

1 Entering the Zone

If you really know where your own mind comes from, boundless obstacles caused by your own actions will be cleared all at once. After that, all sorts of extraordinary possibilities will come to you without your seeking them.

Dahui, twelfth-century Chan master

It's ninety degrees and climbing on an August day at an asphalt basketball court in New York City. Netless metal rims. Broken water fountain. Shirtless kids in baggy shorts. Basketballs worn smooth from incessant contact with the hardened lava now radiating through my forty-dollar Nikes.

I'm playing in a pick-up game of three-on-three with kids who aspire some day to be half my age. They spend their summers doing just this: playing basketball. For me, chasing down some Allan Iverson wannabee with lots of attitude and a flawed jump shot is just a quick way to get a sweat going. Most of them are better players at fifteen than I will ever be. Not that I'm complaining. That I'm able to keep up with them at all while on the north side of fifty is satisfying enough. My expectations are modest. Today I'm here on a whim. I haven't played all summer, but they need a warm body to fill out the roster. I have a little time, so what the hell.

It took one game to twenty-one just to get my wind back. I'm playing without my glasses, so I can barely see the rim. But I'm just here for the workout and the thrill of competition. As long as the team I'm on is winning, we keep playing. I'll stay until we lose.

I'm happy to pass, grab rebounds, chase down loose balls, stick a hand in a shooter's face--do the garbage work. I won't shoot unless I have to. The defense starts to leave me uncovered because I'm passing up open shots. "Shoot it!" a teammate yells at me. That's all I need.

The rim is a fuzzy blur without my glasses, but I let one fly from three-point range. Swish. (Or it would have been a swish had there been a net to swish through.) I'm as surprised as anyone, but I don't let on.

Another pass to me. Another shot. It goes through too. Hmmm. And another. The guy who had been slacking off me is now in my face. He's three inches taller and a third my age. He can leap out of his shoes. A jump shot is out of the question. I head-fake and blow by him, laying in a shot off the graffiti-covered backboard, just ahead of the hand trying to swat it out of the air. That's a move that will work only once.

My teammates are laughing because some old white dude is lighting up their friend, and they continue to feed me, all the while woofing my foil. I can't miss. We win in a walk. I actually look like I can play this game.

Until we break for water. We stop for less than ten minutes. When we resume, I can't find my butt with either hand. Nothing works. My hands are cement blocks. I look like what I am: a half-blind, fifty-year-old white guy with a single-digit vertical leap. The new team we face is a lot better, and we lose the court.

My carriage has turned back into a pumpkin. What happened to my game? For a brief moment, it all came together. Then it disappeared.

In the Zone

Athletes speak reverently of being “in the Zone.” It is a magical state where everything is working well together. Effortlessly. Every cell seems to cooperate at such a high level that the body almost disappears.

The state may be transitory and unpredictable, but while you are visiting, putts drop, crosscourt volleys find the lines, and a ninety-mile-an-hour pitch hangs so long you can count the seams. There are no doubts or confusions. Mental chatter disappears. Calmness and quietude prevail in the midst of the chaos of competition.

A basketball player in the Zone always wants the ball with the game on the line. When asked what they are thinking during such performances, all the great ones say they have no thoughts. Others say respectfully, “He was unconscious!”

Olympic speed skater Chris Witty won a gold medal in the 2002 Women’s 1,000 meters despite suffering from mononucleosis. She not only won the event but also set a world record. **Despite her weakened condition Witty described the experience as “effortless.”**

Time slows in the Zone. You know what your opponents are doing before they do. Half a second becomes an eternity. Patterns unfold, revealing strengths and weaknesses. An opponent’s intentions and tendencies nudge you like a horse wanting the apple in your hand. Opportunities present themselves, gift-wrapped.

Space bends in the Zone. The field goal hits the left upright and bounces through for a score. In one jump at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Bob Beamon tacks on an astounding $21\frac{3}{4}$ inches to the long jump record, which had grudgingly granted only $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches for thirty-three years. Mickey Mantle hits a 565-foot home run.

Peak performance is not just a result of natural ability and lots of training. Many amazing athletes never meet expectations. There are other qualities that coaches look for, intangibles that allow even a moderately gifted athlete to perform at championship level. There is something special about them that cannot be described in our ordinary language.

The Zone is not restricted to million-dollar professionals and world-class athletes. We ordinary folks can have glimpses of it as well. It requires being familiar enough with a particular activity and comfortable enough with the physical demands of performance to allow concerns about those things to disappear. We then become completely involved in the challenge at hand. This may happen a lot more often than we are aware. Familiarity and ease in our mundane activities resonate with the exalted Zone experience but may be dismissed because we take these things for granted.

I may be so comfortable driving a certain route in my car that I engage in a lively conversation and do not even think about the actions of driving until I magically appear at my destination. Time and space alter significantly. There may be no perception of time at all. I trust my game so much that little or no thought is required.

I don't think about it at the time, but I'm in the Zone.

Knifing through the Zone

My friend Read is an expert at knife-throwing. He has done it for decades. I learned the most basic rudiments of the art from him and know how difficult it is to do it at all.

During one of my visits, Read reached into a toolbox and picked up a drill bit called a speed-bore. He pointed to a broom leaning against the opposite wall, about fifteen feet away. In a flash, this makeshift knife was firmly stuck in the broomstick.

It took me a moment to realize the improbability of the feat I had just witnessed. The broomstick was round and resting at an angle against the wall. That meant that the target area was not much bigger than the point of the bit itself. A quarter of an inch high or low, left or right, and the bit would have clanged impotently off into the air. The path of the missile was circular, end over end, with only one possible point of intersection once it was launched. There was no “close enough.”

Read had to perform myriad calculations in less than a second, taking into account his current body position, his arm strength, the size and weight of the drill bit, the distance to the target, the position of the target, the force and velocity required, the number of spins, the trajectory, and so forth. Any athlete knows that the conscious mind is only a hindrance at such times. Such computations are not done by the reasoning mind.

The human body has an estimated fifty to one hundred trillion cells. Each has its own survival agenda. To get them to play nicely together while accomplishing a task as complex as, say, brushing one’s teeth, is a staggering feat of computation. It certainly requires an organizing intelligence far greater than that of human reason. We take such a miracle for granted because we have functioned this way since before we could think.

Read explained, “If I stop, think, and aim—or try to show off--I'm greeted with the embarrassing CLANK! as the blade bounces on the floor after narrowly missing on-lookers. When I just envision the one-ness of the blade sticking in the board and fire almost simultaneously--I'm greeted with the pleasing THUNK! of forces and masses perfectly aligned in motion that ceases abruptly.”

Many of us are dulled to the astounding difficulty of a throw like Read’s. We have never even tried it. Special effects in movies and television make it look

commonplace. He was not splitting an apple on his daughter's head, nor was he pinning a cigarette to the wall from the mouth of a pretty girl spinning on a wheel.

So what's the big deal?

It was the first and only time he made that particular throw. A different throw, a different broom, a different speed-bore and all calculations must be done anew in an entirely different moment, a new NOW, unencumbered by previous attempts. There is no room for doubt or equivocation.

The knife-thrower and the pool hustler will tell you that it is just physics...but it's not. Science can give a sketchy outline of forces and vectors, speeds and trajectories, drag and acceleration, but no one ever learned to hit a curve ball by studying calculus. Maybe you can plot it on a graph after the fact, but such information is pointless before the ball is launched. Science can offer only a symbolic representation of the most superficial aspects of life, not live that life. The "Father of General Semantics" Alfred Korzybski said, "The map is not the territory."

Does this have anything in common with the ninety-word-a-minute typist? The violinist playing Paganini? The driver calmly and safely negotiating midtown traffic? Are there not principles involved in the amazing feats of athletes, martial artists, saints, and spiritual adepts that are applicable to the more mundane pursuits of thee and me? We have become accustomed to thinking of these exceptional individuals as something other than us, to be admired or envied, but always objectified. We have become accustomed to thinking of these exceptional individuals as something other than us, to be admired or envied, but always objectified. Fans, followers, and worshippers want a piece of what their idols have. But can we recognize the essential qualities they embody?

Better with Age

Very few athletes perform at a high level for more than a few years. Gymnasts, skaters, and divers generally are past their prime when the orthodontic braces come off. Rarely do football, basketball, or baseball players last past 40, their best years long gone. Many have paid a big price in pain and injury that haunts their later years.

Yet taijiquan and related martial arts have a rich tradition of remarkable feats by senior citizens that sometimes dwarf even the achievements of modern athletes. Morehei Ueshiba, the founder of the Japanese martial art Aikido, was a slight man in his seventies when he deftly flipped hundred-pound sacks of rice with a long spear in a demonstration for the emperor. Yang Chien Hou, son of Yang style taijiquan¹ founder, Yang Lu Chan, defeated nine opponents at once when almost eighty. A white-haired Cheng Man-Ch'ing would easily toss opponents twice his size into the air, or ward off a long line of men pushing on his rounded arm. Seventy-year old Willem de Thouars, a master of Kuntao Silat (a blend of Indonesian and Chinese martial arts) displays a frightening blend of internal and external power that shows no sign of erosion. In this photo seventy-year old William C. C. Chen engages in some vigorous sparring with his son Max.

<Insert Photo 1>

Martial arts lore is full of such examples. Travelers to China often return with stories of an old woman or a slight man depositing a strapping young visitor on his

¹ The many variations of taijiquan are traditionally identified with the families that created them. Yang style taijiquan was created by Yang, Lu Chan in the nineteenthth century. He was called "Yang the Invincible" for his martial prowess. His grandson Yang Cheng -Fu standardized the Yang style form in the early decades of the twentieth century. Cheng Man Ch'ing learned from Yang Cheng-Fu and created a "short form" that became popular in the West. William C. C. Chen was his student and developed his own form called the "Sixty Movements."

backside with the flick of a wrist. I have seen enough similar displays to know that little embellishment is needed in those tales.

Such martial artists display an effortless competence similar to what we see in athletes in the Zone. Their confidence exudes a feeling of inevitability. Their bodies exhibit a grace and fluidity that bespeak a high level of organization and functioning. Such ability does not come solely from size, strength, and speed. As the eighteenth-century taijiquan master Wang Zong-Yue² wrote:

Consider the saying, “Four ounces repel one thousand pounds.”

It is apparent that this cannot be accomplished by strength.

*Look, if an eighty or ninety-year old man can still defend himself
against multiple opponents,*

It cannot be a matter of speed (48)

Waysun Liao

Extraordinary feats abound in the martial arts. Some are just tricks or illusions designed to swindle or to simply entertain, but have little additional value. Others show genuine martial prowess or wonderful athleticism, but offer no larger lesson than, “Wow! He’s a tough guy. I know better than to cross him.”

I have seen many demonstrations of high-level martial arts throughout the years and witnessed some astounding feats. However, I tend to be a little skeptical of teachers who make their students flop around like a carp on a fishing pier, send them flying thirty feet, or paralyze them with a touch. It is not that I doubt that such things are possible. The teacher may actually have a high level of skill, but if it can only be demonstrated with the cooperation of his own students, then little has really been shown.

² “The Taijiquan Treatise” by Wang, Zong-yue is generally regarded as the clearest statement of taijiquan principles essential to all styles.

There is another category of demonstration that actually resonates with a deeper truth within us all. It serves to empower us by showing our potential abilities. I once witnessed such an impressive display by Waysun Liao. I had read his book, *Tai Chi Classics*, and wished to speak to him for some clarifications. He graciously agreed to meet me at his studio, and we talked at length about how taiji draws a greater distinction between muscular force and internal power than any other major martial art. Brute force is discouraged in favor of the highly efficient use of a relaxed body and keen sense of internal energy. When he asked if I would like a demonstration, I was surprised and delighted. I immediately accepted.

He asked me to stand and relax about three feet in front of a wall. He lightly placed his fingertips on my chest. With no movement of his body, I was suddenly slammed into the wall behind me and fell to the floor. I had no sense of time having elapsed. There was just a simultaneous “touch-wall-floor.” Time had collapsed into a single moment.

Liao said, “I hope I didn’t hurt you.” I smiled broadly and exclaimed, “That was amazing!”

“Would you like to see Roll Back [a movement from Yang style taijiquan]?”

“Sure!”

I expected him to neutralize gracefully a simulated attack by turning from the waist and blending with the incoming force. Instead, he just placed his fingertips on my forearm and again, without movement by him, I was instantly on the floor.

There had only been the slightest touch on my arm. My subjective experience was that the floor sucked me down in a single moment. Resistance was not just futile; it was incomprehensible. Space and time had collapsed into a single point for me. Something

dramatically beyond my normal experience had just happened. I knew I did not yet have the language to explain it.

Liao pleasantly explained that it was all very comprehensible and that the details were in his book. Such skills would, of course, require time to develop. At that time he had been cultivating his internal power for forty years. He recommended patience.

At least a dozen other experienced taiji players and teachers have said their experiences with Liao were similar to mine. All confirmed that his was a high-level skill.

How was he able to project my 170-pound body through space with the slightest touch of his fingertips and no apparent movement? Why was my subjective experience of time so compressed? What are the limits of this type of internal power? Is there a way of accessing such ability without forty years of intense training? Do such demonstrations have anything in common with peak performance in other fields? Are there important principles at work that can have positive benefits in our more mundane pursuits?

The answers to these and other questions are encoded in the body/mind wisdom of taijiquan.

What is Taijiquan?

Taijiquan is a Chinese martial art characterized by slow, graceful movements, sometimes punctuated by explosive punches or kicks. Over time, certain movements and postures were found to be highly effective and were then standardized into choreographed sets representative of a particular style. These sets are called taiji forms. The main styles are family styles, handed down through generations and named after the founder of the style. Yang, Chen and Wu styles are examples.

These movements are performed in a highly conscious way, so that practitioners may feel the physical, energetic, mental, and spiritual qualities of their being and bring all these qualities into a state of harmony. These movements establish the basic physical vocabulary of that style and are repeated until they become second nature. The student later learns to extrapolate related actions.

Taijiquan is considered an internal martial art in that its power is derived from a conscious development of the body's internal connections and the vital energy that animates it. External (or "hard") martial arts seek excellence first through muscular development and control of bodily momentum. Internal and external are sometimes seen as two paths up the same mountain.

The name "taijiquan" is derived from two terms: *Tai Ji* and quan. (The philosophical concept *Tai Ji* is capitalized here to distinguish it from the martial art of taijiquan.) *Tai Ji* is the "Supreme Ultimate," the name given to the dance of polarities that makes up the manifest universe. *Quan* means "fist" or "martial art form."

The *Tai Ji* is expressed as the polarity of yang and yin, whose interplay we perceive as everything in the universe. Sun Lu Tang, creator of Sun style taijiquan, explained the relationship of *Tai Ji* to yin and yang, "To open is to extend and to move. To close is to contract and to be still. Opening is yang and closing is yin. To issue, extend, or move is yang. To withdraw, contract, or become still is yin. Opening and closing is like the one qi moving through the cycles of yin and yang. *Tai Ji* is the one qi. The one qi is *Tai Ji*."

Thus, taijiquan could be translated as, "the martial art characterized by the harmonious interplay of polarities."

Perhaps taijiquan's most important feature is the one described by its name. Its effectiveness depends on first recognizing the dual nature of all that exists, and then transcending that duality. Taijiquan is no mere accretion of skills to an existing body of martial knowledge; it entails a transformation to a new way of being in the world. As Wang Zong-Yue explains, "There are many other kinds of martial arts. Although their forms are distinct from one another, overall they are nothing more than the strong taking advantage of the weak, or merely the slow yielding to the quick." (36)

Most martial arts depend for their power on external qualities, like speed, physical strength, mechanical advantage, leverage, and momentum. Taijiquan is different. The emphasis is on soft overcoming hard. Force is not resisted directly but received and redirected. Punches and kicks display a power much greater than the effort expended. You stay calm and relaxed despite immediate threats.

Taiji's real power comes not from the ability to render an opponent's face into hamburger, but rather from the capacity to recognize dangerous patterns as they develop and neutralize them before things get ugly. Skilled practitioners have the confidence that they can handle themselves in most situations, thus allowing them the freedom to remain calm and clear-headed. It becomes easier to find a way to harmonize even apparently conflicting energies in a way that is most beneficial to all.

Even though only a small percentage of taijiquan students actually pursue it as a martial art, the martial history is the root of this particular tree. It nourishes taiji's many other fruits. Health, vitality, calmness, good balance, grace, and a calm, relaxed power are a few of the benefits from its practice. This power can be demonstrated in many unexpected ways.

Elicia, a 105-pound ex-ballerina, had only been studying with me for about a month, but she was an eager student. I had explained about rooting (see chapter 11) and how to connect the energy in the body so that it worked as a unified whole. She apparently was paying attention. At the next class she was very excited, exclaiming, “I did what you said and it worked! My husband called me at home. His 1960 Caddie was stalled in the intersection near our house and he wanted me to get help. Instead, I raced over there and pushed the car across four lanes of traffic by myself!”

How such a simple calisthenic can dramatically improve health, while at the same time serve as an effective martial art, a path of wisdom, and a tool for personal transformation will be discussed in subsequent chapters. We examine what is traditionally called the “uncarved block” of taijiquan: those natural principles that provide the foundation for all the various techniques and applications. We must wend our way up the path less taken and investigate some of the most basic and jealously guarded assumptions of Western science and philosophy. Some of the most popular myths about taijiquan and its underlying philosophy will be asked to account for themselves. Tools and standards for establishing validity will be suggested.

The principles inherent in taijiquan are the same ones that permit the athlete’s experience of the Zone, the Zen “No Mind” state, as well as the healing power of acupuncture, polarity, and other forms of energy medicine.

An old taiji adage promises students:

The strength of a lumberjack,
the pliability of a child, and
the wisdom of a sage.

Simply reading this book will not grant such strength, pliability, and wisdom. Those qualities, and many others that come from this art, still require what the Chinese call *gongfu*. *Gongfu* is focused practice over a long time. The most valuable benefits of taiji require and facilitate an actual transformation: physical, mental, and spiritual.