

Interview – Shi Ming



Stillness: The Mover & Shaker in Taiji



Shi Ming is known as one of China's preeminent taiji masters. He is a strict disciplinarian of the old school, inspiring his students to practice long hours in the park under all conditions, including the sub-zero temperatures of winter. He holds himself to the same standards. During the disturbances in 1989 in Beijing, bus service was interrupted for weeks, but Shi Ming rose early to walk 2 ½ hours across town to where he teaches his students every day. Like the legendary taiji teachers of the past, Shi Ming's skill in hand-pushing borders on the magical. It gives peerless authority to his ideas on taiji. Opponents are discharged in the air with a flick of the wrist or bounced backward 20 feet with the turn of the waist. And, according to taiji standards, no force is used. Each Sunday Shi Ming gives hand-pushing demonstrations in the park to convince onlookers that taiji is profound practice, not merely a poetic dance form, which it has become so often in China.

According to Shi Ming, taiji is the application of the principle jing zhi dong, stillness controls movement, or quiet dominates activity. Stillness can dominate over movement because it is egoless and non-resistant. In taiji thinking, wherever there is a self, there is a weakness, a place of stagnancy. The key to hand-pushing then is to completely eliminate these weaknesses by forgetting the self.

In the following interview, Shi Ming discusses his taiji system of training and how taiji interfaces with Chinese culture. The basis of his teaching, he says, is standing meditation and tanhaizhuang. Tanhaizhuang (tanhai for short) is a rarely seen exercise of the spine that rigorously opens and separates the vertebrae in continuous cyclic undulations. Suffice to say it is very powerful.

Our conversation begins with Shi Ming's opinion on Western approaches to exercise. Understandably, compared to the subtle sophistication of Chinese exercise, Western exercise seems coarse and mechanistic. A case could be made that the attitudes of Americans toward the body and exercise in the 90's are analogous to their attitude to diet in the 50's. Today, the "food group" mentality of the past is thoroughly discredited – it's seen as a prime cause of disease. Similarly, in 20 or 30 years, the vogue in America to treat the body as machine calibrated according to quasi-scientific formulae may appear, as it does to many Chinese, a curious lapse of common sense.



The Western approach to exercise seeks to increase overall physical capacity and has various specific goals such as quickening the heartbeat, increasing air intake, etc. I'm not in favour of this approach. Man's physical nature results from laws which should be observed. Harmony is the most important of these. The heart and every other part of the body is interconnected. To focus on one part causes imbalance in the rest of the body. I don't think this is very good. The Chinese method of exercise is xingming shuangxin, dual cultivation of life energies and self-nature, a comprehensive approach to the human organism. From this view, to limit exercise to one area is a mistake. Jogging is a good example. Pounding on the ground injures the knees and stresses the skeletal structure. Whatever advantages there may be are lost to injury. Exercise which merely seeks to increase physical strength is based on faulty premises. It's like running an engine at high RPM. Breakdown is assured. This approach violates the car's nature. We have a saying: "There is nothing in this world that does not have a self-nature." How long you use things depends on your respect for this nature. Use it up and it's exhausted. Our body cells replicate 4 to 5 times in their normal life-span. After that, they're done for. So we can imagine a cell, if it could decide, would like to space its replication over a longer time span, like once every 10 years they may then live 50 years. If replication came every 30 years, its life increases to 150 years. What's important here is the idea that by lengthening the periods of sexual inactivity, the life-span increases. The aging process is countered by not exhausting the organism. These ideas are not found in Western approaches to exercise. Even though we talk about something as tiny as a cell, we can nevertheless say that the cell is dependent on thinking and feeling. Someone has an illness, but the doctors don't tell him, and he keeps living for a long time. But if they mention the word "cancer" or "AIDS", the patient dies within weeks. Fear kills more quickly than disease. My wife once had a cancerous tumour, but she never gave in to fear or stress. After 17 years, she's fine; nothing happened. I told her, don't concentrate on it. Continue to exercise and take care of yourself. Don't let it upset the pattern of your life. All phenomena that arise must disappear.

Video “Shi Ming – Stillness: The Mover & Shaker in Taiji

This video was filmed 1996 by Gordon Faulkner while visiting his daughter Tina Faulkner-Elders in Beijing, China. Master Shi Ming demonstrates Push Hands with some explanations. You also see some impressions of regular training in the Purple Bamboo Park near the main library and the zoo.

So what is the Chinese method of exercise?

I just mentioned xingming shuangxin. This approach includes Daoist cultivation, Chan sitting, martial arts, and practices like taiji which are based on Chinese philosophy. What is this philosophy? The mind guides the body and unites with the body. Every part of the body moves harmoniously with other parts. In ancient times, someone with a stomach illness may not have had recourse to a doctor. Through movement and inner practice, the body and mind were brought into harmony. Harmony itself is the most important. Chinese philosophy discusses at length how to achieve this.

Chinese exercise is not merely moving the body; it is the interpenetration of mind and body during movement. It can't be just the mind or just the body. A feeble scholar or a dumb-witted athlete are both extremes. Chinese emphasize that thought and movement unite as one. This is what produces and maintains the harmony of our lives.

No matter what a doctor's training, treatment of disease must aim toward, balance, centeredness, harmony. Then an illness is truly cured. That's why I think that world medical science will not be Western medicine, but a modernised Chinese medicine. Why? Western medicine makes everything extraordinarily complex. The body is broken down into tiny parts, the interconnections lost. Chinese medicine relies on a philosophical perspective that upholds the integrity of the whole. There's a saying, “A doctor untutored in the Book of Changes or unskilled in taiji, cannot become a good doctor.” A doctor must balance yin and yang to dezhong, attain harmony. Then he can see the deficiencies in the body and restore balance. Western medicine is on a different track.

Your taiji teaching is unique in that it does not begin with the taiji form or even much concern itself with formal movements at all. Your priority emphasis is on developing what you call the taiji state. And yet you have a graduated practice from beginning to advanced stages.

My taiji teaching uses Chinese philosophy, particularly the Book of Changes, to guide the entire process of training. This process includes three stages; study of the fundamental

exercise (jiben gong) which develops one's root, the taiji form, and advanced practices. These three stages can be summarized in nine words: piao, uplift; zou, movement; jie, connection; hip, waist, shoulder; and dispersal, the void, and emptiness. Chinese think nine is the greatest number. It represents kong, emptiness, which is a Buddhist concept. Kong doesn't mean nothingness, where nothing exists. It is an emptiness which produces all things and is attained through cultivation. So I teach taiji through these nine stages, culminating in emptiness.

The beginning stage concentrates on the fundamental exercises which include standing meditation, the spinal exercise tanhai, hip circulations, and the cyclic arm exercise. These prepare one's ground. They are essential to taiji training.

In practicing the taiji form, there are five levels. The beginning level is the rote repetition of a form; this constitutes the level of most taiji today. The second level is called double-weightedness, shuang zhong, form. Most people don't know about this stage. In fact, they think double-weightedness is a mistake. But it's essential to master this stage, otherwise you can't understand how to direct jin, internal force. Using strength and directing jin are skills of double-weightedness. The taiji principle, "qi, mind, and body all manifest simultaneously," is really the idea of double-weightedness. When we develop the hips, waist and shoulders in the fundamental exercises, this is work on the level of double-weightedness. It's all external, you can see it. The inner process you can't see. In standing meditation, we study piao, uplifting, floating. In the spinal exercise tanhai, we learn zou, change. In the arm exercises we learn jie, connection.

The third level is stillness/movement. There's a saying, "in movement, it separates; in stillness, it fuses." Here we enter the taiji state.

The fourth level is to seek stillness in movement. In my movements, there is stillness. When doing hand-pushing, in the midst of swift changes, I am still and quiet.

The fifth level is complete emptiness. There's no form, nothing. Practice on this level relies solely on the mind. I myself haven't reached this level. The stage of emptiness is the highest level, which is only attained after long inner work. I'm only at the fourth level.

You're being too modest.

No, I'm not. I'm just at the fourth level. When doing hand-pushing, the difference between me and my opponent is that I seek stillness in my movements while my opponent loses himself in movement. When we say "in stillness, it fuses," this means the solidity of stillness allows you to be unconcerned about attack or injury. This is what makes taiji, taiji. You totally forget about yourself, abiding in a state of stillness. We said, "Forget your self and follow objective conditions."

This idea extends to every facet of life. You invite me for dinner, if you eat meat, I'll eat meat. If you eat vegetarian, I'll eat vegetarian. It doesn't matter. If it does, then there's a self. If there's a self, there's direction, predictability. So that's why the highest level is emptiness. I'm not there yet, but I'm working on it. It's called no-mind.

What's the most important elements in your system? What leads to progress in taiji?

The most critical practice in taiji, no matter what the family style, is standing meditation, tanhai (spinal exercise), and the hip exercises. Without these you cannot develop the inner competence necessary for taiji. The body won't know what to do.

Why is standing meditation so essential?

Standing meditation teaches piao, floating, uplifting. As with swimming, if you don't know how to float, you can't learn technique. In taiji we say, "Walk like a cat; as if on this ice." This is piao. The idea is to have no resistance anywhere. If you resist the ground, you've created an opposing force which will generate a vertical thrust. A push will easily topple you. So you must learn floating, which is the first principle of standing meditation.

The second principle is to learn to experience movement in stillness through standing meditation. The mind centres in the dantian and the qi disperses and radiates from the dantian. This is called qi san dantian. The qi should not gather in the dantian. Why? If both the mind and qi dwell in the dantian, there's stagnancy, hardness. This is not good. When the mind arrives, the qi should radiate out. Otherwise, it's double-weighted, stagnant. In taiji the body becomes a surface of qi, without break or holes. Otherwise, it's stagnant. In the beginning, when you're just learning, the qi concentrates in the dantian. This is because you have no cultivation. But later it radiates out. This is a process.

So when both mind and qi are in the dantian, there's double-weightedness. You'll feel it get hot. When it does, let the qi radiate out. Like throwing a stone in a pond, the rings roll outward. The stone is your mind, your consciousness. The waves are qi. The body becomes a single surface of qi, of yuanqi. There can be no break, no defect, no interference. This is the state standing meditation creates. The experience is absolutely essential to taiji. When there's no thought, then there's relaxation. Then you've truly forgotten the self. Real relaxation means there's no self, which means kong, emptiness. Standing meditation is the most basic; it's also the most important. That's why I say, all you need to practice to master taiji is standing meditation and tanhai.

Does tanhai aim at attaining the same state?

Tanhai uses the same principle, but applies it through movement. When movement occurs in tanhai, it begins in the tailbone, moves through the undulation of the vertebrae, and ends at the top of the head. At the same time, the hips, waist, and arms are integrated, creating a whole body movement.

Today, a lot of people who practice Chan sitting, don't practice donggong, moving practices. They just practice stillness, but I think this is not good.

Why isn't it?

Because it's easy to straightjacket the body. The body becomes too stiff and hard. Taiji and other donggong practices stimulate the musculature and inner organs. Still practices don't do this. If the inner organs have a problem, it will manifest in the spine, as American chiropractors know. Tanhai exercises the spine with such power and subtlety, that it surpasses chiropractic techniques in medical efficacy. That's why I say, if you practice diligently, you can cure any disease. Just through tanhai you effect the entire body. Don't worry about heart rates and breathing rhythms.

The inner organs are connected with the spine; the spine is their base. If we were to crawl instead of walk, the organs would swing freely, benefiting from this freedom. But, as it is, they just slump together. So tanhai, this meticulous undulating movement of the spine, benefits the inner organs immensely.

If you are just concerned with giving yourself a good workout, standing meditation and tanhai are enough. The taiji form extends and applies what you learn from them. The taiji form is lovely in its execution, but it doesn't add anything to inner technique. That's why all this talk of 24, 48, 84 postures is beside the point. If you master standing meditation and

tanhai, no one can defeat you. “Through non-struggle, no one can beat me.” I don’t need to attack or struggle; therefore no one can compete with me. This is real taiji.

In practicing standing meditation, do you teach ‘caiqi’, absorbing qi from the outside, as is common in qigong teachings?

No, don’t worry about that. If you practice that, then you add more thinking to your practice. “Where there’s thought there’s stagnancy.” Daoism says our bodies are empty, devoid of substance. The Taiji Classics say: “The mind is the monarch, the body the minister. The minister follows the monarch’s bidding.” Our bodies are an insubstantial form. What we see before us is insubstantial. The mind which is unseen. Is the substantial form. This is the real form. In training, your mind must be able to leave the body, forget the body, and roam the universe freely. People can’t understand this point. If you don’t study Buddhism or Daoism, you can’t make head or tails of this. Whether you practice sitting or standing meditation, if you’re thinking about yourself, it’s not good. We say, “Forget all things and be natural.” Through this forgetting, you become natural. If you attain this naturalness, ziran, you enter Great Nature, da ziran. What is there to be proud or arrogant about? If you think of a self, you’ll never become a Buddha.

Why don’t you include sitting meditation in your system?

Sitting meditation and standing meditation are the same – just with different postures. The same effort is necessary: you must know how to cause the insubstantial body to coincide with the substantial mind. What does emptiness mean? What does song, relaxation, mean? These are important questions. If you think, I’ve reached a high level of relaxation and emptiness. . . sorry, big mistake. You haven’t forgotten your self. If you say this or that, it’s wrong, because there’s no forgetting. If you really forget, you don’t know what to say. If I ask you, there’s nothing you can say. There’s a suspension of habitual sensory functioning. Zhuangzi says, “When the eyes don’t see, something beyond the senses knows.” The senses are suspended. If you stand for a couple of hours in this state, your sense of time is altered. It seems like a few minutes.

An old saying goes, “One day in the mountain equals a few thousand years in the world.” There’s a good point here. If you’re always worrying and unable to sleep, eight hours is a long time. If you sleep well, eight hours goes like nothing. But that’s sleeping. Sitting or standing meditation is for inner cultivation. If you experience a few hours passing like a few minutes, that is impressive.

What’s the inner technique in this level of sitting or standing?

In the beginning, meditation practice enhances awareness of yourself. As your practice matures, you forget about yourself, you enter emptiness. This is the critical point. People talk all the time about relaxation, but don't understand forgetting. When there's no thought in the body, then you're really relaxed.

When people see you demonstrating hand-pushing, and your opponents are repelled twenty feet as if yanked from behind by a rope, they have no idea what's going on. They think it's fake. They don't see the principle underlying hand-pushing. We say that the dantian has no fixed place (wudingwei). You can place it outside your body. If you and I are doing hand-pushing, I put my dantian behind you. That makes me insubstantial. When you attack, I'm soft and empty. You can never beat me. My mind, which is substantial, is behind you. That makes me empty and your attack will never succeed.

When you teach taiji, you always talk about taiji jin as the critical element in hand-pushing. What do you mean by taiji jin?



Though we say jin, internal force, it's better to talk about a field. We can also say yinian li, the power of the mind, which means the power derived from the mind harmonizing with the body. This is also taiji jin.

Another way of talking about it is the body is soft and the thought is hard. Thought must be put outside the body. Then softness and hardness mutually correspond. This is taiji jin.

Jin is not something you have after so many years of practice, like a commodity you can show. People talk about qi like this. That's not it.

Putting the mind in the dantian is one means of cultivating this jin. With the mind in the dantian, the qi radiates outward, like waves on a pond. This produces power. If you catch a cold, you put your mind in the dantian and it gets real hot, and qi courses through the body. Soon the cold's gone. This is really beautiful. Most people have heard of the principle yishou dantian, put your mind in your dantian. Few have heard of qisan dantian, radiate qi from the dantian.

So only through qisan dantian can the qi move throughout the body and the lesser and greater heavenly circulations be accomplished.

How does this relate to hand-pushing?

Hand-pushing is a way of demonstrating proficiency of the states realised through standing meditation, tanhai, and the taiji form. I don't push hands to defeat an opponent, but to show the convergence of taiji and the outer world. It's not enough to just harmonise within oneself. You must harmonise with outside conditions. The opponent that appears before you is registered as a change in natural circumstances. So it's said, "By not fighting, I neutralise the enemy's forces." I don't fight, thereby making myself unbeatable. I follow my

opponent's changes meticulously and he has no opening to attack. This is truly a mysterious principle.

So hand-pushing isn't for fighting. It's to explore and illuminate this wonderful, mysterious principle.

According to what you say, taiji jin is not really qi. But isn't the object of practicing standing meditation or the form to develop high levels of qi?

No. You aim to develop a field, a surface of qi. If the qi is too high or too concentrated, then there's an obstruction. If qi reaches an extreme, there must be a reversal. Just as when jing, sexual feeling, becomes extremely strong, there will be a release. If there is no release, there are consequences, like stagnancy, mental problems, etc. You don't want more and more qi. You want qi to radiate throughout the body.

Look at how jing works. When jing is full, it releases naturally. If it doesn't, you feel very uncomfortable. Strictly speaking, there is no monk who is truly chaste, that is, without orgasm. He has involuntary emissions. This is a natural phenomenon. The important point is not to go to an extreme in emitting jing, in having orgasms. You want to bring harmony to your body and extend that to the universe.

For most people, taiji is just a dance-like form. But now they hear it's not the form but qi that's essential. But what you seem to say is it's not the form or qi, but something beyond these.

What is it we call qi? Qi is just the movement of yang, of the substantial, leading to stillness, to cessation. This continuum of movement and stillness is qi. People can't figure out what qi is. Qi isn't air. It's what manifests from the movement of yin and yang. The movement creates a field. This is qi. Movement alone isn't qi; stillness alone isn't qi. It's the harmonious changes we call qi.

This idea of stillness and movement occurring simultaneously is difficult to visualise. How can stillness and movement coincide?

Yes, they occur simultaneously. They are two aspects of a larger field, like yin and yang. It is this field which produces the qi of the taiji state. Taiji qi is not air, nor is it the qi developed from qigong. It's the qi manifest from the changes between stillness and movement. Taiji is not dependent on only stillness or movement, but on the integral working of the two. What we call taiji is the qi of this larger field.

Look at my index and middle fingers. When I close them together, a line is formed. This line doesn't belong to the index finger or the middle finger. But there it is. This line only exists within a field; we can call it a taiji line. Similarly, stillness and movement produce a line which we call qi or jin. Taiji is based on this line, this is the taiji spiritual state.

Today everyone's talking about getting qi, increasing qi, putting out qi. But the real secret is how qi is produced from the field of stillness and movement. This is the Dao.

Is this qi then, also the qi Chinese medicine talks about?

Chinese medicine is not so interested in defining qi or understanding its origins as in using qi to treat illness. Suppose you have an illness and I use an acupuncture needle on your hand. A field is created: I'm hard, you're soft. I use this state or field to treat your illness. This is the fundamental principle of acupuncture treatment.

This idea is central to all of Chinese culture. It's quite simple. Two discrete entities do not produce anything of themselves, but as soon as they meet, something new is created, and this alters their individual identity. Just as when my two fingers come together, they can no longer be properly called fingers. There's a new relation.

This idea is critical to an understanding of qi.

How do you understand the aging process from the point of view of inner cultivation?



The critical factor in aging is a person's mind, thinking, and moods. If some people age faster than others, it's because of this. Aging is not just a matter of the body. The mind is critical to the body. We mentioned this before: if I'm happy, I can cause a disease to go away. If you are always anxious or worried, you are going to get old fast.

For people who don't cultivate, a distance gradually occurs between their body and mind, energy and emotions. Their thinking and behaviour become disharmonious. Life situations only aggravate this disharmony.

So I say, only through harmony can you live long. Today people are really interested in Daoist sexual practices. They get really excited about transforming sexual energy into qi. But I don't approve of these practices. It creates unnatural energy states. If you have a lot of jing, it's natural for it to flow out. To overly manipulate it is unnatural. It's not good for something to be disharmonious. So people who practice this alter their marital or love life. This is a mistake. Only through harmony can one live long, not through inner practices manipulating sexual energy.

If you work at cultivation, it's not necessary to pursue these things. Once you set up objects, you're at an extreme. But be careful about what I'm saying: the natural expression of sexual desire is fine, but you can't go to extremes.

When you demonstrate hand-pushing there are sometimes 2 or 3 opponents attacking you simultaneously. How can you harmonise with forces coming from different directions?

It's not my direction, it's my opponent's direction. I have no direction. I have no self. When they attack, they create a force. If I had a self, I would then have thinking, direction, resistance. I remain in stillness, not thinking what I should be. When people attack, it's like they attack a wall. This is called, "When attacked, the attacker's force necessarily uproots himself." His force must return to him.

I'm not concerned about the direction of attackers. They can feint and fool you. Your own eyes can deceive you. I simply remain selfless and empty. They attackers can do as they like.

What does it mean to listen in taiji?

Your stillness listens. "In the midst of movement, seek stillness." Your training is to cultivate stillness. Then you can realise jing zhi dong, stillness controls movement. Your stillness controls another person's movements. This is what it means to interpret an opponent's force. If you're not still you can't interpret anything. "Illumination comes with stillness." By quietness you become bright and intelligent. If you have rambling thoughts, you can't understand anything.

There are many family traditions in taiji and many individual styles among these. How can one know if a certain taiji form is worth spending the years to learn?

You know the quality of the form by seeing the teacher's hand-pushing. Does he listen to taiji jin? Does he demonstrate taiji principles? Hand-pushing is the final arbitrator of taiji. You can tell me, "I'll live to a great old age," but I'll have to wait a long time to see if your right. However, hand-pushing demonstrates a relationship and a process right now. You're hard, I'm soft. If I'm truly soft, you can't defeat me. We can reach a real conclusion from this.

I'm not talking about ego-games or personal victories. Taiji leads to harmony and peace, not conflict and resistance. I'm totally opposed to martial arts competitions whose result too often is self-aggrandisement. Conflict and resistance are not productive in the long run. Look at Muhammed Ali – a world champion with all the glory. Now look at his life. This is a sad example of what a life of resistance can produce. This kind of athleticism is a slaughter of the body.

Taiji is totally different. Taiji relies on Chinese philosophy to coordinate inner and outer in order to produce great harmony. I teach taiji boxing (quan) so you can understand taiji philosophy and principles. Mastering these principles allows you to do many other things: cure people's illness, paint, cook great cuisine, study the Book of Changes, etc.

I can accept you calling me a taiji boxer or taiji practitioner, but not a taiji specialist. Why? Taiji covers a vast territory. It includes the great traditions of Chinese culture and philosophy. I can't pretend to any expertise as a taiji specialist in this vast realm.