



Taiji and Zen

Jake Newell, July 2007



The Buddha said our original nature is boundless and open, not dependent on life and death, not contained by space and time. Things come and things go, but originally we are empty and clear. If we attach our mind to things, we “enter the ocean of suffering”. But if we cut off our attachment to things, we spontaneously revert to our original nature.

In the open sky, clouds come and go. Sometimes there is light; sometimes there is darkness. The sky just lets this happen. It doesn’t resist or cling. This is Zen mind.

But human beings tend to hold onto things, keeping our mind filled with thoughts and feelings, contriving a self-identity that separates us from the world and from other beings. If we attach to these things, regardless of whether we have a good situation or a bad situation, the things obscure our mind and we lose sight of our original nature.

Zen practice is a medicine for letting go of our attachment to the things in our mind. Traditionally, formal Zen practice consists of bowing, chanting and sitting meditation.

Taijiquan is equally a path of Zen practice. When practicing Taijiquan, we first relax the body, breath, and mind. Then, when we move, we just move. We flow like a river, letting go of anything extra beyond the pure movement. When warding off, we just ward off; when rolling back, we just roll back. Our mind naturally becomes calm, clear, and open.

In push hands we practice maintaining this quality even when we are under duress. Confrontation lures us into tension, resistance, fear, fighting, or other forms of opposition. This is like Maya tempting the Buddha under the Bodhi tree. Like Buddha, we practice remaining clear and open regardless of what clouds are passing through the sky.

We follow no set form and practice no contrived technique; we just follow the movement of our partner, like a river flowing through its channel. Exerting no willfulness, we naturally remain in harmony with our partner. Then, when our partner makes a mistake, they are naturally pushed, without any contrived effort on our part.

This is the practice of “no-mind”. We keep this practice moment by moment, when doing the form, pushing hands, sparring, even when walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. When our practice does not change regardless of our situation, our mind is like a clear mirror only reflecting the moment. “Sky is blue, tree is green, dog is barking, woof, woof.”

This mind is already enlightenment, already complete. We just need to return to it each moment. Gradually, as our practice matures, larger and larger storm clouds can fill the sky and it affects our practice less and less. We remain calm and clear under duress, and respond naturally and effectively to whatever situation comes up.

The Buddha also said that when we are thinking, we, the universe, and all beings are separate. But if we cut off all thinking, we, the universe, and all beings become one. When our Taijiquan practice evolves beyond “my body”, “my practice”, “my skill”, we realize that our own practice is itself not different than the practice of all beings. Then, we naturally help one another along the path.