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**DAOISM, TAIJI QUAN AND DAILY LIFE** *(draft)*

Dear friends

I hope you are enjoying the participation in this meeting. Massimiliano Biondi spent a lot of effort to organize it. We tried to help him from Milan, but I am afraid this didn't give him any significant relief. Also on behalf of Massimiliano and of Simone Sebatiani I thank you, the Masters from Taiwan and Master William Nelson for making possible this meeting.

Massimiliano and Simone asked me to give you a short speech also this year. The main reasons of their request were that I was the first to introduce the Cheng Man Ch'ing style in Italy around twenty years ago, and that I am significantly less young than them. As you may imagine, the last observation didn't make me particularly happy, but I didn't find any viable alternative other than accepting their invitation and thanking them for their confidence.

Let's go to the theme of this conversation. Taiji Quan is a straightforward application of several principles developed by some of the most important schools of thought of the ancient Chinese culture, in a way that I feel it is worthwhile to explore. It is also to be mentioned that the study of the cultural roots of Taiji Quan significantly influenced the life of Professor Cheng Man Ch'ing, who was an unusual combination of extraordinary martial skills and of a wide and deep knowledge of the culture of his Country.

In looking for the roots of Taiji Quan the first text we must consider is the "**I Ching**" or "The Book of Changes", which includes some of the oldest written traces of the Chinese culture. Other key references are the **initial Daoism** and the "**school of Yin-yang**", developed around the IV century b. C. in the "Warring States Period", referred to also as the "Hundred Schools of Thought period". Fifteen centuries later - about nine hundred years ago - **neo-Confucianism**, a system based on the Buddhist and Daoist thought as well as on Confucianism, brought forward in various ways the concept of the "supreme principle" or Taiji, term so familiar to us.

What I plan to do tonight is to give you a presentation, necessarily short and incomplete, on the **Taiji Quan relationships with the initial Daoism**. To do this, I will quote some statements from "Tao Te Ching", the fundamental text of Daoism written according to the tradition by Lao Tzi. Professor Cheng Man Ch'ing wrote on this text a book, the only one of his various essays on the ancient Chinese culture that as far as I know was entirely translated in English<sup>(1)</sup>.

In a logical order, the first concept to be taken into consideration, clearly stated by Lao Tzi but already emphasized by "I Ching", is the need to understand that **everything in the natural world continuously changes**:

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<sup>(1)</sup> "*Lao Tzu: my words are very easy to understand*", *Lectures on Tao Te Ching* by Man-jan Cheng - Translated by Tam Gibbs. *Lao Tzi statements quoted later on are taken from this book.*

- (2) *Is and is not are mutually arising.*  
(22) *Bend and become straight. Hollow out and become filled. Exhaust and become renewed.*

Daoism adds to this consideration a focus on our **relationships** with ourselves and the world around us. What we can do, what we achieve to be is substantially dependent on these relationships. The fundamental question therefore is: how shall we respond with our changes to the changes of the things and the people we interact with? If the world around us continuously changes, how should the Sage behave?

According to the Daoism we shall let changes independent of us get to their completion, following them and trying to get advantage from them at the right moment. "If we try to force things, we go against their natural development and we lose them". This is the so called "wu wei" - literally "without action" - principle. Shortly, according to Lao Tzi:

- (47) *The sage does not act and yet completes.*

"Wu wei" doesn't mean nevertheless to become completely passive. It is rather the principle of not exerting our will against the world, of not resisting to change. As a famous translator of classical Chinese texts says "wu wei is the art of managing circumstances without resisting; it is the principle of avoiding the impact of a force incumbent on you".

The Lao Tzu advice is **to change in a way complementary to the changes of the things and of the people we interact with**, implementing a mutual balance: be weak against force, be strong against weakness. Decrease when it increases, increase when it decreases. Lao Tzi says:

- (36) *That which would be shrunken must first purposely stretched.  
That which would be weakened must first be purposely strengthened.  
That which would be overthrown must first purposely set up.  
He who would take must first purposely give.  
This is called "wei ming" (wonderfully minute and obscure, yet brilliant)  
Softness and suppleness overcome hardness and strength.*

In the war, trying to resist to the enemy when he is strong would be risky and useless. To be the winner, we must take advantage of his weaknesses when and where they materialize.

The application of this principle requires **flexibility**, to follow the changes of our counterparts, either expansions or recessions, adapting ourselves to them. Lao zi recognizes that in the natural world flexibility is a sign of vitality:

- (76) *When a person is born he is soft and supple.  
When he dies he is stiff and hard.  
All things, including plants, are soft and tender at the birth,  
At the death they are withered and dry.  
Hence the stiff and hard are the moribund ones; the soft and supple are the*

*vital ones. A hardy tree gets the axe.  
The hard and great are at the bottom  
The soft and supple are at the top.*

For the Daoism, the best symbol of the effectiveness of non-resistance and of flexibility is the **water**, which visibly doesn't have any rigidity and is able to adapt itself to any situation, but is at the same time capable of penetrating everywhere.

(8) *The best attitude is like water. Water is a positive benefit to all things without competing with them.  
It seeks out places abominated by man.*

(43) *The softest in the world overcomes the strongest...  
The insubstantial can penetrate where there is no opening.  
Because of that I know the benefit of Non-action.*

The secret of success stays also in being timely in our reaction to changes, so that we can “**act on the small**”.

(52) *To value the lesser is enlightenment. To cleave to the gentle is steadfastness.*

(64) *The brittle shatters easily. The minuscule disperses easily...Act before it is gone.*

To recognize changes of the world around us when they are beginning it is needed **to join it and to keep a continuous and careful contact**. We shall be able to listen and to interpret. Lao Tzi says:

(64) *Be as cautious throughout as at the beginning, and there will not be failures.*

All the principles I mentioned so far cannot be successfully applied unless we are able to **integrate all our energies**, e. g. to find the unity of the mind and the body - or any other instrument - and to **feel being a part of the world around us without fear**, forgetting ourselves and getting free of tensions and rigidities of any kind. These conditions are also the principles of the Daoist meditation, and are stated by Lao Tzi as follows:

(10) *Can one unify the spirit-of-the-blood and the spirit-of-the-breath and keep them from separating?*

*In cleaning the Mysterious Vision (his mind) can one do it flawlessly?*

(16) *Attain utmost emptiness. Maintain profound tranquillity.*

*All things are stirring about. I watch their cycle.*

*Things flourish, and each returns to its root. Returning to the root is called tranquillity. This is what is meant by returning to one's basic nature (forgetting himself).*

I believe you already had enough of the quotations from Lao Tzu, and I stop here, ignoring among other interesting points his **focus on the internal energies and on the model of the infant** (10, 55). It shall be mentioned however that some parts of the Lao Tzi text cannot be easily accepted, because they conflict with human behaviours that are the foundation of our society and of its development. This is one of the reasons why Prof Cheng Man Ch'ing referred himself also to the Confucius thought. As far as this conversation is concerned there are only few considerations to be outlined before ending it.

**The first one is the extraordinary analogy between the Daoist principles I mentioned before and the principles of Taiji Quan.** Looking for the unity of mind and body, getting free of physical and mental tensions and rigidities and paying all of our attention on what we are doing, learning to change in a flexible way, listening to understand ourselves and the others, following in a complementary way the opponent's changes, yielding if he advances, and advancing if he goes backward, timely reacting when his changes are going to happen, are principles well known to the practitioners of this martial art, that allow for the soft winning against the hard, as Lao Tzi says.

**The second consideration is that after twenty-four centuries the usefulness of these principles in various areas of the human activity** - from war to politics and to business management - is more and more recognized.

Their positive role is evident also in many situations - even if not in all of them - of our daily life. By the application of the Daoist principles which are the basis of Taiji Quan, we can take the maximum advantage of our capabilities and at the same time protect ourselves from tensions and stress, with beneficial effects on our health also. A significant example is represented by our interactions with other persons. To carefully listen to our counterparts to understand them, instead of resisting or going away, put ourselves in a potentially advantageous situation. If we recognize some common interests, we can exploit them at the best of our capabilities. If on the contrary we are in a conflict situation, our tranquillity and ability to manage it following our counterparts allow us to take advantage of their weaknesses. In any case we can have more effective interpersonal relationships. This is a lesson given by Taiji Quan that several of my students have reported to me.

In conclusion, Taiji Quan can also be a school of life that teaches us to protect ourselves from our emotional reactions and to usefully change our usual behaviours. Certainly, to read Lao Tzi is not an absolute requirement for an effective practice of Taiji Quan. One of the peculiarities of this martial art is however to be a kind of window from which we can look at a culture coming from an early period of our civilization and from a remote Country, but rich of universal principles of growing usefulness in our time. This is an opportunity that you may or may not exploit. Other interesting texts of the initial Daoism are Zhuang zi, extremely agreeable also from a literary standpoint, and the "Art of War" written by Sun Tzi.

Thank you for your attention.