

MARTIAL ARTS & ECOLOGY?

A DAOIST PERSPECTIVE

These are two terms that are rarely paired together. While many styles are practiced in the controlled environment of an indoor hall, others will agree that their most memorable training experiences have been situated in natural surroundings, perhaps moments that have been humbling, soaked in multi-layered sensation, even transcendent. For many traditional training communities around the world, martial arts practice has always occurred in their immediate outdoor environment, a fortuitous clearing or area of flat land, a world away from hall-hire fees and timetable availability.

Of all the world's martial arts and mind-body traditions, Daoist practices are one of the more prominent approaches that explicitly incorporate a relationship with Nature into a practitioner's journey, and I would like to explore this in the article below. All of my individual Wudang training is done outdoors, I run a workshop in a local forested hill in my hometown of Oxford (UK) in each season (as conceived within Wuxing 5 Elements Theory), and in the summer months I run my weekly class in a local park. From the Wudang Daoist perspective, we can consider the relationship between the martial arts practitioner and their natural environment within three levels, increasing incrementally in an internal and spiritual focus as we progress through these.



Level 1: Nature as External Teacher - The Environment Honing Physical Martial Art Practice

As a novice, learning strange bodily movements, getting one's body to contort in new ways, optimising procedural implicit memory and bedding down-sequences and combinations of upper and lower body movements, a controlled training environment is desirable, free of unexpected obstacles and external distractions. The practitioner can focus on themselves while unimpeded by environmental preoccupations. A sports hall with a smooth floor is ideal at this stage.

However when a level of movement automaticisation and technical mastery has been accomplished, practicing the same moves and drills in the outdoors can be very instructive indeed, and prompt further physical improvement. This could be done in one location across different seasons and weather conditions, or performing the same movements in different locations, all with unique environmental qualities. Many people have tried practicing their forms or moves on a beach when on holiday and noticed how the weight and 'give' of the sand requires additional effort and suppleness.

In my own experience, I had practiced the lotus kick many times inside training halls, even on dry grass. However during my training with Shifu Zhong Xue Chao (Master Bing) in Wu Long Gong, we would train in the ruined paved area between the main structures of the 5 Dragons Temple. These were overgrown, and a local shepherd would graze his cattle on the same location. Cow dung, mixed in with the daily tropical rains and heat, interspersed the historical masonry with slippery, smelly, brown patches. So pushing down to launch the spinning, flying kick and achieving a landing was suddenly far from straight-forward, with several attempts ending up on my backside along the way. But I persisted, improved, the slippery ground encouraging me to improve my core stability control, grounding my techniques and stances. A parallel personal experience is one which unfolds across the seasons in my local training grounds on Shotover Hill, Oxfordshire. In the British climate my training in winter and spring is less acrobatic, my bodily movements more conservative, as I practice on wet, cold terrain. Then, things start to dry out in late April, and the dryer ground in May, June and onwards to August invites more committed launching and aerial techniques, before the falling and decaying leaf matter of Autumn introduces a cautionary dimension to my practice.

once again. What is interesting in this repeating, cyclical pattern is that the natural environment becomes increasingly easier April to August, as my repetition and practice of the jumping techniques increases, this combination optimising performance. Then in early Autumn this progression is put to the test as the terrain becomes more challenging (slippery) once again, with a final call by the practitioner to decide when to curb their practice for another year, in harmony with the ever-changing wheel of seasonal, elemental change (or risk injury by being too out of synch with nature's progression, an archetypal Daoist caution). These learning experiences seem to strengthen the basics and foundations of the martial artist's practice, in a way that the comforts of a training hall may preclude.



Level 2: Nature Incorporated into Martial Art Expression

Several routines, drills, combinations and techniques in barehand styles have evolved and modified to exploit features of the physical environment around a practitioner. Striking examples are 'environmental kicks', where the kicking or contralateral leg is launched off a vertical surface, such as a wall or a tree. The immediate physical environment can increase the hit of a kick, change the angle of delivery to surprise an opponent, or facilitate striking combinations.

In Wudang Mountains, the landscape is characterised by overgrown and crumbling temples and masonry surrounded by lush, dense forest. The creepers, grasses, vines and even trees constantly seek to exploit a new sprouting point between the brickwork, so the boundary between man-made regular forms and nature's intricate complexity is blurred and not clear at times. Advanced Wudang practitioners performing light body skills traverse their (at times) vertical trajectories across this territory.

The other way in which natural elements are often incorporated into martial practices is via the use of weapons. The staff is a fine example – poles fashioned from wax wood, ash or oak have become emblematic of certain styles and defined the way in which a practitioner's body moves with and around the weapon. Metals, forged from the earth have been an additional prominent weapon foundation, combined with wood as spears and inherent in their own right within swordplay. Weapons of all kinds have a huge impact on a practitioner's body structure and expression, such as the loosening of the wrist motion alongside strengthening of upper limbs. An intimate link therefore, between natural elements and bodily physicality within martial art practice.



Level 3: Nature as Internal Teacher - Fusion of Practitioner with Nature

This final level is a potential dimension of profound personal experience. That is when the internal experience of the practitioner is directly affected or modified by unique qualities of the surrounding natural environment. Many people acknowledge a pull to practice a martial arts form when inspired by a moment of natural beauty: a sunset, a water's edge, a panorama. The morphology of some internal practices has been shaped to resemble certain environmental and metaphysical qualities, such as the Willow bending in the Wind move in many Qi Gong sequences. Others feel connected to the type of energy during a point in the day, such as the wakening, building energy of a morning as wildlife stirs into life around a practitioner, or the closing and settling of an early evening chimes with an internal practice that stills and softens the experience of the martial artist.

Increased sensitivity can deepen the relationship between a practitioner and their natural surrounds. You may have had an experience of having a bad feeling in a certain part of a forest, while being drawn repeatedly to another spot without explicitly knowing why. Many internal martial arts practitioners intentionally seek out certain kinds of energies from key sources of life within a natural landscape, such as an ancient tree, and perform their forms and drills at these spots. There are certain formalised practices to this end. Zhan Zhuang can both be a posture that resembles and acquires the properties of a tree (grounded and rooted lower half, light and supple upper limbs), but also is recommended to be practiced near notable sources of natural energy. There are other elaborated practices that are collectively known as Tree Qi Gong: http://aoda.org/Articles/Tree_Qi_Gong.html

One may find that certain practices fit with certain surroundings or weather conditions but not in others (e.g., performing explosive movements in a storm is quite an amazing experience). The monks in Wudang mountain reflect constantly on water and its varied forms: mist, fog, ice, waterfalls, pools. Tai Ji forms may be practiced in dense mountain cloud mist to subjectively appreciate this expression of the element. Neijia training can be undertaken chest-deep in pools of water to increase a practitioner's sensitivity and connection to circular, flowing processes.

We of course are not 'other' or separate from nature, we are alive, organic, composed of the same constituent elements. However our modern lifestyle practices and self-focused preoccupations can muffle or impede our connection with the natural world, our ability to situate ourselves within it and use this broadened reference point as a stimulus for wellbeing. The Daoist practice of Neidan (Internal Alchemy) aims to harmonise the embodied experience of the human with the flow of wider natural forces and processes. Breathing, postural alignment and meditative focus are enhanced to allow a transformation of energy forms: physical essence or jing from our inherited biology and our ingested sustenance from the natural world, converted into Qi and then to Shen where this higher form of energy is put back into nature, the universe, the void. The Daoist aims to synchronise the flow of energy movement within their body with the flow of cosmic forces that move around and through us.

Often Daoist practices are considered from the viewpoint of the individual's body and inwards, with the surrounding ecology minimised. Yet it is the relationship between a human's internal processes (physical and psychological) and wider cosmos that defines the overall project to commune with the Dao. This dimension seems to be very commensurate with Western Paganism and Wicca, where the witnessing of the Divine is through contact and immersion in Nature.

I have been personally blessed with one gift, a momentary taste of what this transcendence may be like, a few years ago I was practicing Tai Ji sword by a lake as the sun was setting. A Kingfisher was perched on a branch a short way away from me, and momentarily darting into the water to catch her prey. The fact that a Kingfisher was there at all was immediately unusual and special – despite the local nature reserve signs showing Kingfishers, I had never seen one there in the preceding 6 years of visiting and practicing at this spot. I carefully started my practice, taking care not to disturb the bird. The setting sun moved into its next phase of retirement and the oranges, pinks and buff hues of the sky intensified, reflected in the water. I rhythmically moved my sword in the slow, circular patterns of the tai ji form. The kingfisher darted into the water and back, leaving ripples to emanate out, moving the sunset hues on the water, from their origin where the beak of the bird piercing the water to find their conclusion on the bank of the lake. The Kingfisher dived, the water rippled, my thrust of the sword forward. The bird, the ripple, my sword. For a moment of an uncertain duration, everything merged into one, folded into oneness, my self disappeared.

Then I was back, practicing my form as a separated element from the bird, the lake, the trees, the sky, once again. It was beautiful and profound, unforgettable. That was a one-off, a gift to inspire my ongoing internal martial arts practice and work towards one day attaining the state once again. More commonly, and less dramatically, my own Wudang practice of Qi Gong, Tai Ji, Liangyi and Longfist Gong Fu is nourished

by practicing these in particular spots within nature, each practice fitting a particular setting and feeling nourished by this fit and the qualities of the surrounding landscape. Nature does still bring me presents during these times, the most recent during my training with one of my Shifus in Spain, Pablo Salas. We were practicing in wooded hillside above Barcelona and a family of Wild Boar came out of the bushes and slowly walked past us, very close in a procession.



Summary

So this exploration of the relationship between nature and the martial arts practitioner has identified a range of influences and depths of experience. This is not an exhaustive account and I would love readers to share their own perspectives, including their own personal experiences of transcendental moments while practicing martial arts in nature. It is these kinds of influences and inspirations, that lead me to practice my Wudang arts in nature as much as possible, in all weather conditions, in all seasons.

To be inspired by Nature as a martial artist/mind-body practitioner in this way, and to learn and refine one's own practice through this inspiration, may in turn lead to a new relationship with Nature in other aspects of one's life. This may be increased ecological conservation awareness or activism, or a focus on how consuming foodstuffs from nature can optimise both the quality of the produce and the conditions/sustainability in which it is grown and produced. I have found one community group that uniquely fuses the themes of this article – Wudang martial arts, Ecology and Horticulture, within an inspirational approach to supporting youth culture and potential, The Green Dragons, in the USA. Do check them out: <http://www.thegreendragons.com/about.html>

Giles Yeates is a basic level Wudang Instructor based in Oxford UK (www.dao-flow.com). He teaches in Oxford's beautiful parks during the summer months and runs Wuxing 5 Seasons Workshops in the Woodland of nearby Shotover Hill Country Park throughout the year: <http://www.dao-flow.com/teaching--syllabus.html> The next one of these focuses on the element of Wood and will be held this coming Sunday, 3-6pm: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1080401198658845/>

For a comprehensive consideration of the wider relationship between Daoism and Ecology, please check out this enjoyable article: <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/daoism/>

