Taijiquan and Nonviolence

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical and ethical tension between the practice of taijiquan—a traditional Chinese martial art with violent origins—and a personal and professional commitment to nonviolence. Drawing from the author's experience as a senior taijiquan instructor and a scholar of ethics, the paper examines how a martial art rooted in Daoist and Confucian philosophy can paradoxically deepen a commitment to nonviolent practice. Clarifying definitions of both taijiquan and nonviolence, the paper argues that while taijiquan was originally developed as a system of combat, its underlying philosophy emphasizes yielding, restraint, and harmony. Engaging ancient Chinese texts such as the Daodejing and Yijing, the analysis demonstrates how taijiquan's somatic training complements the cultivation of inner discipline, emotional regulation, and moral responsiveness. Three key contributions are offered: taijiquan fosters inner nonviolence and self-mastery; supports preventative health and well-being; and offers a humane model of self-defense aimed at minimizing harm. The essay concludes that, far from undermining nonviolence, taijiquan—when practiced philosophically—can serve as a powerful gongfu (disciplined practice) for living a nonviolent life.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht das philosophische und ethische Spannungsverhältnis zwischen der Ausübung des Taijiquan - einer traditionellen chinesischen Kampfkunst mit gewalttätigen Ursprüngen - und einem persönlichen und beruflichen Engagement für Gewaltlosigkeit. Ausgehend von den Erfahrungen des Autors als erfahrener Taijiquan-Lehrer und Ethik-Wissenschaftler wird untersucht, wie eine Kampfkunst, die in der daoistischen und konfuzianischen Philosophie verwurzelt ist, paradoxerweise das Engagement für eine gewaltfreie Praxis vertiefen kann. Nach einer Klärung der Definitionen von Taijiquan und Gewaltlosigkeit wird argumentiert, dass Taijiquan zwar ursprünglich als Kampfsystem entwickelt wurde, seine zugrunde liegende Philosophie jedoch Nachgeben, Zurückhaltung und Harmonie betont. Unter Einbeziehung alter chinesischer Texte wie dem Daodejing und dem Yijing zeigt die Analyse, wie das somatische Training des Taijiquan die Kultivierung von innerer Disziplin, emotionaler Regulierung und moralischer Reaktionsfähigkeit ergänzt. Drei Schlüsselbeiträge werden angeboten: Taijiquan fördert innere Gewaltlosigkeit und Selbstbeherrschung; unterstützt präventive Gesundheit und Wohlbefinden; und bietet ein humanes Modell der Selbstverteidigung, das darauf abzielt, Schaden zu minimieren. Der Aufsatz kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Taijiquan - wenn es philosophisch praktiziert wird - keineswegs die Gewaltlosigkeit untergräbt, sondern vielmehr als kraftvolles Gongfu (disziplinierte Praxis) für ein gewaltfreies Leben dienen kann.

Preliminaries

"It's more aggressive than I imagined," my longtime friend and fellow philosopher commented as we left the training hall. "With your commitment to nonviolence, I'm quite surprised you enjoy such a violent form of exercise!" he added. I was attending a week intensive taijiquan[1] training in San Diego, California led by my teacher taijiquan master Dr. Jesse Tsao. My recently retired

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[1] In this paper I am using *taijiquan*, and *taiji* for short, rather than the more common *tai chi chuan*, or its short form *tai chi*, though the pronunciation is the same. Taijiquan is the now preferred Chinese (pinyin) transliteration rather than the now dated Wade Giles system.

friend was camping in his RV and had invited me to stay with him and his wife while I attended the training. My friend had ferried me to and from the dojo twice each day, and on this occasion had arrived early and watched the end of the session. Master Tsao was demonstrating martial arts applications with the explosive power of fajin. It was a far cry from the often slow and gentle taiji of most people's imagination. My friend's observations highlighted a tension I live with, as I am both a nonviolentist (philosophically and in practice) and a serious student of a martial art. This paper, then, analyzes why being a taijiquan practitioner and a nonviolentist might present an existential tension; how I personally live with that tension; and, further, how practicing taijiquan has enhanced my nonviolentism. I am a better nonviolentist because I practice taijiquan.

It will help the reader if I make clear from the start the experience I bring to the discussion, and what I mean by "taijiquan" and "nonviolence." As to my experience I am a student and teacher of traditional taijiquan, a practicing nonviolentist, and a professional philosopher. As a philosopher I find it helpful to be clear how words are used. People can often talk at cross purposes if they are not clear about the subject under discussion. In other words, people may use the same words but describe different phenomena with different understandings and interpretations. As taijiquan and nonviolence can both be understood in a myriad of ways, let me stipulate from the beginning how I am using those words.

Taijiquan

Taijiquan can be, and doubtless is, many things: a gentle movement art practiced by the elderly for good balance and general health; a weekly class at the YMCA for camaraderie and fun; a daily and serious practice to maintain good health and well-being; an "internal" martial art practiced for self-defense; a competitive sport replete with beautiful flowing movements performed to exacting standards; and even a "national treasure" for the Republic of China. All of these ways of understanding taijiquan are valid in their different contexts.

Taiji is practiced today more for its health benefits than as a serious form of self-defense and for understandable reasons, not least that though apparently simple, taiji takes much time and effort to master. For self-defense, other systems produce quicker results. Studies have demonstrated that regular practice of taiji helps maintain good posture and balance, reduces blood pressure, strengthens essential muscles and tendons and gives to its practitioners a general feeling of well-being. Peter Wayne and Mark Fuerst of Harvard University, among others, have documented the evident health benefits of regular taiji practice,[2] and its roots in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Long practiced in the East, TCM is becoming increasingly recognized in the West as a comprehensive system that includes theories about nature, the human body and well-being, all rooted in ancient Chinese cosmology and philosophy. Among its constituent disciplines are the development of the body's natural energy pathways (most commonly known in acupuncture), the use of herbs and nutrition, and specific exercises developed over centuries. Taijiquan molded those understandings into a system of fighting; its *raison d'être* being an efficient and effective method of self-defence with health benefits being of secondary importance. The early history of the system that became known as taijiquan is shrouded in mystery and some of the foundation myths need to be taken as metaphor, if not with a grain of salt! We are on more sure footing from documentation from the sixteenth century onward,[3] when Chen Wanting, a military man, formulated what became the Chen

[2]Peter M. Wayne, and Mark L. Fuerst, *The Harvard Medical Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart and Sharp Mind* Boston and London: Shambhala, 2013.

[3]See history of taijiquan in Davidine Siam-Voon Sim, and David Gaffney, *Chen Style Taijiquan: the Source of Taiji Boxing*, (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2002) 9-30; Jwing-Ming Yang, Tai Chi Chuan: *Classical Yang Style* (Wolfboro: YMAA Publication Center, 2010) 1-38; Mark Chen, *Old Frame Chen Family Taijiquan* (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2004) 9-23; and for an in depth understanding see Jesse Tsao Tsao, Jesse with Jason Weil. *Practical Tai Chi Training: a 9-Stage Method for Mastery.* San Diego: Tai Chi Healthways, 2021.

family system of taijiquan. The other traditional family forms of Taijiquan (Yang, Wu, Sun and others) were adaptations and modification of the original Chen fighting system. What is clear is that taijiquan from its beginning until the mid-twentieth century was a fighting system and bore only small resemblance to those current versions of taiji bereft of all martial applications. If taijiquan is merely a vaguely "new-age" form of exercise, no tension will be found with nonviolence. And though some taiji teachers eschew its roots in martial arts and claim that taiji is only a gentle movement practice to bring health, to do so distorts the practice and underutilizes its benefits.

So, to be specific, in this chapter I am using taijiquan to mean that Chinese martial art that originated as a sometimes brutal form of fighting designed to cause injury to opponents and even death in life-threatening situations. Herein lies the tension for a nonviolentist. If taijiquan is nothing more than a health and healing art no tension with nonviolence exists. However, to take such a view is to deny the origins and development of taijiquan, and to be limited in plumbing the depths of the art.

Nonviolence

Human violence is ubiquitous. Philosopher Barry Gan defines violence as "the intentional use of force to cause harm."[4] In the United States, violence in TV shows and movies is "as American as apple pie." The fear of violence is so prevalent that 42 percent of US households own guns, some of course for hunting, but largely as protection.[5] Yet violence is more than bad guys and guns. Forms of violence include physical, sexual, psychological and systemic harms; from small micro aggressions and bullying, to corporal punishment, to terrorism and war. Violence in all its forms is a disruption of well-being; it always works against the flourishing of the one who is violated. Despite the ubiquity of violence in entertainment and the media, most human interactions do not require a violent response; our common humanity would be better served by restraining violent impulses and acting with kindness, compassion and empathy. Nonviolence is a much needed antidote to violence.

Following the partial successes of M.K. Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King Jr. in the USA, much contemporary writing on nonviolence – often phrased as nonviolent resistance – is taken to be a strategy for achieving social justice, or a means of gaining political power. Though perhaps counterintuitive, nonviolence is more effective in bringing social change than violence. Chenoweth and Stevens analyzed resistance movements in the twentieth century, characterized them as either violent or nonviolent, and looked at the success rates in each decade. In the twentieth century nonviolent campaigns succeeded over fifty-percent of the time, whereas violent campaigns succeeded only nearly thirty-percent of the time. On the contrary, violence failed over sixty-percent of the time, and nonviolence failed just over twenty-percent of the time.[6]

However, my understanding of nonviolence is more far-reaching than the political understanding and is a form of what Gan terms "comprehensive nonviolence"; that is, nonviolence in every aspect of life. Nonviolence is a practice that requires day by day dedication, persistence, and the mundane repetition of new skills. Like any skill set, say playing the piano, nonviolence requires what in Chinese society would be termed gongfu—any practice that requires dedicated hard work, with consistent application and time. In other words, nonviolence is not a belief, or set of beliefs, but an activity to be practiced; that is, nonviolence is not only what you think but also what you do.

In my 2021 book *Pragmatic Nonviolence: Working Toward a Better World*, I define nonviolence as "A practice that, whenever possible, seeks the well-being of the Other by refraining from violence

[4]Barry L Gan, *Violence and Nonviolence: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) 85-86.

[5]Statistica. "Firearms in the The US—Statistics and Facts." https://www.statista.com/topics/1287/firearms-in-the-us/

[6]Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephen (*Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 8-9.

and acting according to lovingkindness." Like any *gongfu*, nonviolence is a practice that requires daily perseverance and conscious commitment. Nonviolence is not an easy fix, nor can one become a master of nonviolence quickly or easily. As with any practice one faces failure and frustration, periods of great movement forward and, sometimes, the dismay of stagnation.

Someone committed to nonviolence would, whenever possible, seek the well-being of the Other. In the history of philosophy, the notion of well-being, or *eudaimonia* in Greek, has a noble history. The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that well-being was the goal, the *telos*, of human life. Well-being for a person would be their flourishing in every conceivable sense—physically, psychologically, relationally, and spiritually. Someone committed to nonviolence would seek the well-being not only of themselves but also of others. In my definition I capitalize "Other" as a shorthand to indicate all those others with whom we are in relationship. That includes all people, from close family and friends, to colleagues and neighbors, to fellow citizens, and even the global community. It also includes other animals, and the whole of nature and the environment that in numerous ways sustains us.

As violence always works against the well-being of the Other, the practice of nonviolence is first and foremost a refusal to use violence to solve problems or to get one's own way. Yet nonviolence is not merely refraining from violence but is also the development of lovingkindness. Lovingkindness respects the Other, shows empathy and compassion for the Other's situation and seeks solutions that work toward well-being with the least harm to everyone concerned.

For me, nonviolence is something morally speaking like a categorical imperative; in other words it is close to an absolute. However, like many philosophers, I am leery of absolutes and I am not suggesting such for nonviolence. I suggest "whenever possible," for to be absolutely nonviolent is impossible. I can imagine situations where to seek the well-being of all at one and the same time is not possible. We sometimes face a choice between well-beings. Like Kongzi (Confucius), most of us see our immediate families as requiring a particular kind of care and well-being—the kind we cannot give to those outside our face-to-face community, let alone those across the globe. It is not that we have no care for distant others, but simply that our care cannot be of the same kind or quality. In my book *Love as a Guide to Morals* (2012) I call this "expanding circles of loving concern." Practically, and of necessity, I choose the well-being of my family over the well-being of some other family. Also, an argument can be made quite reasonably that self-defense is the closest thing to a natural right. When attacked one has a right to defend oneself, proportionally to the threat posed to be sure, but that defense might involve an element of violence. Even so, self-defense in a situation where only violence would restrain the violence of an aggressor is, for most people most of the time, rare.

Ancient Chinese Cosmology, Philosophy and Nonviolence

Besides Traditional Chinese Medicine, with its understandings of the optimal functioning of the human body, taijiquan is based on the cosmology and philosophy of the ancient Chinese world. In terms of ancient Chinese cosmology, before anything existed was the state of *wuji* – no form. When *taiji* arose *yin* and *yang* separated and gave birth to the "ten thousand things," everything that exists. The universe is the constant interaction and interplay of the complementary opposites of *yin* and *yang*. In TCM, the human body functions optimally when *yin* and *yang* are in harmony. In taijiquan, *yin* and *yang* and the constantly changing relationship between them is the basis of self-defense. This is the philosophy of taiji, or the Dao. Some elementary books on taijiquan translate the Chinese literally as "grand ultimate [taiji] boxing [quan]," and continue to explain that taijiquan is the ultimate form of boxing. Such is inadequate, as a literal translation does not do justice to the complex philosophy contained in the Chinese character *taiji*. It would be better to say

that taijiquan is the method of "boxing—open hand self-defense" that is based on the philosophy of the Dao, of *yin* and *yang*, of *taiji*. Taijiquan (open hand, boxing) is only one element of a system that includes taijijian (straight sword), taijibang (short stick), taijizhang (walking stick), and other weapon forms. Taijijian is, then, the method of straight sword fighting based on the philosophy of taiji, and so on.

Philosophically taijiquan is rooted in the ancient Chinese classics the Yijing and the Daodejing and in Confucianism. These ancient Chinese texts are the philosophy of which taijiquan is the practice. Readers of Chinese philosophy will know that whereas traditional Western philosophy is often focused on clarity, explanation, logic and argument, Eastern philosophies are more nuanced and suggestive. The ancient Chinese characters—ideograms— that make up the texts do not lend themselves to slavishly literal or definitive translations. Often written as aphorisms, short stories, and more poetry than prose, the texts suggest many different meanings. Compare several translations, or interpretations, of the Daodejing and though the general impression given will likely be similar each translator adds their own creativity and understanding through the lens of their own experience. Of importance for my purposes here is to note that taijiquan as a system of self-defense (and derivatively of health) is based on a profound philosophical system that leans toward nonviolence. I would go so far as to say that the taiji player who does not study the foundational philosophy misses something important. Equally, ancient Chinese philosophy besides its rationality is also somatic, and somatic practice – to feel and experience *yin* and *yang* in one's own body – aids in understanding the philosophy. The *Daodejing* reads very differently for me now than before I became a student and practitioner of taijiquan. The text now makes sense in a way that it did not before, and as my taiji reaches new depths so does my understanding of the philosophy. And while it is not possible to say that the *Yijing*, the *Daodejing* and the *Analects* are pacifist texts, they are certainly pacifistic and lean heavily toward nonviolence and the well-being of all. Below, I illustrate the relationship of elements of the *Daodejing* to taijiquan and also suggest its nonviolent bias. (All excerpts are from Mitchell's version.)

Being and nonbeing create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
Before and after follow each other.
(2)

In expressing foundational yin/yang theory, the *Daodejing* here describes the basics of taiji movement. Taiji movement, both internally and externally, is a constant dance between yin and yang. Each couplet in this verse is applied to each movement in taiji.

In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.
(8)

Living close to the ground (rooting), simplicity, fairness and generosity, enjoyment and being

completely present are characteristics to the taiji player aims. For example, beginners tend to make taiji over-complicated moving parts of the body that in fact do not move, but only appear to. "Wave hands like a cloud," included in all the family styles, looks like arms are being waved across the body. In fact, the seeming movement of the arms is really a movement controlled from the waist and it is the body that turns giving an illusion of waving arms.

Do you have the patience to wait
Til the mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
Til the right action arises by itself?
(15)

This verse speaks much to the practice of push hands – the exercise where partners seek to find each other's center and move the partner off-balance. Much patience is required, waiting for clarity as the player "listens to" the other player's body, movement and breathing. Eventually the right action arises,and the opponent is easily moved. This contains the principle of wu wei, action through non-action.

Whoever relies on the Tao in governing men
Doesn't try to force issues
Or defeat enemies by force of arms.
For every force there is a counterforce.
Violence, even well intentioned
Always rebounds upon oneself.
(30)

This verse reaches to the heart of the nonviolent core of taiji philosophy and the practice of taijiquan. "Forcing issues" in taiji play loses the body's coherence. "Forcing issues" in push hands play will always lead to defeat. Force leads to counterforce, violence leads to counter-violence in a deepening spiral of harm.

Weapons are the tools of violence;
All decent men detest them.
Weapons are the tools of fear;
A decent man will avoid them
Except in the direst necessity
And, if compelled, will use them
Only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is the highest value.
If the peace has been shattered,
How can he be content?
His enemies are not demons,
But human beings like himself.

He doesn't wish them personal harm.
Nor does he rejoice in victory.
How could he rejoice in victory
And delight in the slaughter of men?
He enters battle gravely, with sorrow and with great compassion,
As if he were attending a funeral.
(31)
There is no greater illusion than fear,
No greater wrong than preparing to defend yourself,
No greater misfortune than having an enemy.
(46)
The more weapons you have,
The less secure you will be.
(57)

These verses explicitly reject violence and building weaponry. Even if compelled to use violence in self-defence restraint is the watchword. Peace is the highest value and even self-defense that injures the opponent shatters peace. The *junzi* – humane person – will feel keenly the pain caused to others, even those who are enemies. Thus, violence is rejected.

Mastering others is strength,
Mastering yourself is true power.
(33)

The way of taiji is self-knowledge and self-mastery, always harder than mastering others. To master the self is to know the way of softness and yielding – concepts counterintuitive to the notion that mastery is about being hard and assertive. Here, too, is the wisdom of taiji.

The soft overcomes the hard.
The slow overcomes the fast.
(36)
Return is the movement of the Tao.
Yielding is the way of the Tao.
(40)
The gentlest thing in the world
Overcomes the hardest thing in the world.
That which has no substance
Enters where there is no space.
This shows the value of non-action.
(43)
When two great forces oppose each other,
The victory will go

To the one who knows how to yield.
(69)

How taijiquan works toward the reduction of violence and the enhancement of well-being

For these reasons, I have found taijiquan to be helpful in my practice of nonviolence. Specifically, I mention three areas:

1. Personal work, discipline, restraining inner violence

Nonviolence is a practice. It is not the work of a moment, nor is it merely an intellectual commitment. Like any practice, nonviolence requires dedication commitment and the building of good habits. Taijiquan is remarkably similar and, for me, the two practices meld into one and strengthen the other. Both practices require inner work to constantly refuse violence as a way of solving difficulties. My nonviolent practice is better because I practice taijiquan. My taijiquan practice is better because I practice nonviolence.

2. Preventative healthcare and the enhancement of well-being

Undoubtedly, taijiquan has enhanced my own well-being and has been a key factor in continued preventative healthcare. My understanding of nonviolence is about maximizing the well-being of the Other. In order to do that effectively, I must take care of of my own well-being in order to function in the best way possible. To know well-being is to thrive physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Taijiquan helps immensely.

3. In self-defense the minimizing of violence

Nonviolence requires the minimizing of violence. On very rare occasions, forceful self-defence will be the most likely action to minimize violence. Even so, as the Daodejing says, enter "battle gravely, with sorrow and with great compassion, as if … attending a funeral." Taijiquan is a humane, largely nonviolent form of self-defence. To be sure, as a committed nonviolentist, tensions remain for me but such is the tension of human being.

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