

Transcript and translation of the podcast Anderas Heyden über Tai Chi und die Einheit von Körper und Geist, Soulfood by Katharina Minwegen 2020

Introduction

Hello dear Andreas, so nice that you are here today. We are currently talking about—today we're talking about Tai Chi, and I'd like to start by saying, because I believe Tai Chi isn't really that widespread here yet— at least not as it is maybe in other cultures— and maybe not as widespread yet as, for example, Yoga, which is already, I would say " mainstream."

Can you tell us a little bit about the history and the origins of Tai Chi?

There is this legendary figure, Chang San-Feng, said to have lived— it's not exactly known— somewhere between the 9th and 12th century. Because the time span is so long, there are writings, places, things that are associated with him, so, supposedly, this person lived about 1200 to 900 years ago, am I about right—800 years maybe? —who is said to have invented **the "wheel" of Tai Chi**. He lived in the vineyards, but before that he was a master of the external martial arts. And then, in his old age—70 years— he went there and learned things about the energy flows circulating in the body, and so on, and from that he found the inspiration to create a new martial art. So you could say, the origins are already 1000 years old.

Incredible, really— and probably very deeply rooted in the culture there.

Yes, certainly. It goes back to the Yellow Emperor. Taoism is a Chinese philosophy and religion that originated around the 4th century BC. Taoism is often also called the soul of China, and the most original form of Chinese thinking. The word Taoism can be translated as **"the teaching of the Way."** And the roots of Tai Chi are said to be just as old. 4000 years— who can even grasp such a span of time today? So, earlier forms were much older, high cultures that flourished in the Wudang Mountains, so to speak. And Chang San-Feng was the first who then coined the term **Tai Chi Chuan— that's the full name**. Tai Chi means something like "the supreme principle" or "highest law," because **no one can move outside of polarity in this world**. And *Chuan* literally means "fist," but in a broader sense, it can also be translated as "movement art" or "martial art."

And Chang San-Feng was, so to speak, the first to put this concept together and to define the first basic movements or basic principles— so-called "forms"— and to express them as a sequence of movements. So, you could say, the 13 movements were the beginning— which are mentioned in the literature. These are the eight fundamental techniques and five types of movement. And the **five types of movement** we also know from— Maybe something like in Greek tradition— that is, moving forward, backward, to the left, and to the right, turning or walking, and then the centered movement— which is an upward and downward motion. Yeah, so that means that from the center you move outward in all directions.

And these basic techniques, they form the eight basic techniques, which are sort of the core of Tai Chi. And from there, a fixed sequence of movements developed, which is maybe what

is most familiar when you get a visual impression— like when you see someone moving slowly and fluidly through a space, in a park, wherever— that is probably the most well-known image. So the core, the so-called form, developed from that.

Now you just said something— which, by the way, I also wasn't really aware of before— Tai Chi is a martial art. Right? Can you maybe explain a little how Tai Chi is different from other martial arts? Because it's a very special kind of martial art— already visually, because you move slower.

Yeah, exactly. When you think of martial arts, you think of dynamics, speed, reaction time, and so on. And Tai Chi Chuan stands out because you move very slowly and very consciously. Another thing is, you don't move abruptly, or freeze things, or stiffen them up— like in Karate, for example, where you often have a kind of focal point in the movement— where you gather all your strength at once— and sometimes even stabilize it with a combat shout. Instead, in Tai Chi, everything flows very quietly, very fluidly, and in a slowed-down manner. But that's also a big misunderstanding, because when you see it, you might think— oh, they're just moving in slow motion, and they're kind of at their limit. Which of course has a side effect— that you become much calmer.

But that's more of a teaching method— it plays a didactic role. Because when you move slowly, the movement becomes visually very easy to follow— you can see every detail, and you can consciously replicate it for yourself. Every detail, which in a fast movement would maybe get lost— all the precision that's there— ...then it's not perceived at all— or not perceived in detail— and then you also can't really replicate it. So this slowness is a tool— a way to feel the movements more precisely and to physically internalize them and imitate them at first, then later to understand them more deeply.

Slowness

And this slowness— in our fast and often hectic everyday lives— is often seen as something negative. But I associate it strongly with mindfulness. And when we carry out all the things we do with more mindfulness, then it not only brings calmness and serenity into our lives, but it also ensures that we perceive and feel more— and in the end, we reach our goals much faster, because we are giving our full attention to one thing at a time. That's the opportunity you get through this. And that's actually the real reason why you move slowly. In a real fight, you would of course adapt quickly— to the speed of the attack, for example. Another big difference is— that you work with space. Meaning, you keep much more distance. You don't react only right before the attack hits you— like with a punch aimed at your head— but you intercept it far ahead of your body.

I see, yes— and in what way exactly? So basically by moving early, so that you are already reacting ahead of time? Can you explain that a bit more? Because I imagine that to be really difficult— especially with something like a punch. How do you manage to intercept that earlier?

Movement space or ball

...to adapt to it or react to it, is exactly the right question, because we don't understand the body just as the body, we see, that we have limbs we can use, but we see it just as space, meaning when you stretch out your arm and make a gesture through the air, then you'll understand the body more like... well, imagine the arm can reach beyond the head or the leg has a certain reach and in every direction that creates a kind of space, like a ball and this ball is, in a way, the body and that's what you encounter when you attack — meaning you're aware not just of the space in front of you but also behind, to the side, and in every direction you know what I mean? so it's like you attack and you hit this — let's call it movement space or ball — and that's where contact with the other begins it's really interesting, because today you also notice it with social distancing this is exactly the space where no aggression happens — when you maintain this distance — but if you break this distance and get closer for example, now we're sitting farther apart and we just met but if we were sitting much closer invading this space so to speak it would already feel intimate and if I come closer, I'm also entering your body space meaning if we don't know each other well, we can feel that maybe even feel threatened or uncomfortable if we know each other well and want more physical closeness, of course then it's welcome but when we don't know each other well yet you can feel it very clearly and this space — exactly this space — is inhabited during tai chi chuan movements but you also give the other person their space you maintain that distance, and contact happens when the spaces start to touch and flow into each other like two balls rolling together so the techniques are built in a way that it's like the balls rolling against each other — and you never go too far if you do, you lose your balance if you don't feel that space then the other person has the advantage and can throw you off balance, the body is like a ball, and like a ball, it has an axis and everything turns around that...

My first reaction earlier was also immediately when you talked about aggression, when you get too close to a stranger you're not just physically stepping into their space, you're also stepping into their energy field, right? would you say it has to do with that?

Yes, absolutely and when that space is crossed without the right technique you feel it then you want to reclaim your space to keep the other outside, I remember when I first met my master, Master Chu he talked about the "front garden" that you should have in front of you like in front of your house not just a flowerpot if you have that garden space then you don't feel so easily threatened it's welcoming and friendly but no one is pressing their nose against your window. Such a beautiful image and I think we all know that feeling especially in today's society even if we're not fully conscious of it but we feel it clearly everyone who's ever stood in a packed subway knows it and of course sometimes it's a luxury to have that space people will say: I can't afford to claim that space I live in a cramped place or it's just not possible in many situations but if you're aware of it you understand your own feelings better and your sense of discomfort and you can deal with it better then you know: okay,

we're standing close but internally I can still give myself some space you become aware of how far your own body extends

Yin yang polarities

I really love this image of the ball because we usually think: we are our body but this explains so much I'm also in a phase where I often wonder why we feel so cramped sometimes and why we are so sensitive to other people's energies and it makes perfect sense now: if someone steps into your front garden or even runs through it of course it affects your energy field even if you're not consciously aware of it and each part of the body is seen as a ball too according to the yin-yang principle you always see polarities one extreme to the other and what happens in between and very concretely each body part is again divided like that. That's why it's even more important to recognize these different energies, to accept them as part of yourself and to love them. Yes, front, back, Yin, Yang, and so on.

You could actually take this idea all the way down to the smallest and up to the greatest. That's why they say it's a principle. For example, speed is often associated with Yang, of course. And cold, slowness, calmness, those are related to Yin. And this principle becomes clearer: but if you start to separate the two or divide these areas, then you're actually making a basic mistake. **The point is not separation, it's about connecting these polar forces**, making them work together, creating harmony between them. Then the symbol also becomes very clear, the Yin and Yang symbol — everyone knows it, the intertwining or swimming fishes. And you can see in the light part, there's a dark dot — meaning that even in Yang, Yin is present. And in the dark area, there's a light dot — showing that even in Yin, there is Yang. It's always about interaction.

Stick

I remember when my master once handed me a stick and said: one side is Yin, the other side is Yang. And if you move one side, the other side moves too. I had the stick in the middle, and when I moved it toward Yin, the Yang side moved away from me. And vice versa. Meaning: Yang becomes Yin, and Yin becomes Yang. And when you hold the stick in the middle and rotate it in all directions, you can see that same sphere appear again — the ball of space you occupy. And if you imagine your center like that — that all your gestures and movements come from this middle point — then you begin to understand: wherever you are, Yin and Yang are always present. These relationships are studied very carefully so that you stay in balance, that you don't go too far into one side, because otherwise, you lose yourself, you lose your center. And you also shouldn't be too passive — because then you lose the space altogether. Each part of the body has a relationship to another part, a polarity. And my master said: "Take away one side. What's left?" And I said: "Nothing, no stick." And he said: "Exactly, you've understood it." The poles pushed to the extreme end up as nothing. If one side no longer exists, the other cannot exist either. It's all about the interplay between Yin and Yang, not about separating them. And not about saying: this is right, that is wrong. There's no "right" and "wrong" in that sense — only an expansion of opposite forces that together create a whole through cooperation.

No right, no wrong

In my eyes, there's fundamentally no right or wrong either. We judge situations, people, or our feelings way too quickly. But it's much more important to come into acceptance. And if you can't yet accept, then maybe ask yourself: what can I change in this situation so that I can come to acceptance? And how can I express my needs and wishes in friendships or relationships in a kind way? Be mindful, feel inside yourself — but try not to judge. Try to remove words like "important," "wrong," "good," or "bad" from your vocabulary, and you'll see how much ease and freedom it will bring into your life. In Tai Chi Chuan, everything is based on these two principles, on Yin and Yang.

Yin and yang, but there is also another principle, the principle of heaven, earth, and man. How could you perhaps explain that a little more?

For example, the movement exercise I mentioned at the beginning has three parts. These symbolize this principle of heaven, earth, and man. The first part is: becoming, you learn to make contact with the ground, the basic principles, you develop a solid sense of the body and connection to the ground. Then the second part symbolizes space. This means that the experience is expanded, and you experience these principles in a different way. You make, for example, much wider movements, stand on one leg more often, which means that you move much more into space than in the first part. The third part symbolizes man, who connects these poles, the space and the solidity of the ground, or this feeling of truly being connected to the ground. So, man ideally connects heaven and earth, is like the axis that connects heaven and earth. Heaven (sky) is seen as the area where gods or angels, for example, float around, but actually, it's the space that surrounds us, which we always experience directly. You can always establish that you are standing on the ground and are surrounded by this space. This is ultimately the experience of heaven, earth, and man. The experience is that, for example, when you make contacts, like the first time you burn your finger, you never forget it. I remember how my daughter was standing next to me while I was cooking, and I warned her that she could only stand next to me to watch and give me things, but she had to be careful because the plate was hot. But she was so curious that she touched the plate with her little hand. Then the pain was intense, and this is ultimately the contact with the earth, a very concrete feeling. It might not only be the heat, but for example, the moment you bump into something. This is also very concrete; it's material. What you then experience is the experience of contact, and with that comes the realization that the experience of earth is always something that originated in the past, and once you understand that, you can more easily let go. We can once again fully be in the present. Ultimately, you can make the connection between the space, the experience, and what really is. This is what is meant by synchronizing body and mind, understanding the form and the space that envelops the form.

Synchronizing body and mind, understanding the space

It's about having some trust and at the same time mentally preparing yourself to be aware of it and to consciously use it. When this connection is made, you can actually perform things in the truest sense of the word with full awareness. It's a mixture of intellect and intuition, or the natural or instinctive. These levels are inseparable from each other. We are not just made up of this vegetative nervous system; we have blood circulation, nerve connections between the brain and the body. In Tai Chi Chuan, it is also shown in connection with traditional Chinese medicine that our body is permeated by a network of energy pathways. Acupuncture, is increasingly respected in the West, not just pushed aside but acknowledged. Traditional Chinese medicine is based on life energy, which is called "Qi" and flows in everything that is alive. In our body, it forms a kind of network of energy. In a healthy body, this energy can flow freely. If this energy flow is interrupted, diseases arise according to the ideas of TCM. To restore the energy flow, acupuncture, for example, can be used, where certain energy points are stimulated by placing needles. This helps to prevent interruptions in the energy flow, allowing it to flow freely again.

Sharp edges and corners

If you imagine sharp corners or edges, a blockade always arises at the corners, like a kink in a hose, which causes the energy to accumulate. This should be avoided. It is also important to avoid wasting energy, meaning not going beyond what is necessary with movements, because that would waste energy. In simple terms, rounded movements create a free flow. Though the analogy with a hose is not perfect, you can think of it as a garden hose that gets kinked, stopping the water from flowing. This is a simple way to understand how energy flows. Now, I immediately think of our fast-paced, hectic lives. How does the way we live affect this energy flow? Fortunately, not to the point where we immediately collapse, as the vegetative nervous system still functions, as I've said. Somewhere, our natural state is still intact, enough that the organs continue to work together. Of course, if you continue with certain gestures, you give the inner organs more space. For example, when you move your arms like wings, it affects the lungs. We say "left and right wings," and if the arms are restricted, you can't breathe as freely because the diaphragm can't move freely up and down. This leads to shallow breathing, which isn't deep enough or long enough. Naturally, this reduces oxygen intake, and the body's functions don't work as well.

Wellbeing and perception

This definitely affects our wellbeing and perception. For example, when I sit in meditation with my arms tightly pressed, holding on and tensing, my breathing becomes very short. As a result, I feel more drowsy and sluggish rather than relaxed, as one might expect. Body posture can make a huge difference. When you adopt an open arm posture and cross your legs without restricting blood circulation, you feel completely different and much more

comfortable. This enables relaxation. Many people meditate to relax mentally but take on a stiff, ascetic posture that they are not used to, causing discomfort and pain. Spend all the time dealing with going after some kind of cramp or whatever, this cannot really lead to mental relaxation, and that means there is an idea, the concept is good, one pauses, one lets everything go for a moment, retreats to a quiet corner perhaps, but then limits oneself and often does the opposite one starts to think too much about everything, and doesn't get the effect, but if there is a good introduction and above all a physicality that suits you, for example, first sitting on a chair, straightening up, and for example, having a good open arm posture, then you notice that you can breathe more deeply and relax through that, it's a completely different thing than when you, based on the idea, put yourself in such a special situation that limits you and doesn't help.

Comfort versus relaxation

I think it's mostly because we are so often convinced that there is this image of something in our heads, and we say this must be the way it is, and we're back to the idea of right and wrong— meditation must be done this way for it to be right.

That's what's been suggested to us, so it feels limited. You can't be free, exactly, and who says that meditation is only correct or valid when we meditate in a certain way? Isn't it completely okay to find a position that works for you? Then just meditate in that position, instead of feeling like you have to already be ten steps ahead because of it. It doesn't mean that one can't get there through practice, but that's a different matter. I would even go a step further and say that comfort is a major consideration when people think of relaxation, they think of comfort, feeling good, and thinking a meditation is possible when lying on a chaise lounge, but many believe that is what meditation is, when I make myself comfortable and feel good, but an open, clear mind cannot be formed in that way. **So comfort isn't always the best guide.** People often feel that everything has to be comfortable, but that's not necessarily the case. Meditation posture, for example, the guru position with crossed legs, as described in Buddhist texts, helps to keep the body grounded and creates stability by pressing the legs together to support the circulation, and helps keep the blood flowing in the upper body, which benefits the brain. However, if you try the lotus position with crossed legs for a long time, you'll see that blood circulation can get blocked, and that won't help you. Still, maintaining an upright posture is absolutely essential to developing a clear and alert mind. And through that, you find openness and relaxation, which can be very unusual for someone untrained, and maybe even the opposite happens, where you start to worry even more than before. But if you approach the posture skillfully and focus on what's needed, you can find a good foundation and support, with the right upright body position, and open arms. This will support your breathing, and you can fill the space and find relaxation in a different sense than comfort. Do you understand? So, the most skilled meditation posture is not necessarily helpful in every aspect at first, but you have to approach it with an understanding of what works for you at the moment. I also believe it's really important to feel it within yourself, because if you approach your body consciously, you'll quickly notice where you're making yourself comfortable versus where you're reaching your limits.

Physical limits

How far can you go without overwhelming your body, and that's when, for example, Tai Chi Chuan helps, where you test your physical limits. Another person tests your posture and clarifies the principles, which helps to see where you might be restricting energy, blocking it, or maybe even wasting it. Through this, you make a physical experience, and you gain criteria for what is actually good for you. It's not just a subjective feeling; there is objectivity behind it. And that's why having guidance from an experienced teacher is very helpful, especially when combined with the breath. Then you can really see how, through open arm posture as described, you can breathe more deeply, and that helps you to relax. "Concrete help."

Testing posture, its not about looking at a mirror correcting yourself

"Well, it's not just about feeling it now. We now have a concrete test, and that helps. You take a deep breath, but it's shallow, quick. Still, subjectively, you experience it as a possibility." "So, the test makes it concrete, and then you realize, 'Ah, this is it.' You have a clear way to practice and the criteria to move forward. It gives form, and through that, you experience space and how it interacts. You can practice with those concrete criteria later." "Yes, I do this too, without comparing, I do an exercise, and it feels a certain way. But when you take the test or adjust your approach, you notice small things, like the pelvis might be perceived differently. And suddenly, you realize, 'This is it.' That's what I can actually feel. Before, I couldn't feel that intuitively." "That's a beautiful thing, isn't it? Feeling it from the outside, getting help to feel it, and discovering things you wouldn't have noticed. It's like making adjustments through a concrete test. It merges the subjective and objective aspects, and that's how you find what's right." "It's not just about looking in a mirror and correcting yourself from the outside. It's always an interaction—an exchange. That's a big point in what we do."

Integrating the objective and subjective experience

"There are different methods for testing the body, right? A lot of them are named after the families that developed them. They all share the same principles but have their own unique features. Some emphasize quick, explosive movements, while others are about slow, steady ones." "Exactly. When you practice, it's not just about the physical test. It's about integrating both the objective and subjective experience."

"Now, about the current situation, we talked a bit about this before we started the interview. How has the current situation affected your teaching? What impact has it had, especially since we can no longer do physical tests?" "On one hand, not being able to physically test limits that direct feedback, but on the other hand, it makes everyone more aware of space—

the social distance we've been practicing. It's a recognition of space that we might have overlooked before. There's both a positive and negative side to it." "So, it's a shame that we can't have that physical interaction and exchange anymore?" "Yes, exactly. We're missing that direct subjective experience. But, at the same time, we're becoming more aware of our surroundings, of the space around us. This situation gives us a chance to practice gratitude and recognize how many things we took for granted before. Like hugs, going to concerts, or traveling abroad. These things aren't as self-evident as we once thought." "That's a good point. And you're hopeful that in the future, we'll engage in these moments with more awareness and presence?" "Yes, exactly. Many people in the world don't have the privilege of these experiences. They've never had that respect for space or the freedom we take for granted. That's something powerful to realize." "Even in small moments, like shopping in a supermarket, space is now perceived differently."

Without partner exercise no direct experience

"On the street, at the beginning, you can only pass by each other like this, it's a little restricted, but I find it rather positive. But the fact that you can no longer work on the body, that's really what has been taken away, it's the main tool. You can no longer do partner exercises, you don't have contact, like dancing where you touch each other. Yes, that's still possible, but I really miss that because you don't have that direct experience anymore." "I'm trying to make up for it by using a long stick, guiding it to certain body parts, and working against it as if someone is touching the body. This helps to create space, even if it's not ideal, it still works. You can bring someone to this idea and give them a certain body feeling through it." "You can't test people against each other anymore, which is of course a

completely different experience. Normally, they would experiment with each other, not just with teachers working on students, but also students interacting among themselves. This is a big influence, of course. But on the other hand, people are becoming more sensitive to the space they give themselves and also to the space they give to others." "And now I really like this because I imagine it as everyone who has ever had people around them, as you mentioned so beautifully, people standing in the park and performing these flowing movements. That always feels like something that calms the mind, and I believe that especially in an exceptional situation like Corona, many people, I'm sure there are a lot of people out there, might have used this time to pause and become calmer."

"When I think about people who may have lost their livelihood, that brings a lot of unrest. How can something like this be a way to calm the mind and find inner balance again?"

"Yes, exactly. Just feeling that groundedness. Like I mentioned the example of the chaise lounge or chair, meditating. It's really good when you feel solid ground beneath you. Just this experience of being surrounded by space and yet staying grounded, that feeling already gives you a sense of being at home, even if it's just a flowing process that we're all standing in, one that can never be fully known ahead of time. Suddenly, something unexpected happens, and that might even shock you. But these basic things, you can still find them through this."

"For me, it was really a turning point. I had a professional ban, a restriction from working. I couldn't see people anymore—200 students a week, just like that."

Feel at home - grounding

When I'm in other countries, I immediately feel at home, no matter where I am. You stand on the ground, look up at the sky, and at night, you look at the moon. Then you realize, okay, everyone else who looks up at the sky with the same weather sees the same moon. And that's something that gives you the feeling of being at home. Many people only feel at home when they are in a familiar environment, something they truly know. But when you have this practice, it doesn't matter where you sit, because ultimately, you can always feel this grounding, that same experience that I've mentioned before. You can find that everywhere, in the present moment. This gives you certain foundations you can rely on, no matter what happens. And the influence of the outside world always depends on yourself. This strength can be there, but you have to practice it. If you don't, okay, maybe you have the opportunities. You suddenly have a lot of time, and you're not disturbed at all, but if you don't apply it, that's the issue. But if you practice, you gain that strength to deal with it. That means being with yourself and not perceiving the calmness as total unrest, but perhaps even seeing it as an opportunity, not just as uncertainty. And that's a big advantage. For example, I've asked myself, because I have this practice and have gained this treasure for myself, what do people do who don't have this? Okay, someone who is religious might turn to prayer or church, which, for example, was also taboo. It's crazy, where people would gather and celebrate together. That's really missed now. But if you have a practice like this, you can make it very individual, and of course, it's also nice to do it with like-minded people. That, of course, has its positives and negatives, like everything in life. But at the end of the day, it's always a matter of perspective. But I think, even if you think of meditation or yoga exercises, if you had a lot of time, that could deepen your practice. That's an incredible gain if you have something like that. Definitely, it's true.

Now, I'd like to conclude. I ask all my guests this question: I'm sure you practice Tai Chi regularly, but do you have other rituals in your life that ground you a bit more, bring more peace into daily life, and help create an inner connection with yourself? Are there things you practice, not necessarily on a daily basis, but things that bring more harmony into your life?

I work with paint and colors. This also needs rules and knowledge, like how to mix colors, and it's really a very beautiful ritual. Yeah, it's really good to free yourself completely to do something completely different.

That can of course for someone else who is in a profession sitting in the office all day, be a movement practice art exactly like Tai Chi Chuan, I really hope to encourage one or another to take on this beautiful practice, it is so incredibly important to create a balance for yourself, especially in these times, and Tai Chi Chuan is a wonderful way to do this for anyone in Cologne who wants to try this out with Andreas, you'll find all the important

links in the show notes, and of course, I always look forward to a share of the podcast or a little comment on Apple Podcasts, and now I wish you a wonderful start to the new week
[Music]

