

3 Taoist Lessons

Every Martial Artist Should Know

Taoism is a philosophy with a great deal of wisdom that can be especially relevant to martial artists. Its unique perspective is different from how we usually look at things. Add the Taoist perspective and you'll discover the myriad possibilities it brings to improve your martial arts skills and improve your life in the process. For thousands of years people have found inspiration and strategies for living healthy and fulfilling lives by being in tune with Tao.

LESSON ONE: Go With the Flow

"The first step on the way to Tao is to be in harmony with, not in rebellion against the fundamental laws of the universe."

— Chuang-tzu, Taoist sage

Chuang-tzu's statement is about a fundamental lesson in Taoism: wu wei, non-action. Wu wei teaches that if you want to accomplish anything in life, the best way is to align yourself with natural forces. Then, as Lao-tzu said in the Tao Te Ching, "Tao invariably takes no action and yet there is nothing left undone." The current flows downstream, so if you want to travel efficiently and well you would be wise to ride with the current, not against it.

Sometimes going with the flow doesn't seem like the correct thing to do, even though it is. A simple example is clearly experienced if a car skids on a slippery road. Often, the first impulse is to slam on the brakes and turn the steering wheel in the opposite direction, hoping to counterbalance the force.

Get in tune with the **Tao** and find how happy your life and martial arts can be.

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Photo courtesy of the China Dept of Tourism

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But if the skid is opposed, the car may get out of control and spin. The best way to regain control is to steer in the direction of the skid while letting up on the gas. After control is regained, steer gently out of the skid. Turning the wheel with the skid allows the car to right itself; similarly, following the flow puts you back into control.

When you take no action that is contrary to the natural flow of your life, you gain a certain power that the Taoists call *te*. Then, all the forces of nature work in your favor and nothing stops your progress. Let things act by themselves and everything works as it should. This lesson has sound applications to martial arts practice.

Wu Wei in Your Martial Art

How can you do martial arts without doing? This skill can be developed using meditation. By exploring the very roots of action you can begin to let go of doing and discover the true nature of your technique, in tune with Tao.

Standing is a basic human action that is the fundamental starting point of any martial art. But many people interfere with their natural, inborn ability to do things effortlessly, even such a simple activity as standing. If you pay attention you may be surprised to discover all the ways that you make standing an exhausting and stressful effort that may interfere with the smooth and powerful execution of your techniques. By following the flow of standing, gravity does the work. And you can reclaim inborn capacity you did not know you had.

Effortless Standing Exercise

You can apply this exercise to all your stances, helping make each one naturally in tune with gravity. Begin by simply standing with feet approximately a shoulder-width apart, hands hanging comfortably at your sides. Close your eyes. Relax and shift very gently and slowly, forward and back. As you shift forward, feel your weight move over your toes. Can you feel the front of your

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legs tightening? Now shift your weight back, over your heels. Do you feel your legs tightening differently, and do you arch your back slightly, to compensate? What else do you notice? Gently rock back and forth, making smaller and smaller movements until you feel a center point where all your muscles are most relaxed, aligned with gravity, and standing takes the least effort.

Now, shift side-to-side, first over the left foot, then over the right. Feel how as you leave the center, muscles tighten and standing becomes more difficult, but when you are directly in the center, standing feels effortless. Rock gently side to side until you find your center, equally balanced between each foot. Take a few moments to enjoy balanced, effortless standing. This can be applied to all stances. Find the best balance point for each, whether centered, more on one side, or more on the other.

Not-Doing Meditation

To turn toward Tao, lessen your conscious experience until you arrive at non-action. Find a quiet place where you can be undisturbed for a time. You can begin with as little as one minute, and gradually increase the time up to 15 or so. Sit quietly and close your eyes. Let your thoughts slow by allowing them to flow without any interference. At first you might think of all the things you should be doing — perhaps what you have to do later or what you did earlier, but do not try to think anything further about these things. Simply let these thoughts be as you continue to sit quietly and do nothing. If you find yourself carried away by a thought, gently bring yourself back to doing nothing.

Practice this meditation at different times. You might be surprised how a short period of not-doing can have a positive, lasting effect throughout your busy day.

LESSON TWO:

Forget What You Know

The idea of wu wei also applies to knowledge and learning. We in the West believe that a well-educated person has stored up a great deal of knowledge. The more a person knows, the wiser he is. But Taoism has a different idea about what



makes a person wise.

Storing up knowledge simply adds something that is external to our true nature. Like piling on one heavy weight after another, outer knowledge can bog us down and stand in the way of inner wisdom.

Taoists believe that people should be able to let go of thoughts about what they know, to react and respond directly to what is really happening. So for martial artists, practice trains you and extends what you can do, but ultimately, in the moment of sparring or self-defense, you may need to let go of what you know and have practiced, so that you can respond with flow. Too much thinking can get in the way of the best response.

Using No-Knowledge to Truly Know Exercise

No-knowledge begins as a state of mind, an approach to what you do. At your next workout, try noticing what you really do without having any concepts about it. For example, when blocking a partner's (slowed) punch in a two-person attack/defense exercise, put your open palm on the inside or

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Landscape by Chun-pi Huang. Chinese ink on silk, 1959, San Diego Museum of Art. Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. Everett F. Drumright

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the outside of his wrist and feel the force as it comes toward you. Without any theory in mind, block the attack. Pay attention to how you divert the incoming punch, simply experiencing what happens. Don't think about it. Try this with various techniques.

Let go of judgment from comparison, as well. For example, don't try to assess whether you blocked well or poorly. Simply experience. See what you see, hear what you hear, feel what you feel, and nothing more. At first your mind will race on with thoughts as usual. But keep returning to your direct experiencing whenever you can.

No-Thought Meditation

Pick a time when you are relaxed or perhaps a bit tired, so that your thoughts are already slowed. Find a comfortable place to sit quietly. Notice those moments between thoughts when you spontaneously think about nothing. Invite your mind to extend these moments without thought, and wait. Try not to interfere. You don't have to do anything or think anything in particular. Simply allow your natural abilities to emerge.

Take a few minutes during your day to sit down and allow yourself to think of nothing. Be curious and interested in the process as you discover the benefits of wordless, idealess experiencing.

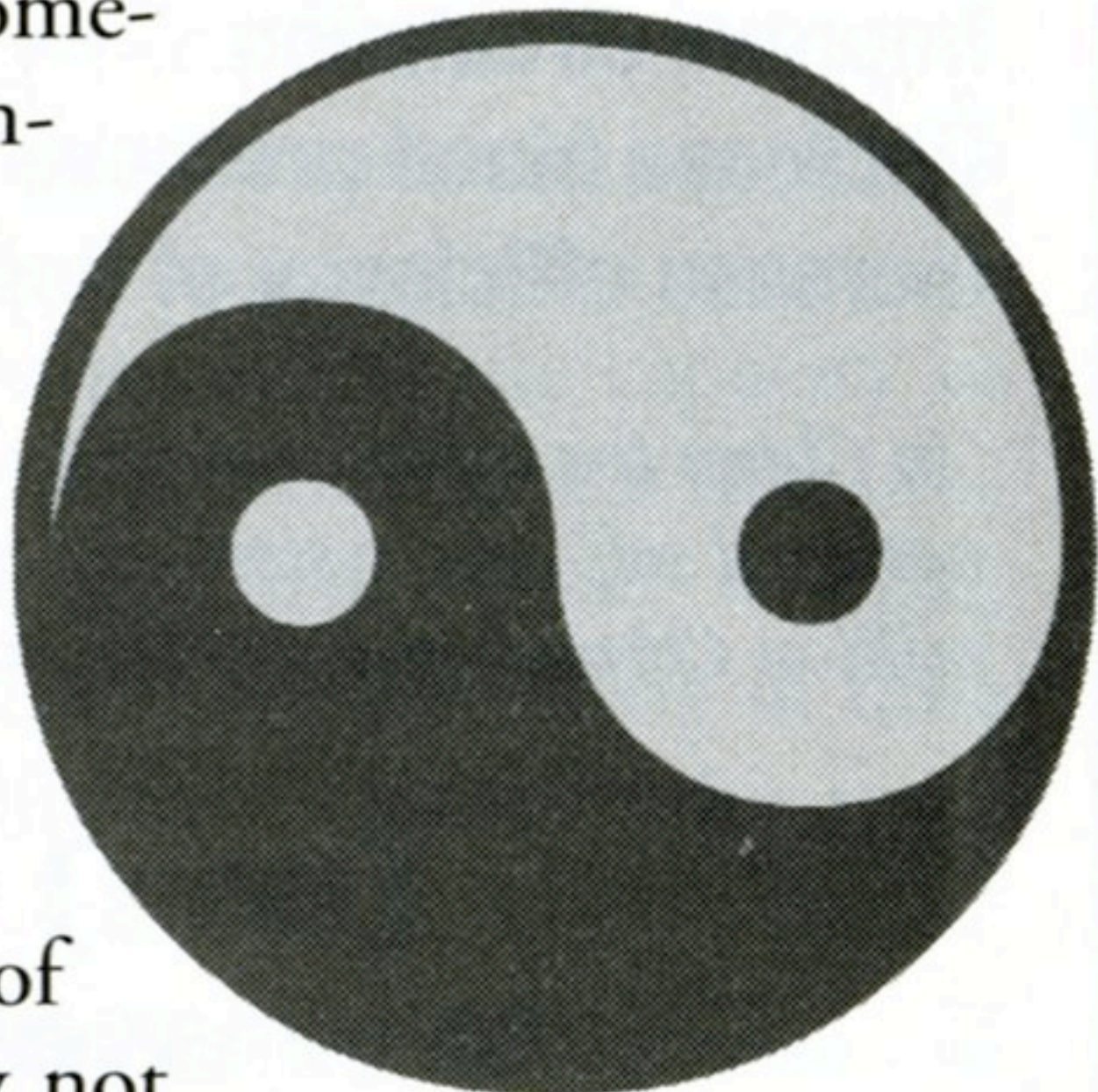
LESSON THREE:

Te is the Way

Te is the natural byproduct of following the Path. Staying with Tao gives you a certain kind of power; a power to influence what happens spontaneously and move in tune with the forces already there.

When you follow the Way you can perform with skill. Te is expressed in skill, which is often unconscious. You just do it. You have probably had moments in your training

when you did something exceptionally well. Without thinking about it, it just happened. This was a moment of *te*. Unfortunately, these moments of perfect skill may not



“He who looks too hard at the outside gets clumsy on the inside.”

— Chuang-tzu

happen often.

We are all capable of much more accuracy and perfection in what we do. Often the problem is that we get in our own way. Many great athletes attest to the importance of being able to perform without thought, to allow their bodies to do what they have been trained to do.

Chuang-tzu talked about an archery contest where people were betting on the winner. When the stakes were small, everyone shot with skill. When stakes went higher, participants worried about their aim. When betting was for real gold, players became nervous and skill levels dropped. In all three cases the players' abilities remained the same, but because one prize meant more than another, people let these external conditions weigh on their mind, interfering with their performance.

“He who looks too hard at the outside gets clumsy on the inside.” (Chuang-tzu)

Once Milton Erickson, the famed hypnotherapist, trained a professional golfer to use self-hypnosis to help combat the nervousness from anticipation, which increased as the tournament progressed. He taught the golfer to forget his score, and to not even know what hole he was playing!

At the next contest, the golfer teed up at the first hole with perfect confidence. He continued to play through the course without faltering. But after the 18th hole, much to the surprise of the spectators and his caddy, the golfer teed up again. He had played each hole with such total immersion, he didn't know when the game was over! And so without any mental worry to get in the way, the golfer was able to play his best, with *te*.

Exercise for Perfecting Your Skill

Pick a form or group of techniques you do fairly well but would like to perfect. Clear your mind and do not think about anything. Sit for several minutes. You could use the meditation from this article to quiet yourself. When you feel ready, stand up and begin to move. Focus on the movement of your arms and legs, the feel of your stance, the flow of your movement. Do not fill your thoughts with any goal. Your natural ability to move will be free to express itself without any extra thoughts to interfere.

Conclusion

Taoist sages know how to participate in the Way. They take an attitude that allows them to spontaneously follow the path they are on and be facilitated by the natural forces that are inevitably present. You too can receive what the world gives and as you receive, you also give. Keep the balance. Transcend every situation, as it transcends you.

And you will find fulfillment, expressing your martial art in harmony with the natural flow of your life and abilities, expressed as Oneness with Tao.

Those who trust

The way of the world

Are empowered by the world.

— Tao Te Ching 

San Diego, California-based Alex & Annellen Simpkins have written 12 books on martial arts-related subjects.