

Quantum Soup



Fortune Cookies
in Crisis



Chungliang Al Huang

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Preview



A NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

None of the existing romanized systems is fully satisfactory to render the correct pronunciation of Chinese. I am adopting the new Chinese spelling called pin-yin (literal meaning: combined sounds) for the usual spelling: T'ai Chi, now Tai Ji, looks more like the way it sounds. I have left many words as they have been written by most standard systems of romanization. By now most readers are familiar with Tao, which is actually pronounced Dow. *I Ching* is pronounced E Jing, and *Tan-t'ien* is Dantien. And the eight trigrams: *Ch'ien*, *K'un*, *K'an*, *Li*, *Sun*, *Ch'en*, *T'ui*, and *Ken* should be pronounced close to Chi-en, Koo-en, Ka-an, Lee-i, Sue-en, Tzen, Dui, and Gen.



Loontil Soup avec Schmaltz

Sometimes, as a background to my Tai Ji,* I like some lush, romantic music—Viennese waltzes, syrupy strings—I call it “Tai Ji Schmaltz” and find it good for the soul, and for the souls in my classes. One of my favorites was the soundtrack from an Academy Award-winning Hollywood movie, richly sentimental right down to the laughing of the loons.†

When the loons laugh on the record, who can keep from joining them? What was getting heavy lightens immediately, and we call out puns to one another—with the corn as high as an elephant’s eye.

“I vant to be a-loon,” “A-loon at last.”

“Croon me a looney tune. Come fry with me. Tao Be Do Be Tao!”

I find in the West many people “do” Tai Ji or “practice” it—rather ponderous words, perhaps accounting for the serious demeanor of many Tai-Ji-doing faces. But the true translation from the Chinese *Da*—“beat,” “the beat,” or “hit it, man!”—is to play and enjoy Tai Ji. 打

What fun it is to play Tai Ji, sharing smiles and laughs and loons with others. Why must we assume that getting in tune with the universe means silence and solemnity, aching leg poses, and dour expressions? Perhaps that is one way, but it is not my way.

* The new pin-yin spelling for T'ai Chi.

† Do you realize that the loons have had 160,000,000 years of laughing practice?

I admit that some conscientious searchers for the path are often put off by my lighthearted approach and Midwestern, corny humor. They say that I do not do “real” Tai Ji, I only dance it! Once, when I taught a group in Germany, a woman tearfully told me that she could do nothing else but go out and kill herself because I had made fun of everything she held in reverence. (I later learned she periodically threatened such action.) I tried to explain to her that finding fun in everything is not the same as making fun of it.

When I read G. K. Chesterton’s line: “Angels fly because they take themselves lightly,” I was *delighted*. At the same time, I was saddened that this world is still so short of heaven.

Not that all must be levity and lighter-than-air. We can take our cue for a Tai Ji balance from the Chinese characters for *tree*, a well-rooted object, and *flight*, airborne. Notice how the downward brush strokes in *Mu* (“tree” 木) are balanced by the outward reaching ones? And the flight of the bird is pictured here, *Fei* (飛), with a pair of wings (飞飞) flapping upward (升).

I see these brush lines as not *doing* tree or bird but *dancing* them in the true spirit of the Tai Ji Loon-iverse. If you find no such dance in your philosophies and deep wisdom, let loose the loon and laugh.

“I call no man wise until he has made the progress from the wisdom of knowledge to the wisdom of foolishness, and become a laughing philosopher ... ”

—LIN YUTANG, *The Importance of Living*



Ridge
on the
Wind



Chopstick Your Piano

I know someone with a beautiful Steinway grand, but she never plays it anymore. She says that she can't bear to hear herself after attending an Arthur Rubinstein concert.

I doubt that it is the intention of the masters to intimidate their listeners into silence. I think it is more likely that they would like to inspire their audience into greater enjoyment of their own playing. Yet too many people allow their self-judgments to paralyze their activities.

Many persons come to my Tai Ji seminars and workshops apologizing for their awkwardness. I congratulate them. At least they are there—aware. They are interested in becoming more acquainted with their bodies. How many other people treat their bodies as if they were rented from Hertz—something they are using to get around in but nothing they genuinely care about understanding? Recognizing awkwardness is already a long way toward not being awkward anymore.

Besides, what is awkward?

I start out with new students by getting them to recognize that *awkward* is really just a word for their own notions about what *other* people are thinking of them. But that is an *assumption*, a guess, a belief born of self-consciousness. When we are worried that other people will find us awkward, that very worry constricts movements and tightens muscles and—lo and behold!—we *are* awkward.

How to break the vicious circle?

I tell people to begin very simply so that it is easier not to get in their own way with their assumptions of judgments. I point out that they do not seem to worry that people will judge harshly the way they sit in a chair or step up a curb. So I suggest they begin by keeping their movements simple, gradually exploring new territory.

I tell them to pretend that the others are trees or rocks or flowers or weeds. After all, they do not concern themselves that the pine tree is critical of their dancing or that the pebbles are snickering among themselves over the stiffness of their arm movements. If that person there is a juniper and those are speckled rocks and these a field of daisies—how freeing from judgments that can be! Nature neither condemns nor applauds us. Let people be as nature.

Such freedom can open a body to the discovery of spontaneous grace and improvised beauty. That does not always seem a comfortably secure path for some, and many students prefer the safety of learning strictly prescribed postures—as if following a gridded street map. Though their movements may always be posed and mechanical—and thus miss the essence of Tai Ji—the formality is at least protection against trying to flow and being judged an awkward failure.

A new student at one of my workshops refused to move at all without knowing exactly what to do next. When he couldn't think of what he was "supposed" to do next, he froze! Often, in our free exercises, what he was "supposed" to do was whatever he felt like doing; therefore, he was usually incapable of moving at all.

Day after day he stood and watched the others becoming more and more adventuresome in their explorations. It was obvious that he suffered intensely from his self-imprisonment, and the pressure inside him built.

Then one morning, by the seashore, his body slipped the tight reins of his controlling mind, and he adopted the waves and the birds wheeling overhead as his models. He moved with them, as them, and for several breakthrough moments he was breathtakingly graceful.

Later, a bystander said to him: "Wow, that was beautiful! You must have practiced Tai Ji for a long time."

"Yup!" was the student's proud and spontaneous answer. "All my life!"