

# Taiji and the Procrustean Bed

or

How Not to Get it Right

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[Theseus] put to death Procrustes, ... this man compelled the travellers who passed by to lie down upon a bed, and if any were too long for the bed he cut off the parts of their body which protruded, while in the case of such as were too short for it he stretched (*prokrouein*) their legs, this being the reason why he was given the name Procrustes ('the stretcher').<sup>1</sup>

You might well ask what relevance the Greek myths have for our practices, which, after all, originated in China. In the case of Procrustes the answer is, 'Unfortunately, a great deal'. While chopping bits off or stretching them to fit a bed is ridiculous as well as gruesome, it is all too common for us to find ourselves doing a similar thing by forcing our bodies into the 'right' shape of a form in order to make it conform to the ideal. Stretching ourselves beyond our limits in this way will inevitably be at the expense of comfort and connection.

It is important to remember that any neigong, qigong or Taiji form is there to help us to move in the direction of life; the technical term is *yangsheng* 養生 'nurturing life'. Forms are not designed as an end in themselves.

What is the point of doing a form simply to perform it correctly? The answer may well be aesthetic: 'because it is beautiful', etc. In which case you are dancing, and that's fine if that's your intention, but do not confuse it with practising the internal arts. How a form looks has never been a concern in this tradition. Forms have always been about function; most fundamentally, connection.

The three, usually overlapping, types of function we seek in the internal arts are: health (medicine), martial (reverse medicine), and spiritual (the rest of you). Particular forms will focus on one or more of these domains. Few engage with all three equally. For instance, *Dragon & Tiger Qigong* is primarily medical, with some martial and spiritual elements.

To execute a form 'correctly' at the expense of our health is what the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* calls, 'cutting off your head to change hats':

Now, if there were those who cut off their heads in order to change their hats, or that killed themselves to change clothes, everyone would certainly consider them confused. Why? Because hats are for adorning the head, clothes are for adorning the body. If you kill that which you want to decorate and make the decoration all important, then you do not know the reason for acting!<sup>2</sup>

Why then specify external ideals for an internal form? The answer is, 'To provide a direction of travel along the way'. It is useful to practice in a certain direction. Practising as close to the ideal as possible, while staying within our comfortable range, will release open the body most efficiently and, gradually, will enable us to gain the most benefit from the form. As always, it is a case of applying the Goldilocks principle: not too much, not too little, but just enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* Vol. III, Book IV, 59.6. Translation by C. H. Oldfather

<sup>2</sup> *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* 21.4.