoist principles applied by Tai Chi Chuan.

³ Comments sent to info@centrotaichichuan.it will be attached to the version of this report available on www.centrotaichichuan.it.

A second consideration is about its relatively low complexity. Tai Chi Chuan, in which we have only to cultivate ourselves and to interact with our opponent by using at best our personal capabilities, is much simpler than Business Management, and doesn't include some challenging tasks associated with change management in a real business environment (see 'A process view'). For this reason, it may be an efficient laboratory for understanding and experiencing their common principles. Furthermore, the results achieved are immediately perceivable, both in the quality of the 'form' execution - with the help of an experienced teacher - and in the outcome of their application in the 'win or lose' relationship with our opponent in 'push hands'.

A third consideration is that learning Tai Chi Chuan is based on its practice and requires only a personal commitment and the advice of a good teacher. The study of its 'theory' may be kept at an initial and elementary level. This way of learning - called 'kung fu' in traditional Chinese terms and 'experiential learning' in the language of contemporary science - is quite effective and is consistent with the Taoist claim for naturalness and simplicity. Furthermore, its practice may be pleasant and self-rewarding. On the other hand, there is the need for personal commitment and perseverance, because getting rid of the psychological and physical conditioning applied by human beings to themselves over a lifetime, and returning to the 'way of nature', is not a simple affair.

Last but not the least, Tai Chi Chuan may be practiced everywhere and without any special equipment by people of various ages, even if with various levels of orientation to its martial applications.

COMMON TAOIST STRATEGIES

Strategies of Tai Chi Chuan strongly influenced by Taoism and potentially applicable in our daily life as well as to Business Management may be recognized in following areas:

- ✓ Key role of changes, search for flexibility and agility
- ✓ No disruption, minimum effort
- ✓ Yielding policy
- ✓ Keeping self-wholeness
- ✓ Timeliness of changes
- ✓ Emptiness, tranquility and full awareness
- ✓ Continuity

These strategies are mutually interdependent, and should be therefore followed as an organic whole.

Key role of changes, flexibility and agility

Tai Chi Chuan practitioners and Business Managers have relationships with a variety of counterparts, some of which are under their control, at least to some extent - our own body and its

internal energies in Tai Chi Chuan, human resources, processes and technology systems, product and service offerings in Business Management - and represent 'internal resources' that must be developed and managed. Other counterparts are 'external resources' which are not under direct control - e.g. gravity as a source of 'internal strength' through the body elasticity and air as a source of oxygen in Tai Chi Chuan, potential customers, new technologies, suppliers and business partners in Business Management - and the question is how to effectively exploit the opportunities they offer.

Finally, other counterparts represent a threat - opponents in Tai Chi Chuan, competitors in a business environment. A fundamental question concerns the best strategy to resolve the related conflicts. In business management conflicts may also arise in the relationships with numerous other counterparts - e.g. human resources, suppliers, business partners.

These relationships involve changes concerning our resources and the way we deploy and use them.

The need for change occurs often in operational activities. In Tai Chi Chuan, as in any self-defense martial art, our opponent can perform in a fraction of a second an action that requires a countermeasure. Equivalent changes, with a considerably longer response time, are frequently needed also in a business environment: modifications of critical factors - market demand, available technologies, competition behavior, government regulations, and so on, as well as resolution of internal conflicts. These changes may be classified as "problem solutions".

Changes may also be a consequence of decisions taken to improve our current status by exploiting 'available opportunities' and not the response to an identifiable external stimulus. In Tai Chi Chuan the right moment to issue our energy toward our opponent must be selected by us. An example of voluntarily initiated changes is also the use of the so-called 'enticing energy' for getting the opponent to perform an action that can expose him to our countermeasures [Olsen 1995: 79]. In Business Management, resource development projects, including new offerings in new markets, are typical examples of unsolicited changes for growth.

Equivalent change situations occur frequently in everyday life.

A high level of **flexibility**, in the sense of the capability to change without major efforts and disruptions, is therefore required. In the Taoist vision, flexibility is a key virtue. Laozi says:

(76) *'A man is born gentle and weak. At his death, he is hard and stiff.
Green plants are tender and filled with sap. At their death, they are withered and dry.
Therefore the stiff and unbending is the disciple of death. The gentle and yielding is the
disciple of life. Thus, an army without flexibility never wins a battle.
A tree that is unbending is easily broken'*

In Tai Chi Chuan, flexibility must be achieved by liberating the mind and the body from any rigidity. In a business environment, to be flexible implies a particular care in the development and the acquisition of internal and external resources (see 'A process view - Prepare for changes').

Flexibility is a prerequisite of **agility**, in the sense of the ability to change quickly and easily when it is required. In Tai Chi Chuan life, the focus is on the vitality of our mind, traditionally represented by the spirit 'shen', its ability to control our body and the environment being free of stress and anxieties, and the application of specific techniques, as putting the weight on one foot at a time for ease of body rotation. Flexibility and agility are also key requirements in our daily life.

In a business environment, agility depends on several factors as management commitment and alertness, effectiveness of internal communications, 'engagement' and attitude towards cooperation of human resources. 'Business agility' has become a crucial strategy. A key success factor is to recognize that changes are normal occurrences which cannot be considered as occasional events. A report indicates that in USA from the 1970 to 2012 the rate of failure of change management projects has been consistently equal to about 60- 70 % [Ashkenazi 2013]. This high failure rate was likely due to a lack of management commitment and of a positive attitude towards change in company culture. Even in Tai Chi Chuan, although continuous changes are evidently required, a full commitment of mental and physical resources to their implementation is often overlooked by non-experienced practitioners.

Agility has, however, a series of limitations, primarily the need to maintain system stability. In Tai Chi Chuan the 'central equilibrium' principle (vertical alignment of our center of gravity with the foot supporting the body weight) must be continuously applied. In business operations, system stability can be compromised by various risk factors which must be considered.

No disruption, minimum effort

The 'ideal' changes require the lowest possible consumption of resources, are implemented smoothly and do not cause irreversible modifications. Taoist philosophers noticed that this is what happens in nature when its transformations obey the '**wu wei**' principle which is also recommended for the activity of human beings. The literal meaning of this term is 'no action' or 'no effort'; its proper meaning is 'refraining from activity contrary to nature' [Needham] or 'to act without forcing' [Watts]. Actions of human beings shall be aligned to the natural transformation of things, without pursuing at all costs a short-term objective independently of the characteristics and the status of their counterparts. This mode of action is the one which requires the minimum effort. Laozi says:

(48) *'The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.'*

In 'Zhuangzi', the other fundamental text of the philosophical Taoism ⁴, (29 'The Full Understanding of Life') there is a story about a man, able to swim with tranquility and joy in the rough waters of a scary waterfall, who, to the question if he had any particular way of treading the water, answered:

'No, I have no particular way. I began (to learn the art) at the very earliest time; as I grew up, it became my nature to practice it; and my success in it is now as sure as fate. I enter and go down with the water in the very center of its whirl, and come up again with it when it whirls the other way. I follow the way of the water, and do nothing contrary to it of myself; this is how I tread it'.

The relevance of spontaneity, in the sense of lack of anxiety to obtain the desired result, and simplicity, in the sense of naturalness, is also shown by this story.

The ability to apply the 'wu wei' principle finding the way of minimum effort depends on a fully awareness of the counterpart we are dealing with, and of its potential transformations. This form of knowledge cannot be only an intellectual one, but requires also our intuition (see 'Emptiness, tranquility and awareness') and a skill achieved through an intensive experience. In Zhuangzi, in addition to the swimmer story, there are other examples of this type of skill: the 'perfect' carver, the 'perfect' butcher.

An exemplification of the 'wu wei' policy has been given by Alan Watts: in the art of sailing one uses intelligence (to take advantage of the wind), as distinct from rowing, in which force of the muscles is dominant. Another exemplification is given by an advice I got when I began having people management responsibilities: 'Try to take advantage of the people strengths. Do not try to remove their weaknesses'. Unfortunately, being more inclined to rowing than to sailing, I followed in some instances the latter approach.

The 'wu wei' principle is constantly followed in Tai Chi Chuan. Movements of the various parts of our body shall not violate its natural constraints. The transitions between different postures are the most natural ones, and through an 'experiential learning' may become easy and spontaneous. The muscular force required for their implementation is kept to a minimum, and it is developed by the core of the body, from where all its movements are activated, maintaining the body as a unit. A remarkable example of the 'wu wei' principle is the relationship with gravity. In Tai Chi Chuan we do not defy it, but we use the weight of the body bending the knees to develop at exactly the right moment the 'internal strength' that can be used against our opponent. This mechanical power is obtained by using the body's elasticity and not its muscular strength. A primary example of an action conforming to the wu wei principles is the issuance of our energy toward our opponent that shall be done when he has not the ability to resist.

⁴ 'Zhuangzi' quotations are taken from the James Legge translation, available also on the web (oaks.nvg.org or ratmachines.com/philosophy/.)

Concerning Business Management, a focus on the 'wu wei' principle is advantageous in many instances. Exemplifications are the adaptation to the evolution of the market with the development of new business models and new offerings, and the 'engagement' and empowerment of human resources by not forcing their behavior with continuous management intervention. The relevance of skill is recognized from a market perspective, e.g. selecting niche markets, and at level of human resources. A term which has been used is 'specialization' [Yueh et al 2008: 251]. As far as change implementation is concerned, the message is to consider the nature of the resources affected by the change, with calmness and accuracy and without any forcing. For instance, keeping to a minimum the user's adaptation costs has been identified as a critical success factor for 'internal' innovation projects [Aladwani 2001: 271].

Unclear situations may arise when dealing with changes of complex artifacts, i.e. of 'objects made by human beings, with a view to subsequent use', such as information systems or industrial equipment. When the characteristics of one of these artifacts do not allow for an easy and orderly modification, the less costly and more timely alternative may be forcing somehow the required change. Tradeoffs between change implementation alternatives may represent a challenging management task.

In any case, the ability to forget ourselves and to adapt to the circumstances is a critical success factor.

Yielding policy

According to the Taoist principle of a dynamic and peaceful balance of yin and yang, when two counterparts are in a potentially competitive relationship, each of them must follow the changes of the other without contrasting it. For instance, if one of the two counterparts is advancing, the other shall withdraw. Laozi reminds us that the transformation of reality is cyclic and that any change will be 'naturally' preceded and followed by a change in the opposite direction:

- (36) *That which shrinks Must first expand.
That which fails Must first be strong.
That which is cast down Must first be raised.
Before receiving There must be giving.
This is called perception of the nature of things.
Soft and weak overcome hard and strong.*

By this way, conflicts and the related waste of resources are avoided, and a status of overall harmony may be reached. This application of the 'wu wei' strategy discussed in the previous section can be called 'yielding policy' or 'no-opposition policy'.

To act according to the transformations of our counterparts without resisting to his actions, allows us to take advantage of their weaknesses which sooner or later will materialize. Strengths cannot last forever:

- (9) *Over sharpen the blade, and the edge will soon blunt.*
- (23) *High winds do not last all morning. Heavy rain does not last all day.
Why is this? Heaven and earth!
If heaven and earth cannot make things eternal, how is it possible for man?*

A critical error would be to underestimate our opponent by not recognizing the convenience of yielding to him where and when he is strong:

- (69) *There is no greater catastrophe than underestimating the enemy.
By underestimating the enemy, I almost lose what I value.
Therefore when the battle is joined, the underdog will win.*

Water is the metaphor preferred by Laozi (and by Zhuangzi).

- (43) *The softest thing on the universe
Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.
That without substance can enter where there is no room.*
- (78) *Under heaven nothing is softer and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better; It has no equal.
The weak can overcome the strong; the supple can overcome the stiff.
Under heaven everyone knows this, yet no one puts it into practice.*

Tai Chi Chuan is a martial art which implements systematically this Taoist approach. The overall strategy is to follow the opponent 'forgetting ourselves', moving synchronously with him and avoiding a confrontation when he is using his power against us ('do not resist'). Pre-empting techniques such as 'seizing' or deviating the opponent's limbs are used to avoid his attacks. If the opponent can attack, the priority is given to a 'neutralization' action. By yielding to him and by taking advantage of his momentum with the movements of our body, we can lead him to an unsafe and weak position before issuing our energy. The circularity of the body movements, typical of Tai Chi Chuan, has an integral role in this strategy. An alternative requiring a high level of skill is receiving his energy without resistance so that it may be issued at least partially back to him [Olsen 1995: 65].

In business operations, as in our daily life, there are many potential causes of conflicts, external and internal, and the same strategy may be profitably applied. A confrontational approach shall be if possible avoided because of the waste of resources it implies, which is one of the visible consequences of the lack of harmony. Pre-empting strategies with a proactive approach are often implemented, and potential conflicts do not often materialize. When a conflict cannot be avoided, and a major resistance is expected, the identification of the counterpart's weaknesses - actual or

potential - shall be the basis for selecting the most appropriate course of action, instead of reacting emotionally.

The relationship with competitors may also include a learning opportunity. In Business Management, the practice of benchmarking against similar organizations has been widely adopted as a way for improving business models and identifying a set of best practices. In Tai Chi Chuan learning in a friendly environment from practicing 'push hands' with more experienced and smarter practitioners is a usual practice.

Searching for self-wholeness

The Taoist focus on relationships leads to a holistic, system view of the reality. The notion of 'system' applies to any entity that may be identified considering an aggregation of mutually interacting components. By having them working harmoniously together as an organic whole, properties and effects may be reached that otherwise would not be achievable.

The relevance of a harmonic wholeness for the quality of things is explicitly mentioned by Laozi:

(39) *These things from ancient times arise from one:
The sky is whole clear. The earth is whole and firm. The spirit is whole and strong. The valley is whole and full. The ten thousand things are whole and alive.
Kings and lords are whole and the country is upright. All these are in virtue of wholeness.*

To perform an analysis of Tai Chi Chuan and Business Management from a system perspective, it is convenient to consider as a first level of aggregation ourselves and our 'internal' and 'external' resources (see 'Key role of changes, flexibility and agility'), which can be controlled by us at least to some extent. We may call 'self-wholeness' the ability to work with our resources as a 'unit', taking full advantage of their interrelationships.

In Tai Chi Chuan the resources are our mind, our body and its internal energies, the oxygen we get by breathing, and the internal strength we may obtain from gravity. Our skill consists of their coordination and synchronization. A necessary element is our "spirit" ('shen') which may be interpreted as our capability of having a firm intent and of applying our attention to its implementation.

With respect to the body, the internal energy 'qi' and the blood should flow through all its parts without any hindrance or obstruction. The same conditions apply to the 'internal force', obtained by applying a 'stretch - shortening cycle' to the muscles and connective tissues of the legs, which must flow from the foot supporting the weight to the part of the body acting against the opponent. The opponent energy adsorbed with a 'ward off' position shall easily flow in the opposite direction. The various parts of the body must be therefore fully interconnected; no part shall move independently of the other parts, and there shall be no internal obstacle or discontinuity due to

muscular tensions or joint stiffness. This is the first principle of Tai Chi Chuan, probably the most difficult one to be fully implemented, and it is usually referred to with the term 'relax' ('song' in the Tai Chi Chuan tradition).

There are changes of the different parts of the body which shall be opposite each other, following the principle of 'balancing the opposites'. In all postures, to obtain ease of body rotation, one part of the body must be heavy, 'substantial', 'yang', while the other is light, 'unsubstantial', 'yin'. In the sequence of postures, the status of the two parts of the body must change cyclically: while one becomes yang, the other shall become yin, and vice versa.

The mind and the body must act as a unit. Internal energy flows and the consequential movements of all parts of our body are commanded by the mind's intent as a will that by experiential training becomes instinct ('first in the mind, then in the body'). Also, the flows of 'internal strength' need to be activated and properly adjusted by the mind intent. Finally, breathing must be deep and synchronized with the body movements. When we are little child, the movements of our body are fluid and harmonious because we behave spontaneously according to these principles. As time goes by, we get mental and physical rigidities and we lose these abilities. A purpose of the basic 'solo' exercise, the 'form' is precisely to get them again.

In Business Management, an equivalent goal to be achieved is generally referred to as '**integration**'. A primary goal is to ensure that non-financial resources - people, processes, technologies, suppliers - work effectively and efficiently together. Effectiveness of internal and external communications is a critical success factor. Specific attention is given to the motivation of human resources. Even in Business Management, a form of collective consciousness and a common inspiration of human resources, whose role is equivalent to the one of "spirit" in Tai Chi Chuan, are basic ingredients.

The application of the 'balancing the opposites' principle keeping an internal harmony is required also in a business environment. Particularly in the Chinese version of Business Management, harmony is considered a precious value: 'top management must maintain harmony internally and externally to keep the company running smoothly and making profits' [Zang 2008: 247].

The policy of simultaneously applying changes to mutually interrelated resources is generally followed even in times of challenge and having to deal with very complex networks of resources, since failures in its application are easily perceived as specific malfunctions. On this matter, Tai Chi Chuan practitioners who have not yet reached a high level of skill have a lot to learn from Business Management. However, the lack of a comprehensive analysis has frequently caused the failure of innovation projects, particularly in the area of business process reengineering.

Timeliness of changes

The implementation of changes at the right time is a key success factor. Often in Tai Chi Chuan, in our daily life and in Business Management, our response is late, opportunities may be lost, and threats may find us unprepared. Tai Chi Chuan applications require a timely reaction, in the order

of fractions of seconds, when the change of the opponent is still 'small'; otherwise, we will be defeated. Although in a business environment there is some time to recover from these situations, due to the inertia of complex business organization, even change factors with a relatively long lead time may deserve a quick initiation of the related change plans (see also 'Continuity').

Laozi says:

(64) *Peace is easily maintained; Trouble is easily overcome before it starts.
The brittle is easily shattered; The small is easily scattered.
Deal with it before it happens. Set things in order before there is confusion.*

Changes may have also to be applied to changes that are already in progress. To avoid a delay, in Tai Chi Chuan the movements of the body, as opposed to other martial arts and western boxing, are always circular and therefore can be immediately and easily modified in any moment. In Business Management, to meet the same requirement changes must be reversible, and we need the ability to restore the initial status.

Sometimes we react too early and this is also a problem. In the late '70, working for a multinational corporation active in the information systems area, I tried to convince my management that it was already the right time for dedicating significant resources to the sales of services diverting part of them if necessary from the sales of hardware. Fortunately, they did not make this decision and continued profitably for some years with the same business model, and started only years later to change it progressively. Also in Tai Chi Chuan, there are situations where before performing our action we must wait for the opponent to fall into our trap. An example is the Rollback move, which consists of neutralizing an incoming force by turning our body so that it is diverted away from us.

The ability to intuitively envisage the future and to discard false alarms are key virtues, although they are not explicitly mentioned in the Taoist texts.

Emptiness, full awareness and tranquility

According to the Taoist vision, we need to have the awareness required for participating harmoniously and profitably in the global transformation process of the reality around us. Laozi says:

(52) *Seeing details is called clarity.*

In Zhuangzi, it is written (2 Adjustment of Controversies - Sect. 2 'The world of changes')

Great knowledge is wide and comprehensive; small knowledge is partial and restricted

Obtaining this level of global awareness depends on our ability to perceive even very weak signals originated by various sources, and to understand their correlations, using our intuition when required. A model of the awareness process is given by the hexagram n. 20 of the 'I Ching', called 'Kuan', which has the meaning of viewing, divining the meaning (Kielce). This hexagram is composed

of two trigrams: 'wind' - gentle penetration, flexibility, the ability to penetrate and to pervade - and 'earth' - receptive energy, that which yields, the ability to perceive and understand signals coming from observation. It has the appearance of an observation tower.

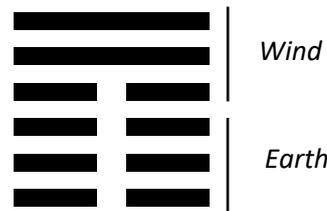


Fig. 2 – The Kuan hexagram (20 - 'Contemplation')

To have our sensorial and mental capabilities fully available to perform this processes without any disturbance, we must reach a status, which may be called 'emptiness', free of other thoughts, anxieties, prejudices, and of any conditioning due to predetermined criteria. By getting to 'emptiness', our awareness is the result of peaceful and symbiotic observations of the environment we are in, and for this reason can be accurate and useful. On the contrary, a knowledge biased by personal interests and prejudices may be disconnected from reality, misleading and frequently associated with anxiety, anger, frustration.

In the Taoist thought, we must include ourselves and our counterparts in a holistic vision, where we lose our identity, and our consciousness can experience a global knowledge. 'For a better understanding of the things of the world, one has to become identical and mentally immersed with them, meditating and integrating himself with the systemic whole' [Lang et al 2002:7]. It is so possible not only to reach an 'internal wholeness' within the self (see 'Searching for the self-wholeness'), but also to move beyond it to become one with the external world [Sawyer]. This approach leads to the wisdom traditionally searched in the Eastern culture by means of meditation, as a way of getting to an enlightenment and an enrichment of our daily life.

According to Laozi:

- (16) *Empty yourself of everything. Let the mind rest at peace.
 The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return ...
 Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.....
 With an open mind, you will be openhearted. Being openhearted, you will act royally.
 Being royal, you will attain the divine.*

The status of emptiness shall be reached by getting free of anxieties, prejudgments and predefined criteria. The Taoist texts use as a metaphor the natural spontaneity of a little child. In 'Zhuangzi' It is written (Chapter 23 – 'Käng-sang Ku'):

'Can you become a little child? It walks it knows not where; it rests where it is placed, it knows not why; it is calmly indifferent to things, and follows their current. This is the regular method of guarding the life'.

In Tai Chi Chuan, which is a self-defense art, the need to understand as early as possible the intentions of our opponent, and to respond spontaneously and immediately to his actions with an open mind not obscured by aggressiveness and fear, is even more crucial than in other martial arts. It is said that to understand fully people we should not be hostile to them. For an early interpretation of only a few telltale signs, we have also to rely on our intuition. At the same time, we need to be conscious of all parts of our body that shall follow specific rules to keep naturalness and stability even in complex movements. Furthermore, the feeling of the transformation that take place in our bodies, such as rooting on the ground, abdominal breathing, flow of energies, helps to perform them fully and correctly.

In our daily life, the ability to listen to our counterparts and to understand their status and their motivation is essential for having effective personal interactions. We have often to rely on our intuition. The ability to be empty in the Taoist sense is also a critical success factor in a business environment. The understanding of the global system and of its trends achieved through a careful, unbiased listening to the signals coming from inside and outside is a stringent requirement. In many instances, processing the huge amount of data usually available is insufficient for an early understanding of all the stimuli requiring a response and of their correlations; a full and comprehensive awareness of the business environment is therefore dependent also on personal wisdom and intuition.

The status of emptiness leads also to the tranquility and calm required to find in any circumstance, being free of stress and artificial constraint, the most appropriate and 'natural' response, avoiding emotional reactions. This is a critical success factor, in Tai Chi Chuan as well as in our daily life and in Business Management.

Continuity

The term continuity is used here in the sense of a flow without discontinuities. In our context, it applies to both 'attention and alertness' and 'change implementation', which are respectively a requirement and a function common to Tai Chi Chuan and Business Management.

Continuity in attention and alertness is a prerequisite for the 'timeliness of changes' mentioned previously. This advice is also given by Laozi:

*(64) People usually fail when they are in the verge of success.
So give as much care to the end as to the beginning; Then there will be no failure.*

Concerning continuity in change implementation, the message coming from the Taoist vision is to make the changes as easy as possible by decomposing them into smaller changes which may be applied smoothly and progressively, with the minimum effort. According to Laozi:

- (63) *In the universe the difficult things are done as if they are easy.
In the universe great acts are made up of small deeds.
The sage does not attempt anything very big, and thus achieves greatness.*
- (64) *A tree as great as a man's embrace springs from a small shoot;
A terrace nine stories high begins with a pile of earth;
A journey of a thousand miles starts under one's feet.*

A gradual development is a law of nature. In a Chinese story, a farmer pulled on the plants to make them grow faster and the morning after all of them was dead.

In Tai Chi Chuan circularity of the body movements and the minimal use of muscular strength lead naturally to the continuity of changes which is perceivable as the fluidity of the 'form' execution. Any action, however complex, must be carried out harmoniously and seamlessly. The continuity and smoothness of changes doesn't necessarily imply their slowness. Movements of the body can be fluid also when they need to be quick, as in push hands.

In our daily life, the focus on continuity leads to constancy and perseverance.

In a business environment, all changes are per se discrete steps, but a gradual implementation is the safest approach and a 'small wins' strategy is recognized as a catalyst for success. Western and Chinese managers share the belief that the business must be running avoiding too quick developments. An interesting exemplification of the Taoist way of breaking down a challenging task into small steps is given by the 'continual quality improvement' strategy, which consists of systematic actions leading to never-ending improvements, rather than to a 'breakthrough' improvement all at once. This strategy was initially applied in Japan - the 'Kaizen' approach - based on a theory taught by William Edwards Deming who was unheard of in his home country. It is of interest to note that this approach includes a specific attention to the human resources. In the second half of the '80 it started to be adopted by industries in the West and was later recognized in the documentation on quality programs issued by ISO (International Organization for Standardization).

THE REQUIRED VIRTUES

The virtues that Tai Chi Chuan practitioners, as well as Business Managers and all human beings should have may be classified as follows.

- ✓ Humility in the sense of willing to go through an endless learning process without arrogance and self-complacency.

- ✓ Openness to change
- ✓ Willingness to remain calm, avoiding emotional reactions
- ✓ Intuition and ability to envisage the future
- ✓ Perseverance in a continuous search for quality through continuous improvements
- ✓ Determination to comply with a 'code of conduct' ('wu de' in Chinese martial arts)

These virtues may be rationally recognized but need experiential learning to be fully achieved.

A PROCESS VIEW

Tai Chi Chuan may be considered an interrupted 'change management' activity which may be decomposed in the basic processes shown in the following figure, not distinctly recognized as such in the current literature but executed de facto.

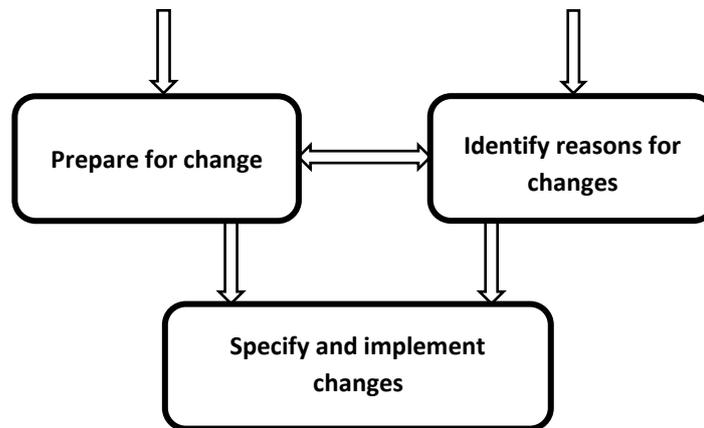


Fig. 3 - Basic processes related to changes

In Business Management, the activities related to change management are spread over all functional areas and do not follow any standard terminology. For reviewing the implementation of the strategies related to changes and discussed in this report, we can, however, refer to the same virtual process structure applicable to Tai Chi Chuan.

Prepare for change

For Tai Chi Chuan practitioners this process has two basic purposes. One is related to improving the vitality and the sensitivity of the mind and of the body that are crucial requirements in Tai Chi Chuan. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, this goal may be achieved with a balanced and unobstructed circulation of the blood and the internal energy 'qi', which, in turn, requires a relaxed body, a quiet, unstressed mind and a deep abdominal breathing, conditions which usually we do

not look for in our daily life. This is one of the benefits of a continual practice of the basic exercise of Tai Chi Chuan, the 'form'.

The second purpose is learning to apply 'by heart' the set of rules which must be followed in practicing Tai Chi. Some of these rules - such as staying in contact with the opponent, yielding to his attacks without resisting, not moving one part of the body independently of the others - require a radical modification of our usual behavior. Other more detailed rules to be learned which are dependent on the 'style' we have selected concern the various body 'positions' and the related transitions. Due to the short response time which is needed in a martial art, the application of these rules should be a 'natural' and spontaneous response to an opponent action and not the result of a repetitive rational thinking. The Tai Chi tradition says that the body shall be controlled by the mind's intent 'I' which in Traditional Chinese Medicine is associated with the heart and not to the brain. This learning process requires long and continual practice.

In Business Management, this process is embedded in the functional area of resource development. For technology systems, the application of an architecture conforming to the appropriate principles - e.g. multi-layer structure, separation of concerns - and the utilization of suited design and development techniques are a must. Concerning organization, its decomposition in processes rather than in functions is of help. A major obstacle is a resistance to change of human resources. This constraint should be resolved using education and motivation programs. The goal is to make them active agents of change and innovation at all levels. This is a crucial aspect and a prerequisite for any empowerment strategies. Attention should also be given to the terms and conditions side of the relationships with our resources (internal and external). Furthermore, appropriate change management processes and effective communication systems and procedures must be put in place.

Identify reasons for changes

This process examines our internal resources and all the entities of the environment we are in, trying to perceive stimuli that may lead to changes. The detected signals have then to be interpreted, giving them meaning and value. False signals must be ignored; weak signals may be indicators of a major change which is starting to happen.

In Tai Chi Chuan the detection of the changes in the opponent's behavior since their beginning is essential to prepare the most appropriate response in a timely fashion. With respect to other martial arts this requirement is especially important, since in Tai Chi our opponent is very close to us, and thus the promptness of our response is crucial. A basic principle which must be applied in 'push hands' - a fundamental exercise of Tai Chi Chuan, in which we are always in contact with our opponent - is to perceive the opponent's internal energy flow and interpret it correctly. In martial applications, which are intended to represent an actual fight, we must rely only on our 'external' observations with the help of our intuition. The perception of the 'internal' signals coming from our body - proprioception - makes it possible over time to control its status and position.

In Business Management the frequent monitoring of potential change factors, both external - e.g. technologies, suppliers, partners, competitors - and internal - e.g. human resources, technology systems - as well as of the resulting financial and non-financial performance produces a large quantity of data and evaluations. An early detection of changes often requires management intuition. The notion of risk is always present: some changes may be needed as a countermeasure to stimuli which are not yet visible but are expected to happen in the future.

Specify and implement changes

In Tai Chi Chuan the selection of the appropriate change as a reaction to an opponent action must be quick and instinctive. Changes may be selected from a predefined menu with the modifications required by each specific situation.

In Business Management, as in some situations of our daily life, this process is much more complex than in Tai Chi Chuan, because, in addition to the more challenging implementation of changes, there are often alternatives to be considered, and an appropriate decision-making process is a must.

At a given moment not all opportunities and problems - internal and external - can be taken care of. Other actions may be decided independently of external or internal stimuli, because an innovation may be the most appropriate strategy. Additional alternatives may derive from the way of implementing changes (see 'Common Taoist Strategies - No disruption, minimum cost'). Maintaining flexibility implies also a continuous fight against complexity. There are therefore rankings and decisions to be made, with the intervention of managerial intuition and not only of rational analyses.

For the changes that have been selected for implementation, there is the need to prepare an action plan concerning all affected components and to monitor its implementation.

CONCLUSION

At the level of abstraction of our analysis, key Tai Chi Chuan strategies, strongly influenced by the Taoist vision, apply profitably to our daily life and to Business Management as well. They look obvious and recall the common sense of a farmer who knows how to cultivate his field. The point is that their effective application is dependent on our release from bad physical and mental habits acquired over time, and requires willingness and intensive training.

The quality of our life, and in Business Management the survival of an enterprise, may depend on their application. Tai Chi Chan practitioners do not generally have a comparable motivation. To be aware of how these same strategies are applicable beyond the boundaries of a martial art or of a fitness exercise can help them to recognize their 'universal' value and increase their motivation.

From a Business Manager's perspective, the practice of Tai Chi Chuan may be considered a laboratory where they can go through a form of 'experiential learning' of key business management concepts. Furthermore, to recognize in an entirely different context the existence of a change management framework conceptually equivalent to the one required in a business environment - even if much simpler and working with much shorter cycles - may be helpful for fully appreciating the scope of the related processes. For these reasons, the practice of Tai Chi Chuan and the understanding of its principles and cultural roots could be for them not only a valuable personal training tool but could also take on a significant role in their management development programs.

To transform this potential opportunity into an accepted practice there is a development work to be done. A key question is related to the method of teaching Tai Chi Chuan. At least in some specific contexts, we should move from the enunciation of revealed and esoteric truths to the recognition of principles which have an understandable justification, taking also into account the indications coming from the contemporary science (which, incidentally, confirms the validity of the principles stated by the 'classic' texts of Tai Chi Chuan). The notation of 'strategy' as an understandable way of achieving identified objectives may be of help. We started years ago to work in this direction for the 'Associazione Italiana Cheng Man Ching' operating in Milan (www.centrotaichichuan.it).

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