

(Not) getting it right

or

Taiji's Procrustean Bed

[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').¹

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 may be ridiculous as well as gruesome, it is all too common for us to find ourselves forcing our bodies into the 'right' shape of a form in order to make it conform to the ideal. This 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; of *yangsheng* 養生 'nurturing life'.² Forms are not designed as ends in themselves. Just like listening to or playing a piece of music, we do not do the form in order to get to the end of it. It is what happens along the way that counts. As Bruce has often said, the point of Taiji is not physical movement.

What is the point of doing a form simply in order to perform it perfectly correctly according to some external measure? The answer might be aesthetic: 'because it is beautiful', etc. In which case you are doing wushu, gymnastics or dancing, which is 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. For instance, *Dragon & Tiger Qigong* is primarily medical, with some martial and spiritual elements.

There are many ways to perform a form 'correctly' at the expense of the benefit that we could gain from it. Firstly, there is rigid adherence to the size and shape of the form. It is quite common to find the view that one's stance must always be 'so', long or wide, etc. This, all-must-fit-one-size attitude is particularly unnatural. True Taiji is based on principle. How each of us can best embody those principles is not externally identical to everyone else, that is to say there is natural variation. It is one reason why different forms have developed: different masters found that they could best embody their Taiji in different ways.

¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* Vol. III, Book IV, 59.6. Translation by C. H. Oldfather: https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/4D*.html.

² See 'Nurturing Life', <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Nurturing-Life.pdf>.

This is why the Wu Style looks different to the Yang style, the Taiji is the same, for the most part, but the embodiment is different.

Not allowing our forms to shrink and grow with the seasons is another way to miss the point of the form. Our bodies are naturally tighter in the winter and looser in the summer. If we tried to adhere to the same size form, or relentlessly tried to open it up, without paying attention to the seasons, we would be working against the body instead of with and within it. Remember these are mind *in* matter practices rather than mind *over* matter ones.

There is a fundamental yin-yang balance between structure and flow in the internal arts. Bruce has always taught alignment before circles, and for a good reason. Those who go straight for a flowing form generally end up with very poor alignments, which can damage the body, especially the knees and spine, rather than strengthen it. The ideal is to develop good alignment first and then round off the corners.³ There will always be a balance to find between structure and flow, which like all balance is dynamic. Sometimes we need more structure and sometimes we need more flow. Too much structure – over emphasis on alignment – makes us rigid, too much flow makes us flaccid, which paradoxically enough weakens the circulations that we are developing. The word for alignment in the internal arts is the same as ‘correct, right, straight’: *zhèng* 正. Too much trying to get it right binds rather than liberates.

Why then specify external ideals in an internal form? The answer is: in order to provide a stable enough container to hold all of the internal content. Bruce uses the image of fine wine in a bottle. You buy the bottle of wine for the wine, not the bottle. Still, the bottle needs to be good enough to hold the wine. Similarly, the external form needs to be connected and integrated enough to hold the neigong.

Practising as close to the ideal as we are able, given our present level of integration, which is always the determining factor, without straining, will release open the body most efficiently, and will gradually enable us to maximise the internal potential of the form. As always, it is a case of applying the Goldilocks principle: not too much, not too little, but just enough,⁴ and seeking what is natural.

Thus, even though a duck's leg are short, to stretch them would make him sad; even though a crane's legs are long, to cut them off would bring him grief. Thus, what is long by nature should not be cut off, and what is short by nature should not be stretched.⁵

It is ironic that by trying too hard to get it right we actually reduce the quality of our practice. If we find the balance of ‘trying, but not too hard’ we can avoid stretching our ducks and shortening our cranes.

3 See ‘Rounding off the Corners’, <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Rounding-Off-the-Corners.pdf>.

4 See ‘Making use of the Middle’, <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Making-Use-of-the-Middle.pdf>.

5 ICS *Zhuangzi*: 8/22/14.