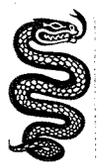
Taijiquan

Through the Western Gate

虛实

Rick Barrett



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This book is dedicated to
~ Dick and Phyllis,
who taught me early on to look
behind the curtain.

Chapter 2

Gongfu

You should practice diligently; it would be too bad if you wasted time. If you do not practice for a day, then you are a ghost for a day; if you do practice for a single breath, then you are a realized immortal for a breath.

The Secret of the Golden Flower,
eighteenth-century Daoist/Chan manual

There is no English-language equivalent for *gongfu*. It can mean any practice one does diligently over time, or it can mean a high level of martial skill. More popularly known in the West as kung fu, it is associated with a variety of martial arts.

The idea of *gongfu* can extend to virtually any practice. Let's say your *gongfu* is playing piano. You begin by just getting the sensorimotor connections. You learn to coordinate your finger movements with appropriate symbols, the notes on a page. You may not even hear what you are doing as music. At first you just want to "get it right," to produce sounds that correspond to what is expected. You then learn scales. More complex patterns form. Sound shapes correspond to your finger movements.

All this takes time because you are actually changing your body, as well as your mind. New neural connections, connective tissue patterns, muscular development, and the like all support this change. You are not just learning a new trick: you are evolving. This is no easy task. Besides building new structures and patterns, you must go through a process of convincing

your body and mind to discard old patterns at each stage. A major barrier to growth is the unwillingness to leave what has become familiar and comfortable but has continued on past its time.

At first, each note you read requires a conscious mental conversion from written symbol to physical action, resulting in a sound, which is more or less pleasing. As you get familiar with the process, it becomes automatic, and the correct tone becomes your feedback that you are doing it right.

Patterns become apparent in songs, études, and fugues. You study theory and composition, creating within accepted forms. Then gradually or abruptly, you start hearing the music as you play. It is no longer an issue of conforming to an established order but of actually creating a pleasing sound. New forms spontaneously appear and are appraised by their own intrinsic value, not by how well they mimic existing standards. You create easily, with little delay between the idea of the music and the reality of it.

This is now mastery. You can leave the maps behind and create sound sculptures that have never been heard. You have achieved a high level of integration and understanding.

So why pour time and effort into a *gongfu*? Where is the payoff? Why engage in a practice like music or taijiquan knowing that competence is years away, and mastery decades? Everyone is a stumblebum when they start, so why put up with that aggravation?

Gongfu swims against the tide of instant gratification. It doesn't promise immediate results. It suggests that devotion to a healthy practice will permit a deeper understanding of yourself and your world. You don't do it just to be able to brag that you are a black belt. You don't simply learn some clever tricks to impress the neighbors. It is through the *gongfu* that wisdom is gained. You are truly transformed by your involvement: physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Any *gongfu* takes time because the transformation requires more than adopting a new set of beliefs. It reaches down to the cellular level and rewrites the operating code of your body/mind. After all, even if we are uncomfortable with how things are going in our lives, we are loath to surrender familiar patterns.

The *Gongfu* of Taijiquan

Taijiquan is a special type of *gongfu*. In taiji, process is at least as important as result. Its slow, graceful movements are ideal for exploring all aspects of our human makeup: physical, energetic, mental, emotional, spiritual. It provides a model for exploring the wide spectrum of life's energies and dynamics. In taiji, consciousness is brought to the slightest of movements, and we learn that only through consciousness can we access the power of taijiquan. Through patient, careful observation, ancient mysteries of body and mind reveal themselves over time. The *gongfu* of taijiquan challenges our basic assumptions of how the world works. Much of what makes taiji effective is counterintuitive, as we shall see. Often those who enthusiastically mouth its more cherished maxims may not really believe them when push comes to shove.

Even an untrained eye can see a quality that differentiates taijiquan from other exercises. Taiji styles and interpretations vary widely, as do the skills and understanding of practitioners, but it is apparent that there is meaning in the movements. Even if a novice is unaware of the depth of this meaning, it is still woven into the fabric of the moves themselves. Conscientious practice imparts the hidden wisdom that transforms the individual in unexpected ways.

As beginners, we really have no idea of what is in store. It cannot be predicted from observation; it must be experienced. Something magical happens when the movements are performed harmoniously.

The experience is analogous to learning to ride a bicycle. Let's say you are given a bike with no instructions other than a picture of a person sitting on one. You have never seen anything like it before. It just arrives at your desert island with the tide. There is little apparent in a bike that reveals the secret of its functioning. It only works when it is moving. But you don't know that. If you are familiar with other wheels, you might guess this thing's meant to roll, but it falls over when unsupported.

You struggle to keep it upright, fighting the pull of gravity. After a number of painful falls you find yourself anticipating and resisting the next one. As your attention gets fixed on resisting all that can go wrong, you find it difficult to do the one thing that you need to do: relax into your center of

gravity and go fast enough in a straight line to establish balance. When you finally find and trust your center, it becomes much easier to let go of your resistance to the anticipated difficulties. You and the bicycle are now one coherent unit, free and light, riding a sumptuous wave of improbability. What was inconceivable is now within your grasp.

You don't learn to ride by just hearing about it. You have to get on the bike yourself. When you learn its secrets, you are forever changed. You have transformed into a bike rider. The learning process is not just incremental, that is, it doesn't happen by simply adding to existing knowledge. It requires new assumptions and a triumph over fear to learn this new skill.

There is a feeling one gets in taiji that cannot be explained to a "non-rider." While there may be ways of describing this feeling in scientific terms, few practitioners can. There is a body/mind knowledge that transcends the rational, thinking mind and requires the cooperation of all the trillions of cells in the body to make it work right.

Gongfu requires knowing what to do and what not to do. As consciousness researcher and Esalen co-founder Michael Murphy, has said:

> In dedicating ourselves to disciplines that will last for many years or the rest of our lives, we need to know why we must avoid certain pitfalls, give up particular habits, learn new skills, cultivate unfamiliar virtues, and develop various attributes. We need to know how the different parts of our practices fit together, how they support each other, and why we need them all.[1]

A Wordless Book

Taijiquan must be felt. Ancient masters sought to record and pass on wisdom that transcends thought and word. They packaged it in a medium sturdy enough to travel through time, cultural differences, and individual interpretations, yet still permit access to those who seek its treasures.

The story of taijiquan is the story of the Dao, the "Way" things are (see chapter 3). Forms and patterns change constantly, but there are universal truths that pervade all. Those truths must be lived, not just thought about. Taijiquan permits access to this understanding by physically repatterning

the student. It is like a book that can be opened again and again, each time transforming the reader, who dances through its pages.

Taijiquan brings awareness and integration of the many disparate elements that make up a human being. But the fruit of integral awareness requires patient effort over time. *Gongfu*. In the words of William Blake from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:*

> If the doors of perception were cleansed,
> everything would appear to man as it is,
> infinite.
> For man has closed himself up,
> til he sees all things thro' chinks of his cavern.

Chapter 3

Insubstantial and Substantial

The true physics of the world will one day achieve the inclusion of humanity in a coherent picture of the world.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, twentieth-century philosopher and scientist

My taijiquan training followed the normal pattern of *gongfu* for the first decade or so: I learned the art from the outside in. That is, I learned how to move in a particular way according to taiji principles. Tradition holds that if one does this long enough the many hidden treasures of taijiquan will reveal themselves. While this method has certainly proven itself over the centuries, I wondered if it could be accelerated by a reexamination through the lens of ideas more familiar to the Western mind. Applying the logic of Western thinking, however, tended to generate contradictions, where observable phenomena seemed somehow impossible. I was advised to ignore such conflicts and find taiji's truths in its practice, not in its words. Yet I sensed that none of us start this practice with a blank slate; instead, we are somehow limited by our underlying beliefs. Is there a way to resolve this apparent cognitive dissonance?

More precisely, is there a unifying principle that pervades all aspects of taijiquan? One that does not violate what is known or knowable through careful observation of nature?

Taijiquan is such a vast and rich subject that one can practice for many years without finding a common thread or organizing theme. It has so many facets that what seems important at any point can shift dramatically as you progress through your *gongfu*. This is hardly a weakness; rather, it speaks to the depth and complexity of taijiquan.

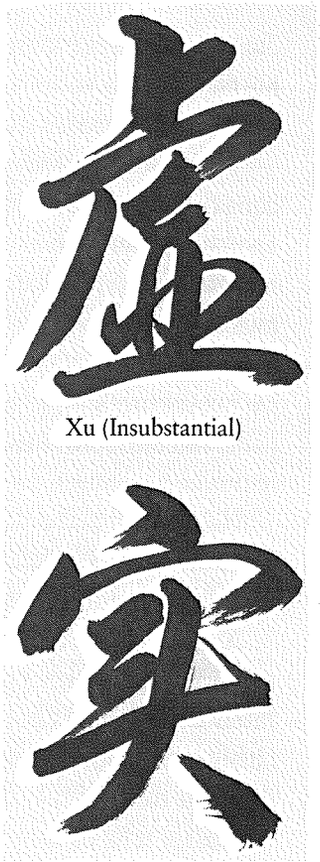
The "wordless book" of taijiquan transforms your consciousness as it physically repatterns you. You learn to function physically at a higher order of relaxed efficiency, and with that comes an improvement in health and feelings of well-being. With proper instruction and diligent practice you will develop awareness of subtle, hard-to-define perceptions that extend beyond the ordinary.

Unfortunately, self-awareness of these enhanced abilities is often limited by low expectations and the lack of a conceptual framework. If something is not considered possible in one's worldview, development can be slowed. The great philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead said, "Induction presupposes metaphysics."[1] That is, scientific knowledge depends on a broader philosophy to give meaning to its facts. As we shall discuss throughout this book, the Western Gate presupposes that matter is the foundation of all things, including consciousness. Its metaphysics is predominantly materialist, and this seriously influences interpretations of all experiences.

In my own taijiquan *gongfu*, spanning twenty-five years, things that at one time seemed the stuff of fantasy have become quite real to me. I came to realize that these were not merely serendipitous events but actual skills that could be developed by anyone willing to do the work. Progress is made through direct experience. That experience is facilitated by understanding appropriate to the event.

A question guaranteed to spark a rousing debate at a dinner table of taiji cognoscenti is: "What is the defining principle of taiji? Is there one thing that makes it different from other martial arts?" I believe there is an answer to this question. To quote Yang Cheng-Fu: "The discrimination of insubstantial and substantial is the first meaning (i.e., the most important content) in Taijiquan."[2]

His uncle Yang Ban-Hou insists that those who train without knowing the theory of insubstantial and substantial will waste their *gongfu*. Understanding insubstantial and substantial goes to the heart of what the art is all about. It puts the *Tai Ji* in taijiquan. The Chinese terms are *xu* (insubstantial) and *shi* (substantial). *Xu* can also mean empty, abstract, or intangible. In Chinese medicine, it is used to describe a deficiency of energy. *Shi* can mean full, solid, or real. Medically, it means a surfeit of energy. (Fig. 1)



Xu (Insubstantial)

Shi (Substantial)

Figure 1

Xu and *shi* take on additional meaning when seen as an interdependent pair, like the more commonly known yin and yang. The Chinese regard such pairs as mutually arising—that is, they are complementary aspects of the same thing. Every thing is considered to have both qualities of the pair simultaneously, albeit in different proportions. Nothing is exclusively yin, or exclusively yang, or just *xu* and not *shi*. As chapter 2 of the *Dao De Jing* clarifies:

> Being and nonbeing produce each other:
> difficulty and ease complement each other,
> long and short shape each other,
> high and low contrast with each other,
> voice and echoes conform to each other,
> before and after go along with each other.
> So sages manage effortless service
> and carry out unspoken guidance.[3]

While yin/yang and *xu/shi* are both paired complements, it is important to distinguish between them. Each pair describes abstract concepts that are largely unfamiliar to the Western mind and often mistaken as synonymous. Understanding these terms is important to all that follows.

As mentioned earlier, yin and yang are the mutually arising aspects of the *Tai Ji*, the "Supreme Ultimate." One cannot do taijiquan without some understanding of this concept, even if only intuitively. Yang expresses the expanding quality of things and yin, the contracting quality. Yang extends

out into the world to make something happen, and yin dissolves and returns home. There is some yin and some yang in everything. It is this interplay that animates existence.

While both qualities exist in all things, one usually dominates. This is considered the identifying quality in that situation. For example, if I greet an acquaintance warmly and enthusiastically, it is a yang expression. If I realize she is embarrassed by my effusiveness, I tone down my manner to make her more comfortable. That is more yin. Kicking or punching a sparring partner are yang actions. They are expansive. If I receive and neutralize my partner's attacks, I am more yin. Masculine qualities are considered yang and feminine ones yin. Males and females display both masculine and feminine attributes, yang and yin, in varying degrees.

Hot is yang and cold is yin. But how hot is "hot"? The relative values of hot and cold are analogous to those of yang and yin. They derive their meaning from their relationship to each other and to their circumstances.

Xu and *shi* are also "mutually arising" terms, but ones almost unknown in the West, even among knowledgeable taiji people. They represent concepts rarely considered important, let alone practical, at the Western Gate. Translators often confuse *xu* with yin and *shi* with yang, but they are fruits of a different tree.

Xu/shi tells us how much substance is present while yin/yang tells us whether that substance is closing or opening, contracting or expanding. For example, if I reach out with my left leg, it is unweighted (*xu*) and yang (extending). My right leg is yin and *shi* (substantial). If I kick with my left leg, that leg is yang and *shi* because it is both extending and substantial. In both examples the left leg is yang because it is opening. It is more substantial in the second example because its purpose (kicking) makes it more solid or "real." Intention transforms perception of substance.

This distinction may seem at first confusion to be a semantic labyrinth, but the patient reader will find it amazingly practical. It opens the door to a Copernican shift, allowing an entirely different view of the world. Instead of dealing exclusively with surfaces, it provides a way to describe depths.

"Lacking substance" is commonly a pejorative, indicating that something is frivolous or superficial (no depth). Not so in the context of taijiquan. The martial artist who discovers the power of *xu* may feel kinship

with Luke Skywalker in the movie *Star Wars* as he learns to "feel the Force." Clearly, it is the insubstantiality of the Force that makes it easy to dismiss as a movie fantasy. Yet martial artists and energy healers have felt and used bioenergetic fields effectively for thousands of years. They have done so by becoming conversant with insubstantiality. And that requires *gongfu*.

The importance of *xu* and *shi* is emphasized in the "Taijiquan Classic," an important treatise by Wu Yu-Xiang, who created Wu-style (Hao-style) taijiquan in the nineteenth century:

> Insubstantial and substantial must be clearly distinguished.
> Each point has its own point of insubstantial/substantial.
> Everywhere there is always this one insubstantial/substantial.[4]

Wu's statement evokes the universality of the *xu/shi* principle. Not only does each point have "its own point of insubstantial/substantial," but also "everywhere there is always this one insubstantial/substantial." The implication is that the idea is microcosmic as well as macrocosmic.

Taijiquan's effectiveness is greatly enhanced by understanding *xu* and shi. *Xu/shi* provides a way not only to examine the biggest stumbling block in grasping the essence of taijiquan but also to illuminate those fundamental assumptions of Western thought that may seriously limit other aspects of health and well-being. These assumptions make up the Western Gate. Before tackling these powerful adversaries it is helpful to investigate more fully what "insubstantial" and "substantial" really mean.

Stuff and Non-stuff

Even the English words "insubstantial/substantial" are ambiguous. They have been a source of contention throughout history. What do those terms really mean? "Substantial" is the adjectival form of the word "substance." It means "having substance or pertaining to substance." Some common definitions for"substance" include:

1. The real or essential part of anything.
2. The physical matter of which anything exists.
3. Solid quality.
4. Philosophical: Something that has independent existence and is acted upon by causes.

These definitions represent popular meanings of the word, yet they should not be taken as definitive. Philosopher Jonathan Shear, author of *The Inner Dimension,* takes issue with the second point above.* He stated in conversation that he preferred "the material or 'stuff' that something is made of." This allows for the notion that nonphysical things may have substance. ("John's ideas have substance." "A substantial fear filled the room.") The fourth definition above begs questions about what is meant by "independent existence." Many Eastern philosophies, as well as some principles of quantum physics, question whether it is possible to have either independent existence or cause and effect.

"Substance" is one of those "everybody knows" words, like "matter" and "energy." But like those words, substance is a fuzzy thing to define. Physicist Arthur Eddington makes it clear that matter and energy are virtually indefinable without recourse to mathematics. We are otherwise caught up in endless loops and circular definitions. One hundred years ago Einstein gave a convincing proof that matter is but very dense energy.

Nonetheless, Shear's definition gives us the latitude we need to understand *xu/shi*. Substance is "the material or 'stuff' that something is made of," and *xu/shi* is a way of describing how much stuff is present in the thing being considered. Shear noted that "substance" also connotes solidity and fixity. Thus, "insubstantial" means less solid or fixed. "Substantial" and "insubstantial" are relative terms. The states of water provide an example: ice is more substantial than water in its liquid state, which is more substantial than water vapor.

In taijiquan *xu* and *shi* are usually explained in this way: When you use one leg to support more of the body's weight, it is considered the more substantial leg of the two. The fist that is punching is substantial, while the hand that parries is insubstantial.

Yang Cheng-Fu and others have used such physical examples to express this distinction broadly. Students could clearly see the difference between a

*Jonathan Shear is professor of philosophy, author of numerous books and articles on consciousness, long-time practitioner of taijiquan and Transcendental Meditation, and co-founder of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. I was fortunate to speak with Professor Shear directly on the subject matter of this book.

leg that supported the body and one that didn't. That did not mean *xu* and *shi* were only descriptions of where you put your weight. The subtler implications of the pair were left for students to decipher. For reasons to be explained below, the Western student is at a serious disadvantage when examining such ramifications.

As a martial strategy, making the distinction between *xu* and *shi* owes much to *The Art of War,* or *Sunzi's Fighting Strategies,* written in the sixth century B.C.E. by Sunzi (Sun-Tsu). Focus your attack on the vulnerable points of the enemy (*xu*), not on the enemy's strengths (*shi*). Don't resist an opponent's attack with your *xu;* rather, dissolve and return with your power where you are *shi.*

The famous Maginot Line illustrated this point. Prior to World War II, the French installed elaborate artillery designed to thwart possible attacks by Germany. The French assumed that future conflicts would be conducted as in World War I, when soldiers fought from trenches in fixed positions. They pointed their cannons eastward and set them in thick concrete. Instead, the Germans attacked from the north, through Belgium, and avoided the substantial part of the French defense. As powerful as it was, this heavy ordnance was nullified because the Germans attacked where the French were insubstantial.

If the concepts of substantial and insubstantial were limited to these mechanical and strategic applications, it would still be a good foundation for an effective martial system. But this only describes the surface level—the contractions and expansions of yin and yang. Taijiquan is an internal martial art and is more concerned with the deeper level of stuff and nonstuff.

The differentiation of substantial and insubstantial is the source of the power and effectiveness of taijiquan. It also opens the doors to spiritual awakening. This differentiation goes well beyond which part of the body is "soft" and which is "hard." It actually challenges the axioms upon which our normal perceptions of the world rest. Taijiquan can be a tool to examine these fundamental assumptions experientially and not just intellectually. Each time we surrender our distracted minds and focus consciousness on the actions of taijiquan, we have an opportunity to bring our body/mind awareness into resonance with the pulse of life. In this way

apprehension of truth is experienced by our whole being and is not limited to just mental activity.

We are introduced to the ideas of substantial and insubstantial by actually feeling their application in our bodies. We become comfortable with these concepts as we feel them somatically. One side is full, the other empty, continually changing throughout taiji practice.

But full or empty of what?

Relative Terms

In order to differentiate between *xu* and *shi* we must ask this seemingly simple question: What is it that makes the weighted leg or the punching fist substantial? After all, on close examination we see that the physical substance hasn't really changed. There is still the same amount of flesh, bone, blood, and sinew as in the unweighted leg and the parry hand. Their physical stuff hasn't changed in size or volume despite the contraction of certain muscles. Yet something is admittedly different.

Ironically, it is the "non-stuff" that makes one side substantial: the mind has enlivened it in accord with its intention and purpose. Thus, if my left leg is used as the primary support of my body in a specific posture, it is considered *shi* (substantial) because I have used the *xu* (insubstantial) qualities of attention, intention, and energy to make it more solid than its counterpart. My right leg, in this case, has a different purpose and function. It assists in the support process but is also available for transition to another posture.

Xu and *shi* are relative terms, not absolutes. They reflect the ever-changing relationship in all things between stuff and non-stuff. In the above example, my left leg is substantial because it is used to support most of my body's mass. It is more substantial (solid) than my right leg in this case. This insubstantial (right) leg is more substantial, however, than the energy that animates either leg. Its flesh and bone are decidedly more solid than the qi that circulates within. And that energy is more substantial than the intention that directs it, which may be more substantial than the thoughts I might have about it. There is a spectrum of substantiality in everything.

Simply put, consciousness determines whether something is considered insubstantial or substantial.

When a woman is kissing a man, she notices immediately if his attention is on her or if he is watching the ballgame over her shoulder. The kiss is empty when bases are loaded with two outs in the ninth. The surfaces of things remain the same, but depth is lacking.

The human energy field is quite insubstantial in ordinary consideration. Most people are hardly aware of it. Many scientists deny that such a thing even exists despite ample evidence. Martial artists, qigong masters, and energy healers can generate bioenergetic fields that are so charged they can be felt and detected at a considerable distance by various machines, such as the electroencephalographs (EEGs) that measure brainwaves and magnetometers used to detect the strength of magnetic fields (see chapter 7).

As a result of different mindsets, words and thoughts can seem *xu* and *shi*. Certain words, like curses and swearwords, are so charged they immediately provoke a response. Others remind us of a traumatic experience, gaining substance from that association. For example, prior to September 11, 2001, the pairing of the numbers "9" and "11" had little, if any, emotional charge for U.S. citizens. Since then, those numbers have been burned into the psyches of millions.

Whether something is considered substantial or insubstantial is determined by consciousness and context, not by any fixed standard. A brick is more substantial (solid, fixed) than a hand unless that hand is smashing the brick. Something insubstantial (intention, energy) makes it more substantial. The Western Gate draws a sharp distinction between stuff and non-stuff. It emphasizes the separateness of things. But such separateness is not supported by the scientific models of relativity and quantum physics, much less by traditional Eastern philosophies like Daoism, Vedanta, and Buddhism. Substantial and insubstantial, form and emptiness, physical matter and consciousness can be seen instead as mutually arising. They are not considered to be in conflict but as interdependent aspects of the same thing. As it says in chapter 11 of the *Dao De Jing:*

Thirty spokes are made one by holes on a hub
By vacancies joining them for a wheel's use;
The use of clay in moulding pitchers
Comes from the hollow of its absence;

Doors, windows, in a house,
Are used for their emptiness;
Thus we are helped by what is not
To use what is.[5]

Daoism and Taijiquan

Before approaching the Gate, let us take a brief tour through a philosophical alternative—Daoism. It is a major source of inspiration for taijiquan. *Xu/shi* is integral to Daoist thought, which provides an excellent contrast to the view from the Gate.

Universal truths are expressed in Daoist poetry and parables with a distinct Chinese flavor. While not the first written record of Daoist wisdom, the *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*, or "The Way and Its Power") is the most popular. It has undergone more translations than any book other than the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita, showing how many different interpretations the *Dao De Jing*'s eighty-one short poems can have.

The Way that becomes a way
is not the Immortal Way
the name that becomes a name
is not the Immortal Name[6]

These are the first lines of the book and let us know from the start that the Dao can never be fully explained. "The map is not the territory it represents." What anyone can understand from the words of Daoism will be like the shadows on Plato's cave.* not the Light that casts them. Daoist language is a useful tool in describing truths that we may personally experience. It provides a rough map for those approaching the treasure, but it will never substitute for the treasure itself.

Daoism and taijiquan have much in common: transforming opposition through understanding, overcoming hardness through softness, cultivating internal energy, recognizing the polar nature of the manifest

*The philosopher Plato likened the individual's perception of reality to the shadows cast on a cave wall by the fire behind the person.

universe, and awakening spirit through an awareness of the natural order. The *Dao De Jing* is a poetic record of this ancient philosophy, written around the sixth century B.C.E. It is unclear if the book was the work of one man, Lao-tse (meaning "Old Master"), or the distillation of Daoist wisdom from many sources. Its principles predated Lao-tse by a thousand years or more.* The book is a celebration of the Dao, or the "Way Things Are." The Dao is a name given to "that which cannot be named" and is beyond all comprehension.

The Dao is the breath that never dies.
It is a Mother to all Creation.
It is the root and ground of every soul
    the fountain of Heaven and Earth, laid open.
Endless source, endless river
River of no shape, river of no water
Drifting invisibly from place to place
. . . it never ends
    and it never fails.[7]

Daoism makes a key point that the sage is to align himself with the primordial forces of nature, rather than with social and religious conventions that separate him from the flow of life. By doing so, the sage attains great power, called *De,* the power of nature. This is very different from power over nature. *De* is the expression of the Dao in life.

De is epitomized in the principle of wu-wei, sometimes translated as "doing by not doing" or "going with the flow." In a phone conversation Shear defined it as "doing, established in absolute non-doing." He explained: "*Wu-wei* means established in *wu,* absolute non-doing, as the ground of action. 'Established in non-doing' allows detection of, and influence on, the tiniest seeds of doing, as a stereo that can play pure silence has the highest fidelity."

*"The earliest historical Taoist text is attributed to a minister of the founder of the old Shang-Yin dynasty in the eighteenth century B.C.," according to Thomas Cleary in *The Essential Tao* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1992).

The sage can feel the natural flow of events and resonate with that flow, not wasting energy struggling to impose his or her will arbitrarily. It is not so much passivity as it is heightened awareness of all the elements of one's environment that permits appropriate actions and wise decisions despite constantly changing conditions.

plan for the hard when it's easy,
work on the great while it's small
the hardest task in the world begins easy
the greatest goal in the world begins small
therefore the sage never acts great
he thus achieves great things [8]

Wu-wei makes sense when one sees all things fundamentally as relationships between shifting polarities. Things can't exist separately from other things. All things are interrelated. Independent existence is a social convention rather than an absolute reality. Scientist and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "The farther and more deeply we penetrate into matter, by means of increasingly powerful methods, the more we are confounded by the interdependence of its parts."[9] Daoism sees our reality as the interplay of stuff and non-stuff. The wise man recognizes how much stuff and how much non-stuff is appropriate in a given situation and acts accordingly.

Daoist Cosmology

The Tao gives birth to one
one gives birth to two
two gives birth to three
three gives birth to ten thousand things
ten thousand things with yin at their backs
and yang in their embrace
and breath between for harmony

Dao De Jing[10]

The Daoist view (shared by most Eastern philosophies as well as the Western mystical tradition) is that things get progressively more insubstantial as you move toward their source. The "ten thousand things" is the world that is most substantial and most familiar to us. It is our playground and the manifestation of the interplay of more fundamental archetypes. It is the universe of space/time, matter, and energy: the world of phenomena.

The ten thousand things derive from the archetypes of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Heaven is the most yang and least substantial of these three. It corresponds to the expansiveness (yang) of pure consciousness while displaying less substance than Earth or Man. As I understand it, this is not the "heaven" of angels, celestial choirs, sloe-eyed houris, Saint Peter, and the like. It is more insubstantial than we can imagine, lacking even these ephemera of other religious traditions.

Earth is the most yin and the most substantial (*xu*). Man occupies the middle ground, a mingling of Heaven and Earth, stuff and non-stuff.

The *Tai Ji,* as noted earlier, is composed of yin and yang, the ever-fluctuating polarities that constitute all that exists. In its most fundamental state everything exists as a kind of pulsation. Each particle is yang in its expanding phase and yin when it contracts. Each has a characteristic frequency (rate of pulsing). Scientists use pulses to identify elements, even across vast distances, by analyzing the frequencies of light emitted by stars. Even at the most mundane, we use frequencies of light when we perceive color and frequencies of sound when we hear pitch. The *Tai Ji* acknowledges this essential dynamic as complementary and mutually arising aspects of the same thing. It also recognizes that there is simultaneously a "wholeness" (*Tai Ji*) and its parts (*yin/yang*).

The *Tai Ji* is preceded by the ultimate insubstantial: the *Wu Ji.* It is the "Undifferentiated Nothingness," the inexpressible chaos of infinite potentiality that exists beyond all conception of space and time, matter and energy. *Wu Ji* gives birth to the *Tai Ji,* not as a "Big Bang" in ages past, but in every moment, now and forever.

Xu and *shi,* insubstantial and substantial, can be differentiated at each point in the vast continuum of the Dao, even to the ultimate contrast of *Wu Ji* and *Tai Ji.* The difference between yin/yang and *xu/shi* was confirmed by martial artist, translator, and scholar Yang Jwing-Ming: "If you consider *Xu* (insubstantial) as *Wu Ji* or void state, then *Shi* (substantial) is

the state of substance. However, it is not reasonable to compare *Xu* as Yin and *Shi* as Yang in this case since Yin and Yang were originated from *Wu Ji* through *Tai Ji's* action."[11]

This is not an idle distinction. Yang and yin indicate whether something is expanding or contracting, opening or closing, advancing or retreating. It has to do with qualities in the substantial realm. *Shi* and *xu* describe how much substance is actually present, even to the ultimate "non-stuff" of *Wu Ji.*

To review these fundamental components of Daoist cosmology, from most to least substantial, we have:

- The ten thousand things (the physical world)
- Earth/Man/Heaven
- Yin/yang
- *Tai Ji*
- *Wu Ji*
- Dao

With this thumbnail sketch I intend only to give the barest of outlines. But this view of the universe has been given much thought for thousands of years. It provides a picture of a constantly unfolding Creation whose genesis is outside of space and time. It also sketches the backdrop against which some of the key ideas of taijiquan can be understood.

These ideas, it turns out, have much in common with Western scientific developments in the past century, some of which have only recently filtered into the mainstream. It is a foreign concept to most Western minds that substance can vary based on such a subjective thing as consciousness, yet that is precisely the view of many scientists who investigate the extremely small world of the quantum and the vastness of conditions where relativity holds sway. Chapter 4 brings us to the Western Gate and an opportunity to explore the impact of science on our collective worldview.

Chapter 4

The Western Gate

The triumphs of modern science went to man's head in something of the way rum does, causing him to grow loose in his logic. He came to think that what science discovers somehow casts doubt on things it does not discover; that the success it realizes in its own domain throws into question the reality of domains its devices cannot touch.

Huston Smith, religious scholar

Certain basic assumptions in the West, while helpful in bringing order to our experience, actually impede the *gongfu* of taijiquan beyond a superficial level. These same assumptions make it difficult to access the Zone state in sports, to clear the mind in meditation, and to feel the energy that pervades every aspect of our existence. Taken to the pathological, these assumptions are the source of much mental and physical dis-ease: lack of harmony.

These assumptions are the Western Gate, and when they are rigidly held, the Gate is locked to us. They prevent entry to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of taijiquan, as well as the mystical traditions of both East and West. We are permitted to play in the beautiful garden just outside and sometimes get glimpses of the wonders on the other side. Yet the glimpses fade, dreamlike, when those assumptions reassert themselves. We have to content ourselves with improved health and vigor, some martial prowess, and a sense of relaxation. But there is so much more.

Please don't mistake this as a "West is bad/ East is good" diatribe. That is not where this is going at all. I draw heavily on Western science,