

Tai Chi Classics

An Interview with Daoist Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis by Matthew Brewer

What are the Taiji Classics and what is their relevance to Taiji practice?

The *Taiji Classics* include the overarching principles of what is known today as Taijiquan. Each principle is more like a book title, having an extraordinary number of ramifications.

How did you first encounter the Classics and how were they taught?

When I first learned Taiji in Taiwan, my teachers would use phrases from the *Taiji Classics* that I didn't understand. When I subsequently trained in Tokyo with Wang Shu Jin's most senior student there, he too would throw out old classical Chinese phrases in Japanese. Although I still didn't understand the meaning, what was very clear is that when a teacher really wanted to make a point, they would quote something from the *Classics*.

As the years went on, I found that some teachers would commonly either state a principle from the *Classics* and then teach it, or teach you a lot of stuff and say, "Well, this is where it is in the *Classics*," and keep going through the ramifications.

Then in 1983, when I was first learning the Old Yang Style I was taught *Classics* line by line. This occurred first with Bai Hua, Liu Hung Chieh's other disciple, and then my teacher Liu himself. With Liu it went further because he went into where and how the *Classics* interrelate with the Daoist tradition.

The vast majority of the material that's in the *Taiji Classics*, most of the phrases that have to do with qi and spirit, come from a much older work that was from four or five hundred years earlier. I believe it's called the *Hua Ting Ning Jing*. While the rest are taken from war manuals.

So, you have to know how to look at the *Taiji Classics* in terms of what it's doing for your qi or how it is specifically relating to what you do with your qi and your mind to produce the internal power used for fighting, because they're all mixed together. In the old Chinese way of doing things these weren't considered to be separate. The internal martial arts were based upon applying the principles of qigong and the larger principle of Daoist meditation to be effective in warfare. So to say exactly where one started and the other one finished was a little bit tricky.

Now, as I went further I learned from Liu how those same principles had their cognates within Daoist meditation, which has more to do with how the principles are applied in terms of spirit. Again, principles are generalised and have many, many layers of meaning. It isn't just one thing. Today, most people who teach Taiji don't really know the *Classics*.

It sounds as though traditional Taijiquan doesn't have the mind or the spirit work of the Daoist tradition and that Liu showed you more about the roots of the Classics.

Liu taught me from the roots because that's how he learned it, and because he understood Taiji as a martial art and the internal martial arts in general. He could clearly see the thread. The *Taiji Classics* go to this point, but then what are the implications of those statements? Many martial arts practitioners only know some of the chapters in the book. They don't know all the chapters in the book and depending upon the tradition, it's a question of how much is left out. You see if you have a body of knowledge, depending upon the applications you try to create, you may not use most of them. You may only use some parts of the body of knowledge that are needed for specific applications, or you may use the whole thing.

There is nothing written in the *Taiji Classics* that says: If you do this, you will become spiritually enlightened; if you do that, you will become a living Buddha; or, if you do this and that, you will become a Daoist immortal. Instead, the text looks at how to practice martial and energetic techniques, or describes a generalised principle to embody. The implication is that, if you do, you will be able to replicate what is talked about in the following stanzas.

Again, the *Taiji Classics* are more geared towards martial arts. As I have repeatedly said, I once spent time with Yang Shouzhong (Yang Zhenming) who was the original Yang's eldest great grandson. In my conversations with him, he said that his family had never practiced meditation, "We do martial arts and qigong. That is what we have always done." So many of the implications about where practice might take you in terms of emotions, the mind, karma and essence, what you might call serious spiritual subjects was not a part of Taiji. Yang was very clear that his family did not do meditation, and he knew that this was going to be a shared statement.



You have highlighted the phrase “From posture to posture the internal energy is unbroken,” (Shi shi shang chung jin bu duan) as being one of the most important and you’ve spoken of it as a spiritual principle. Is it also as an energetic and even physical one? Yes

Could you tell us about this one thread that runs through the jing, qi and shen (body, qi and spirit) phases of practice?

First, you must grasp “From posture to posture,” which implies from action to action: from physical movement to physical movement the internal power is unbroken. Like a light bulb, whether the light shines bright or goes low with the dimmer switch, the electricity is always connected.

With Daoist meditation you come to the question of: from mental space to mental space, whether active or quiescent, are your emotions connected? Are your emotions well balanced, functioning, doing what they’re supposed to do? The same thing goes for mental and psychic spheres as well as your karma. Is your karma connected or is it blocked and clogged up? Bad karma and the corresponding actions rip you to shreds at the level of essence. Is your essence actually fully connected and fully awake, or is it intermittent turning on-off-on-off-on? Well, the same parallel exists between having power in terms of fighting and in terms of continuing your life and your spiritual existence.

Shi shi shang chung jin bu duan is a basic consideration in all of Daoism. One of the most fundamental concepts in this Chinese spiritual tradition is things being fully and smoothly connected: being connected to the Earth, to the Universe, to yourself and your emotions.

Of course, you can be disconnected. For example, the ego is nothing more than the biggest disconnecting device in the universe. However, Daoists don’t go on about the ego. They simply talk about connection. If you are fully connected, the ego is effectively null and void. As long as you keep focusing on the ego, you’re focusing on something that ultimately doesn’t exist, because everything in the universe is connected. The problem is that your mind is blocked, so it’s not connecting. There isn’t any problem with the universe.

This is where you start in the spiritual tradition of Daoism. The classic phrase in Daoist meditation is “*jing, qi, shen*” which translates as “body, energy, spirit” and is known as the three treasures. Martial arts are essentially about the body (*jing*) phase. In classic Daoism, *jing* is about the ability of the body to generate whatever it can generate: the energy that allows the body to do what it can. How can you call martial arts anything more than that? It is a body that fights a body in martial arts. So, to bring power out of the body to defend against somebody else’s body, you’re

ultimately dealing with how all the energies a human being can bring into play have to manifest through the body, or you can’t call it a martial art. You could be a spiritually enlightened being, but still could get knocked on your butt if you didn’t know how to use your body. Being totally clear doesn’t mean that you couldn’t have your head cracked open.

There is an old Zen story that tries to make a parallel with that idea, which is, I think, false. It talks about a Zen priest who was in a town when a crazy guy arrives. The priest makes the mistake of saying something that annoys the crazy guy, so he says, “Okay, I’ll meet you three days hence and we’ll have it out.”

The priest says, “I can’t fight,” so he gets a master swordsman to come and teach him how to fight. The master says, “You must be completely one-pointed in what you do.” So the priest demonstrates that he can be one-pointed in his meditation. So the master says, “You’ll go out and beat him.” And the story goes that the priest goes out and beats the guy.

This is hogwash. The fact of the matter is that the priest’s mind could be as open as possible, but that does not mean that his body is connected sufficiently, without which his opponent would simply draw his sword and cut the priest’s head off before he could blink. Yes, the priest was connected in certain areas, but not in others. A martial art has to include physical capacity; otherwise you cannot call it a martial art. You can do martial arts movements as meditation, but it cannot be a martial art unless it is capable of engaging in war. Even if you never have a physical conflict, you have to have the capacity to handle it.

Are you connected physically, emotionally? In terms of the spiritual realm, you must move from where martial arts can be done not only as qigong, but shengong. Shengong is spiritual qigong, where you move into the space of the emotions through to essence. Here, you’re doing martial arts within the emotional, mental, psychic and karmic realms.

At times, shengong was referred to only as psychic achievement, where you could do things psychically. But, psychic ability is only a small piece of a larger subject.

To follow that up, in terms of “jing, qi and shen”, qi and shen would be shengong. Yes.

My teacher Liu taught me Taiji in terms of shengong, which is the primary reason I teach Wu Style Taiji. I know how shengong works in the Wu Style, which does not exist in the Yang Style. I do not teach Wu Style for purely physical reasons although there are good physical reasons to teach it. Wu Style will do things that the larger styles of Taiji, like the Yang Style, don’t do as well, but they are essentially the same style.

However, the spiritual aspect found in the Wu Style is not present in the Yang Style. It may have been adapted in some other Daoist meditation lineages, but I was never exposed to it. I was taught the whole process of shengong within the Wu Style, and have the knowledge and the capacity to pass it on to a future generation.

The other equally important phrase that you have highlighted is: “When one part moves, all parts move; one part stops, all parts stop” (Yi dong wu you bu dong; yi jing wu you bu jing). Would you tell us more about this phrase and how it relates to the three treasures?

The main point is that it’s absolutely required to implement the first phrase, “From posture to posture the internal energy is unbroken.” “Unbroken” implies that something could be broken or not broken. “One part moves, all parts move” implies not broken and connected. “One part stops, all parts stop”: if one part stops and the others keep moving, that again implies that the connection is broken. The difference between the two phrases, at a very practical level, is that the statement, “the power is unbroken,” is looking at the fact that the connection is manifested and fully integrated. It is the large, general principle. The second one is much more about the fine details that allow you to find out whether the big principle is being implemented, the little stuff without which you never arrive. That’s about the only difference between the two statements.

In your book, Taiji: Health for Life, you explain that many of the phrases in the Classics are interconnected and build upon each other.

More accurately, they are all interconnected. You just have to understand that the interconnections exist and what they are. That is seeing all the parts as one whole fabric. Then again, some of the groupings of phrases are more interconnected because they are looking at a certain part of the tapestry.

Would you mind illustrating that point with one of the phrases: “Sinking the qi to the dantian” (qi chen dantian)?

Although not overtly stated, the implication of “Sinking qi to the dantian” is that the qi actually sinks completely to your feet, into the earth, and circulates back up, reconnecting to the dantian. The whole circle is made so the entire body is connected to the lower dantian. Again, this reinforces the statements: “From posture to posture the internal energy is unbroken”; and, “One part moves, all parts move.” If at any point the qi is not sunk to the dantian, it means that one part of your body is moving while another part is not. They are not different statements, but rather they are looking at the same thing from different angles.

The old Indian story about a bunch of blind wise men touching an elephant illustrates this

point well. One touches the elephant’s tail and he thinks it’s a snake. Another one touches the elephant’s body and says it’s a wall. Another one touches its leg and thinks it’s a pillar. It’s one elephant, but at each angle certain features are dramatically more noticeable than others. The elephant may even appear to be an entirely different object. Whichever part you focus on seems to be the whole thing, but it’s only a part of it. You can’t say any part is something different from the elephant because the elephant moves as one piece. It doesn’t move as forty pieces going in different directions.

How does sinking the qi work as a physical principle, energetic principle and so on?

Physically there is a basic principle in Chinese medicine that energy the body cannot use, waste products, blocked energy, is most easily disposed of by moving it downwards. It will exit into the ground. All your body’s waste products, such as, faeces, urine and sweat, naturally flow downwards.

When the body clears the qi downwards, most diseases disappear because blockages are removed in the process. Two things occur: First, if you clear down the body, you also clear the same channels that allow energy to rise up your body. Secondly, there’s another basic principle that the way the body works energetically is that if its qi sinks, it rises automatically, just like bouncing a basketball. Now, the opposite is not true. You can raise qi but it may not sink. You can charge your channels but you may not release the blockages that are in them, which may cause problems, such as going a bit crazy or having physical problems.

From an emotional perspective, very yang emotions such as anger, frustration, extreme greed or anxiety are usually about energy in the body rising and not being able to fall. So if you’re able to create a downward flow of qi, many of the problems go away. Likewise, you can have the opposite problem of energy dropping down the body, but not being able to rise up. In this case, emotions become extremely yin and you may begin to experience depression, loneliness, sadness or grief. If your qi can fully drop down to the lower dantian, it circulates down and then up, clearing these exaggerated emotions.

From the perspective of Daoist meditation, there is no problem with the existence of any emotion. There is no problem with being angry or sad, or even being mildly depressed about the state of the world or the people around you. I said mildly, I didn’t say extremely! Emotions can motivate you to ponder or consider different aspects of life that otherwise you would ignore. If you are only happy and only high you can watch a baby bleeding out on the street and you’ll walk by and say, “Oh that’s very nice, oh I’m really feeling well today,” and you’ll walk on. So, the fact that you can have down emotions can also bring a

level of awareness and the impetus to do something, but emotions have a natural lifespan.

Such emotions are a very powerful motivating factor. You rise up and you become more normal and more happy, because now is the time to go and do something about it. If you were to stay in a depressed state, you’d empathise with the child, but you’d probably sit there while the child died in front of you.

It’s the same thing if you’re happy. Where’s the line between being really happy and being manic? Where’s the line between really being happy and not being able to recognise what needs to be done?

There are cycles. The body has cycles just like weather changing. Regarding emotional energy, how can you sink your qi so that when the emotion has run its course, excess energy naturally clears and you more easily move onto the next thing?

Sinking qi is also important in terms of becoming physically grounded. The lower dantian is the only connection point of all the channels of your body that relate to your physicality. The other dantians in the body don’t necessarily connect with your physical body. Because they don’t connect with the physical body a person could end up being purely mental. Much of life is about the reality of being in a body. You are not just some ghost floating around. There’s a difference between virtual reality and physical reality.

When you’re angry, if your qi sinks to your dantian enough, you’re not so angry. Thus, sinking your qi calms the emotions that derive from your body. Later, the fact that your qi can move down enough makes your body very stable. It becomes a platform from which you begin to see your emotions and flow with them. How far do you go with your emotions? It’s an issue of balance. It’s very difficult to be balanced if you lack a central point inside you that’s stable.

Beyond the emotions, you have the psychic level. What is it to have that point of stability inside you? How do all the psychic energies in a person intersect with their physical body? If you cannot sink your qi to the dantian, you cannot find that place. In terms of karma, if you want to be able to recognise what you need to do, you must simultaneously be present in your body. Likewise, when you start going into the super-rarefied mental realm, you can get lost in the world of purely mental ideas, mental constructions, unless you sink your qi to your dantian.



My last question is about application. What training methods would be most effective for implementing “sinking the qi to the dantian”? Would standing practices be the place to start?

If you talk about a person who’s just starting, an ordinary person who’s not going to put the hours and hours a day of practice in, yes I would say that standing is the easiest access point to learning how to sink qi. It doesn’t have to be standing with your arms by your side (which I describe in detail in my book, *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body*), or standing with your arms out in front of you as if you were hugging a tree. The standing practice could just as easily be done holding the standard postures of the Taiji form, which was the way it was commonly taught in the Yang Style of Taiji, but was not done as much by the Wu family.

The interviewer is Bruce’s student, Dr. Matthew Brewer. He is a certified Energy Arts instructor and is a Registered Instructor with the TCUGB. He teaches weekly classes in and around Canterbury and runs the NHS Taiji for Chronic Pain Service for Eastern and Coastal Kent. His website is: www.taichi.uk.com.

Bruce Frantzis spent more than a decade following the Daoist path of warrior/healer/priest in China, where he was trained by some of its greatest masters. He is the first known Westerner to hold authentic lineages in qigong, bagua, Taiji, hsing-i and Daoist meditation. Frantzis also studied in Japan and India for five years and has extensive experience in Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, Kundalini, energetic healing therapies and Daoist Fire and Water traditions. He posts articles regularly on his blog, www.TaiChiMaster.com.

For the first time in more than a decade, Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis will be offering a certification program in Wu Style Tai Chi Short Form. This intensive course plus smaller workshops will occur July through August 2011 in Brighton, England, see www.Energysarts.com for details.