

Introduction to Central Taijiquan Philosophical Concepts: Dao, Wuji, Taiji, Yin, Yang, & the 10,000 Things

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Overview

Taijiquan is built upon and infused with a set of observations of the interactions in nature that 600 years after they were written down became the basis for the 'religious' views of Daoism. However, for the practice if of Taijiquan they remain observations that have turned more into Philosophical underpinnings of the system. However, people that haven't been "steeped" in these philosophies traditions (consciously or sub-consciously) find them unfamiliar, confusing, very unclear, and hard to grasp – especially when they are described as stand alone concepts that aren't tied together well.

To this end this document will talk about each concept as slowly but steadily weave them together. This might happen in steps it might happen at the end all together. Either way the most accessible way to start understanding the underpinnings of Taijiquan are to read about the individual ideas, learn about their relationship to each other, and then come back to the individual ideas to clarify and distill a better understanding/meaning from the relationships. Repeat.

Ancient Chinese Characters – a map to understanding

One method that will be used to understand these concepts is the deconstruction of the ancient Chinese characters for these terms. The ancient characters are very literal translations in pictures for their meanings so they are useful to get a start in understanding what the original intent was for the idea. This is is juxtaposition of modern Chinese characters which have been simplified for easier writing but their meanings aren't so inherent in their strokes. Lets look at a simple set to illustrate this idea:



Figure 1a

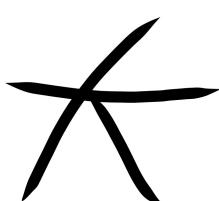


Figure 1b

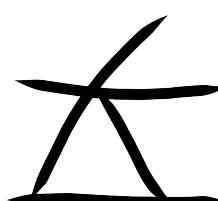


Figure 1c

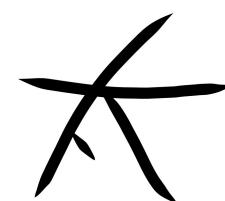


Figure 1d

Most people will instantly see the central upside Y as occurring throughout all 4 of these characters. Each character moving from left to right has additional strokes added to it to 'layer' on meaning. Lets look at the individual meanings:

- Figure 1a is the character for a person (pinyin: ren)
- Figure 1b is the character for big
- Figure 1c is the character for very big in ancient times
- Figure 1d if the character for very big in modern Chinese

So how does an extra line in the middle or at the bottom change the meaning from man to big to very big?

- Figure 1b – Big – This character is the character for person with a line through the center. This picture shows a person who is taller than heaven and is therefore big.
- Figure 1c – Very Big (ancient) – This character is the character for a person who is taller than heaven

but also standing on the earth (bottom line). This indicates a person who is taller than both heaven and earth and is therefore very big!

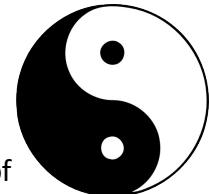
- Figure 1d – Very Big (modern) – Is the same meaning as the ancient very big but the strokes have been simplified for easy writing but at the cost of the story being easily seen

Figure 1d illustrates why it is more useful to look at the ancient characters in Chinese to get an understanding rather than the modern ones: the simplified version loses some of the visual story for the sake of simplicity.

Taiji - Interaction of Yin and Yang

Lets start with the name sake of our art and works forwards and backwards from there.

Whether or not people practice Taijiquan most people have seen and easily recognize the Yin-Yang symbol also called the Taiji symbol (Figure 1). And most people will be able to simply explain that the two colors represent two “opposing forces” of Yin and Yang but that is superficial level understanding of the Taiji symbol is where most people's understanding of Taiji and the associated concepts. But what does it really represent?

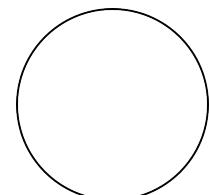


- Figure 1 -
Yin-Yang or
Taiji Symbol

The Taiji Symbol represents the interaction between Yin and Yang but what are Yin and Yang? Yin and yang are often described as discrete entities but they are two separate states of the same underlying material. Just as water can move between gas, liquid, and solid with transitory mixed states so can Yin and Yang. But if Yin and Yang are 2 states (with different qualities) of the same underlying medium the question begs itself: what is the underlying medium?

Wuji – What Gives Birth to Yin and Yang

The underlying medium of Yin and Yang is called and titled Wuji: often translated or explained as “Nothingness” and/or “Emptiness.” Figure 2 is the common illustration of the symbol for Wuji: an empty circle. The symbolic circle, like in many traditions, represents something that is never ending and eternal because the circle has no beginning or an end only a infinity number of points lined up in an continuum. This nothingness or emptiness is not only where Yin and Yang come from but also to where they return to when they stop being differentiated states: a unified state or a state of oneness.



- Figure 2 -
Wuji

The Dao De Ching's Famous Line

The often received Chapter 6 line from the Dao De Ching starts to weave these ideas together. It states (in one translation):

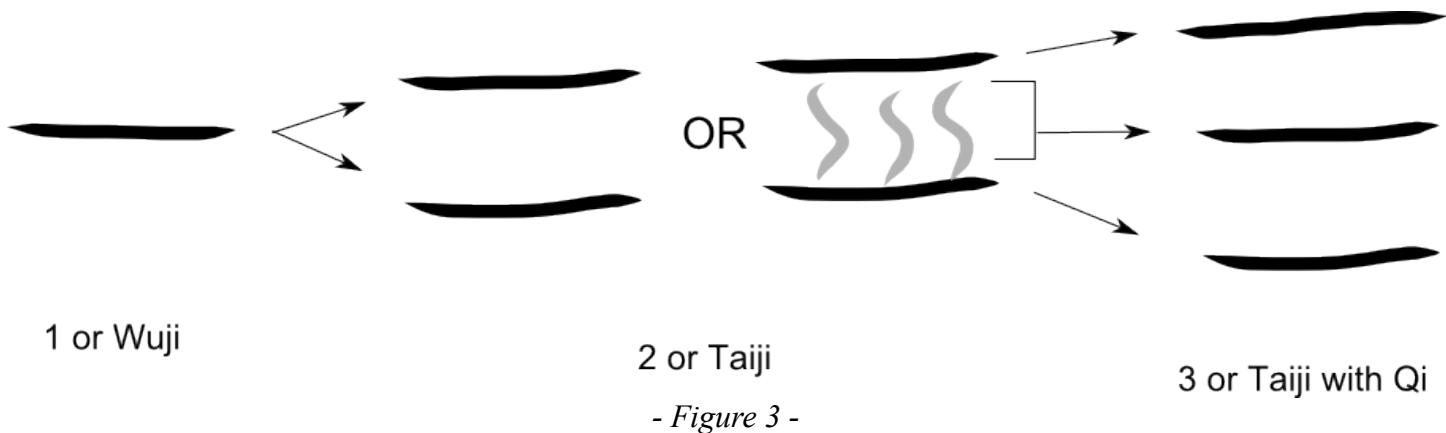
The Dao produced the one. The one produced the two. The two produced the three, and the three produced the ten thousand things

This sentence is essentially the creation story of Daoism (which conveniently is more or less what we are trying to understand: the building blocks of theory/philosophy underlying all Taijiquan). The next step is to rewrite this sentence with our Wuji and Taiji pieces instead of numbers:

The Dao produces the Wuji. The Wuji produces the Taiji. The Taiji produced the three, and the three produced the 10,000 things.

At this point those 2 middle sentences start to sound like what was discussed about about Taiji being 2 different states of Wuji. We are still left with Dao, “the three”, and the 10,000 things left to define. So lets start with a visualization of the above sentence:

The Dao De Ching's Famous Line (con't)



In Figure 3, the same concept is drawn out using the actual Chinese characters for the numbers in the first sentence. The characters for 1, 2, and 3 in Chinese are the number of parallel horizontal lines respectively. In Figure 3 the 1st, 2nd, and 4th characters from the left are the characters for 1, 2, & 3. The 3rd character is a in between step we will discuss momentarily. So lets narrate the above Figure 3 using the Dae De Chings line for guidance:

On the left the one or the Wuji gives rise to the Two or Taiji. When Wuji splits into Taiji where the top line is termed Yang and the bottom line is termed Yin. In between the Yang and Yin polarities of Taiji there is a substance that connects the two: this is termed Qi and is shown by the gray squiggles between the character for 2 above. It is this 'connective' force that gives rise to the 3 from Taiji. And what isn't shown is the last line where the 3 gives rise to the 10,000 things.

About those 10,000 things... the nomenclature 10,000 things just means everything on the Earth. At the time 10,000 was a very large number and was used to indicate something close to the millions of lifeforms and objects and materials found in nature. By this point most practitioners will have heard of the term Qi and this diagram starts to explain 'what it is'. From a strictly observation based standpoint Qi is just the material basis for all objects in this world because inherently our world is between the heaven and earth based on the above model. So the 10,000 things is all of creation and all of creation is created with qi that is created when the Taiji is split into 2 from Wuji.

For a simplistic comparison this isn't unlike fertilization in a human egg. The sperm and egg meet and create a zygote, which is a single celled object (wuji). Then the zygote splits into 2 cells (Taiji) and eventually that 1 cell that split into 2 cells splits into the millions of cells in our bodies doing hundreds of different functions: all from a single source zygote. Now as a physical comparison the splitting generally only goes in one direction: towards more splitting. If the differentiation only goes to more splitting; no one comes home to their loved ones reversed back into a single zygote no matter how they try. But the Qi and Taiji can be reconciled into Wuji and in fact this is one of the central stated tenets of Taijiquan (which will be addressed later).

Zooming Out a Level – Fractal Models

The Dao De Ching line mentions the Dao as the beginning and yet an entire model has been built around Wuji as the Nothingness. Getting philosophical the question comes up what is Dao and how is it more nothing than the nothingness? In science the Big Bang started from nothing but ended up with mass moving away from the explosion which then created the universe. But there isn't much research into what was before the nothing before the Big Bang because presumably both nothings are the same. So what is going on in our model of Chinese philosophy? It is nothing more than the model we just created is only a piece of a larger model.

The Larger Philological Model

Lets revisit Chapter 6 from the Dao De Ching:

The Dao produced the one. The one produced the two. The two produced the three, and the three produced the ten thousand things

In our last model we ignored the Dao and went straight to Wuji as nothingness. But it also appears that the Dao and Wuji have to be slightly different or they wouldn't have terms. Lets start with Dao and work our way back towards refining out definition/understanding of Wuji. Figure 4 shows the Ancient Chinese Character for Dao which will be deconstructed to help construct an understanding on the concept of Dao.

Ancient Chinese characters are made up of individual radicals that are like mini-pictures unto themselves and when the mini-pictures of the radicals are read together they create the meaning of the entire character. So lets look at the radicals in the character for Dao:



- Figure 4 -
Ancient Chinese
Character: Dao

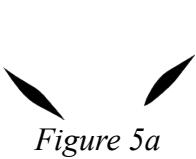


Figure 5a

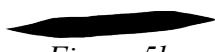


Figure 5b

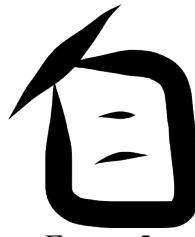


Figure 5c

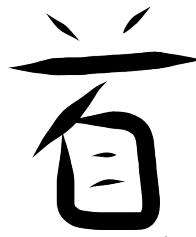


Figure 5d

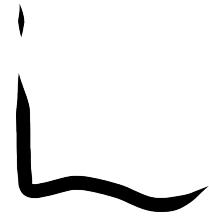


Figure 5e

- Figure 5a – This is the radical for “eyes” or “to watch”
- Figure 5b – This is the radical for the oneness
- Figure 5c – This is the radical for “self”
- Figure 5d – The first 3 radicals can be combined into it's own character that means “head” (tou)
- Figure 5e – This is the radical for “walking” or “way”

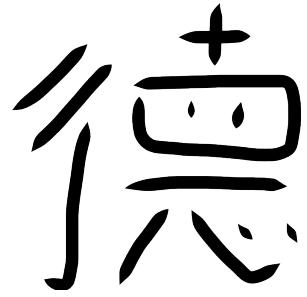
If these individual meanings are shaken and massaged a little bit into a better English sentence we end up with something like this:

The Dao is the way to see oneness in ourselves.

And that just come from the character! But of course there is more to the concept of Dao. It is the true nothingness. The unchaning. No movement. No differentiation (hence how people can find oneness in themselves via it). But without movement or differentiation how does it create or give birth to anything? Using philosophical logic as soon as something moves, changes, or starts to differentiate it is not itself anymore and is something entirely different. So how does the eternal unchanging nothingness create without destroying itself? Simple: give action or a method for Dao to act through. Meet: De.

De

What is De? De is the name of the Dao acting, influencing, changing, creating, and



- Figure 6 -
De

De (con't)

destroying. Similar to the idea of air as the substance in the sky but when it is moving and swirling and pushing and destroying and creating things we call it wind. When the action comes from the Dao it is simply called De and translated as "virtue." Lets look at the character for De to understand some on 'how' it works and acts as "virtue."

De can be divided into the following 4 radicals:



Fig 7a



Fig 7b



Fig 7c



Fig 7d

- Figure 7a – This is the radical for "straight" as in clean
- Figure 7b – This is the radical for "eyes"
- Figure 7c – This is the radical for "clean heart"
- Figure 7d – This is the radical for "Two people"

Massaged around virtue comes to mean "the weight of looking straight out of the clean heart" If we then implant that for De as the action of Dao we get something like "Dao acts via the weight of looking straight out of the clean heart." So the Dao acts through clean and pure hearts in the world we live in. We often call this value of clean and pure actions, thoughts, and living – "virtue."

Side Note: Later in Chinese Philiosophy the mind/heart is divided into the Xin and the Yi mind/heart. If it often recited that the Yi needs to be strong to control the Xin which is true for an impure Xin. However, if Xin is pure and full of the De virtue than no yi is needed to control it.

Lets jump back to our passage for the Dao De Ching again:

The Dao produced the one. The one produced the two. The two produced the three, and the three produced the ten thousand things

And lets rewrite it with what was just covered:

The Dao produced the De. The De produced Wuji & Taiji The interaction between Taiji and Wuji produced the Qi, and the Qi produced all creations.

Now instead of Wuji and Taiji being 1 and 2 respectively they are collectively 2. This looks similar to the original interpretation but is more encompassing. With this new understanding of Dao and De it is time to revisit our understanding of Wuji and Taiji.

Wuji: Revisited & Revised

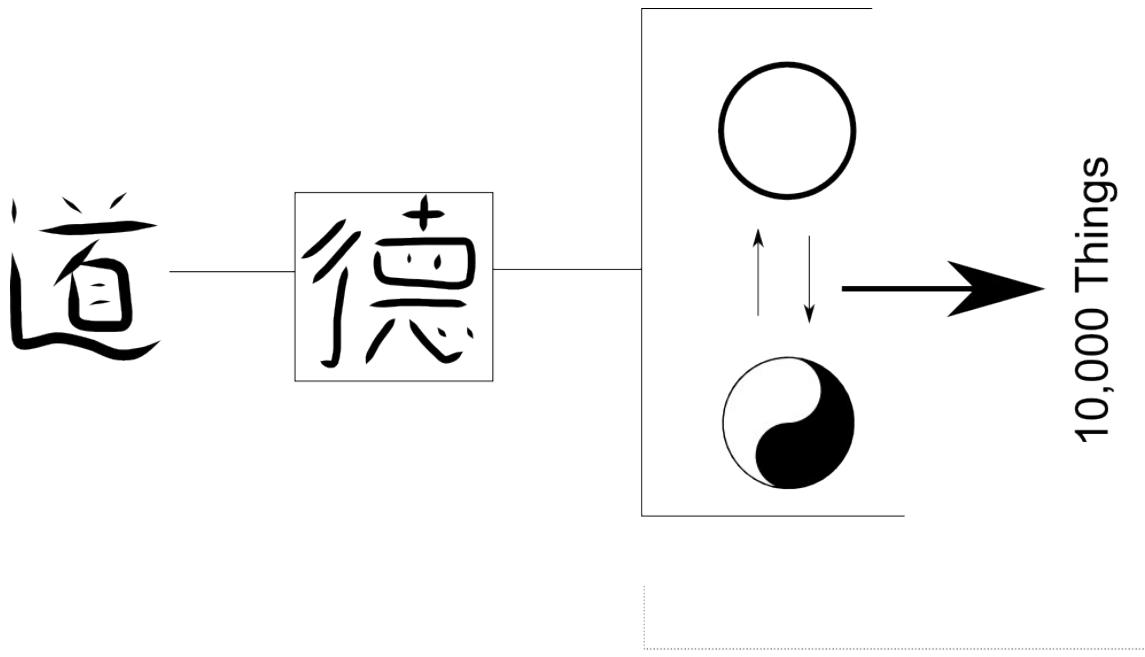
Originally Wuji was the nothingness or the emptiness but now it is clearer that in fact Dao is the ultimate nothingness/emptiness and since Wuji is created by the actions of the Dao via De it is in fact not completely empty but rather it is emptiness that has potential to become something. That something is Taiji. A state of oneness that isn't without the potential to act.

Taiji: Revisited & Revised

Taiji is the something that is created when Wuji turns its potential into kinetic energy. Taiji is Wuji that has differentiated and has Qi holding the two parts together but not unified. However, Wuji is always present in the Taiji just as the circle of the Wuji symbol is visible in the Taiji symbol. Interestingly enough, this idea of discrete polar opposites is quite unfamiliar in the Chinese language as they don't even have a one word equivalent of yes or no. Instead they have phrases that elude one way or the other. This is one reason Taiji is less of a strict duality than it is a continuum of the parts of Yin and Yang.

And in fact Yin and Yang as a nomenclature came much later than the Da De Ching's explanation which originally just used the terms heaven and earth to describe the 2 or the Taiji symbol. At the time it was written the terms heaven and earth were just words with no outside meanings attached to them. Through time the terms heaven and earth were replaced/supplemented with the terms/concepts of Yin and Yang.

As originally stated if Yin and Yang are just two states of Wuji then you can see how there can be movement within the Yin-Yang continuum as well as between the Yin-Yang Continuum and the Wuji Nothingness with Potential. This movement or interaction between the 2 is now the 3 is the Dao De Ching's passage in the larger model.



Model #1

Figure 8

Figure 8 shows the Dao acting through the De to create Wuji and Taiji and the inter-movement of Wuji and Taiji creating the 10,000 things. Also, the section marked Model #1 is the 'smaller' model of Wuji creating Taiji and Taiji creating Qi and Qi creating the 10,000 things: simply a model within a model.

Application of 2 Models to Taijiquan

The ancient character for Taiji starts to give us a clue about the practitioners role in Taijiquan. The green radical is of a tree and means rooted, the brown radical is the earth, the blue the sky, the black is a human, the red is a plow, and the yellow is a mouth. So humans are the connection between heaven and earth by working and talking while rooted.

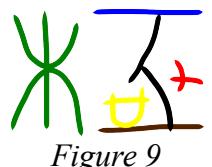


Figure 9

Taijiquan is the practice of moving ourselves from the state of Taiji to Wuji but even once that is complete the larger philosophical model shows up the ultimate goal is to move from a state of Wuji back through De and into Dao.



HAPPINESS IN OLD AGE

Happiness in old age, happiness in old age. When a person is getting older, the body becomes weaker, it is more prone to disease, backaches, hearing loss, the eyes lose their clarity, the memory is not as good. Many problems occur, hands are not as well coordinated. At that time the happiest moments are when you do not have an illness. Personal search for happiness: do not smoke cigarettes, do not drink alcohol and you will not have problems with asthma and cough. Eat 3 meals a day regularly. No craving for fish or meat but get

very diluted rich porridge (congee) weekly. Vegetables are the best nourishment Eat more vegetables and fruits. Chew slowly and swallow what you chew slowly. Overindulgence can cause more harm. Eat less sweets, salty, and spicy hot food. Take a walk after you eat to get your 'fire chi' down. When getting older it's most important to have insight. You need to open your heart and mind. With a clear conscience, clear sight you will be happy. As you get older try to communicate with others, to understand, discuss issues, refresh your mind, think and use your wisdom to analyze more, slowly ponder - Never worry or get yourself angry. Do not grasp the tiger by its tail (don't jump into things). Be centered, don't control people. To improve your body and your mind stay even tempered. Keep to your beliefs. Exercise more, more movement prevents illness. T'ai Chi Chuan, Pa Kua Chang, Chi Kung whatever you like, you practice for the good of your body. Go to bed early with regularity. Dress appropriately. Don't be cold or hot. Take many walks. Less lazy lounging. Work makes you stronger, you nurture your good chi, and then you'll find happiness. When winter comes prevent the cold from coming in, dress warmly. When summer comes, prevent heat strokes. In spring and fall go traveling to different places to enjoy the scenery, enjoy the pleasure of seeing the rivers, the mountains and the changing form of things. Make your mind more relaxed, your eyes more open. This will increase longevity. Take frequent showers, change your clothes often. When the weather is nice do not forget to open the windows. Do not forget to aerate your bedding. Whenever you get sick get the cure immediately, follow the doctor's instructions, take your medicine and avoid charlatans. Don't spread yourself too thin, don't be scattered. Study painting, admire famous musicians and engage in singing. Give more of yourself. This way you teach the younger generations to be responsible. Promote economy, this way you will reach your goal. A rich country with the people healthy, everybody is happy. Happy family, be cordial with each other, you will be happy with everybody. You cannot be without sons and grandsons for happiness. A beautiful future is in front of you. What everybody is reaching for.