

Linking T'ai Chi to NLP

by Bruce K. Stewart

Somatic Syntax. The way our mind codes movement. NLPers have been alert to the genius of the body ever since anchoring was born 25 years ago. Since then, strides have been made to incorporate body awareness into the deeper integration of our mind, emotions, and spirit. Classically, anchors connect a specific state of mind to a physical location on our body. Research into this body-mind connection has yielded inspiring results that pervade all of NLP's frontiers from health and education to business and sports performance.

In contrast to the field of NLP, T'ai Chi research began in China over five thousand years ago. There existed a core of people who understood the value of the body-mind connection and enthusiastically investigated it. As early as 2852 B.C., drawings depicting healthful exercises appeared. These were modeled after birds, beasts, and wonders of Nature. Since their earliest writings about therapeutic exercises describe complex techniques, we can assume these evolved from prehistoric roots. The ancients were inspired by the

states of mind that animals projected from their postures and attitudes. Even Gregory Bateson was convinced that most animals communicate through somatic syntax. Sounds like a pattern to me!

Movements, conscious or not, provided a profound part of NLP's early infrastructure. Explicitly, T'ai Chi is an art based upon giving a person more conscious control over their movements, especially those connected to the reptilian brain — the medulla oblongata. The ancients knew that instinctive behaviors resided there. So they harnessed their powerful potential by emphasizing that movements be practiced in slow motion and with relaxation. This allowed the reptilian brain to connect in positive ways with the limbic system and neocortex. As a result, they were able to develop greater mastery over their perceptions and decision-making faculties. NLP also enables people to augment their needs for survival with conscious decisions based on higher level thinking. Both T'ai Chi and NLP help people generate new neural connections, more adaptive

behaviors, and creative responses to formerly stressful situations.

In ancient China, people modeled animal motions and practiced them for greater health, sexual power, and martial strength. Early practitioners believed that an animal's spirit and talents would be transported into whoever imitated or consumed it. This began an endless chain of dietary experimentation that continues to this day. (Ever hear, *oysters are for lovers or beef up?*) Some of the early forms were honored with animal names such as *White stork cools its wings*, *Snake creeps down*, and *Grasping sparrow's tail*. While imitation is known as the highest form of flattery, ancient hunters often aped their prey in order to better understand and finally overcome the animal's spirit. The founders of NLP used modeling to decode the behaviors of excellent therapists who helped people overcome their limitations. NLP is still based upon modeling, and T'ai Chi players still hope to match the grace and power they see in birds, butterflies, and wind-blown branches.

DEVELOPING FORMS— *Nothing is more harmful to the regulation of health than idleness.*

—Isaac Judaeus, 10th century Judaic physician

With the regular threat of floods, invasion from the north, and insurrection from within, the Chinese people constantly sought dependable ways of gaining enough physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual energy to sustain life. Once in ancient China, a plague followed heavy flooding. Concerned for his people, the Emperor travelled out to study the site. A perceptive student of Nature, he surmised that stagnant waters caused the plague. He reasoned that flowing waters create health, and that people must move their bodies in flowing ways in order to stay healthy. Quickly, he gathered together masters of therapeutic movement and martial practices, directing them to convey their arts to the populace.

The practice of NLP began when people explored the connection (anchoring) between their state of mind and their body posture. T'ai Chi started from the opposite end of the spectrum. But, even in ancient times, imitating animals and natural wonders through movement did not guarantee consistent or positive results. However, by 700 B.C., when Emperor Chin began erecting the Great Wall of China, the arts of therapeutic movement and diet were already quite refined.

In the Han Dynasty, Liu An created the *Six Animal Exercises*. By 222 AD, a physician named Hua To enriched these exercises by devising a series called the *Five Animal Frolics*. These consisted of the dragon, tiger, leopard, snake, and crane. His system was designed in the belief that man is "similar to the axis of the door whose hinges will work smoother and last longer because of its constant rotation."¹ Hua To's exercises prevented illness by increasing blood circulation and improving digestion. This parallels NLP's early days when many mental and physical health techniques were developed.

STAGES OF MARTIAL AND HEALING ARTS

— *When a player comes to recognize, for instance, that learning to concentrate may be more valuable to him than a backhand, he shifts from being primarily a player of the outer game to being a player of the Inner Game*

— Timothy Gallway, *The Inner Game of Tennis*

Healthful movements called *Daoyin* were eventually combined with martial gestures to meet the needs of soldiers and countrymen who lived in arduous times. In many cases, breathing exercises were included to capture specific states of mind that harnessed energy and aided concentration. In time these exercise systems became known as Internal Arts, in contrast to external methods of

Kung Fu, or specific muscle building exercises that we know in the West. NLP could also be called an Internal Art, since it focuses on the inner patterns of behavior, rather than content.

NLP's development has continued to generate and evolve into new forms. And new leaders from other backgrounds and cultures have emerged as they did in T'ai Chi. In 527 A.D., an Indian master named Ta Mo trekked from India to China's Shao-lin monastery. The monks there were weak and unhealthy after sitting long in meditation. He taught them body strengthening exercises which simultaneously improved their concentration (bodymind connection). Centuries later a mountain traveller named Chang San-Feng had long practiced Ta Mo's exercises. Once Chang witnessed a fight between a crane and a snake in which repeated attacks were dodged by yielding and circular motions. Chang derived a T'ai Chi-like martial art from this notion of using softness to overcome power or firmness. Later Chen Wang-Ting, a knight and general during the late Ming Dynasty (1644), fused *Daoyin* with his combined martial arts prowess. His well-balanced style became known as *Tai Chi*.

But times changed. After the introduction of firearms, hand to hand martial arts were used less on the battlefield. The masters then felt that the role of these arts needed to be updated so that this incredible gift from the ages could continue to thrive in a new

society. They felt that the balanced, healing motions would help their whole culture become healthier, more fit, and live longer. So they suggested increasing the number of students and teaching people from all walks of life. This plan became popular and was later extended to include every continent in the world. Nowadays Tai Chi is also known for its ability to improve profitability in business. (Healthy people work better than sick ones.)

T'AI CHI PHILOSOPHY INTO ACTION—

Nonviolence is the only way. Even if you achieve your goal by violent means, there are always side effects, and these can be worse than the problem. Violence is against human nature.
—Dalai Lama

T'ai Chi is translated as "Supreme Ultimate exercise." Its study presaged what Arcinno said, "If men exercised their bodies by motion and work at appropriate times, they would need neither physicians nor remedies." Over the centuries, T'ai Chi-like exercises have been refined by the great masters to meet the needs that contemporary people have for adapting, improving, and revitalizing their lives.

In contrast to this, Roman Emperor Theodosius I ended the Olympic games in 394 A.D. after 12 centuries of success. What was he thinking? Perhaps this is why most Western philosophical systems

have nothing to say about the knowledge our body contains. Yet it is often our "body of knowledge" that we must rely upon when applying NLP skills. Representational systems so intimately connect our body and mind that we must at some point allow the words *bodymind* or *mindbody* to sneak into our ongoing Scrabble game. It took Western cultures more than 1,000 years to restore physical exercises to Europe! Finally in the 1300's, Petrarch championed natural remedies, including exercise, as a substitute for medical treatment.

In action, T'ai Chi is a highly structured system of exercise which fosters man's search for a

natural way to gain health, independent of special diets, mega-vitamins, chemical medicines, organ transplants, or genetic engineering. The substantial gifts of modern medicine in emergencies and for inoculating against most infectious diseases are not diminished by T'ai Chi practice. T'ai Chi simply follows the gentle, preventive, and curative motions already inherent in Nature, from which practitioners profit. Practicing T'ai Chi gradually adds strength to your immune system as you develop martial art skills. Meanwhile, it can improve your posture, sleep, blood and lymph flow, skeletal and muscular strength, while increasing digestive harmony

and, decreasing the chance of falling. Tai Chi is also suggested for improving such chronic diseases as high blood pressure, anxiety, headaches, ulcers, heart disease, lung disorders, arthritis, diabetes, and intestinal problems. In addition, it calms the emotions and adds flexibility to all the organs, joints, tendons, ligaments, and muscles.

T'ai Chi centered its philosophy around the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), the Yin/Yang symbol ☯, and the *Tao Te Ching*. Together, these systems of thought and exercise became as precious as rice in preserving the psyche, culture, and longevity of the Chinese people.

In order to glean something that you can use from T'ai Chi philosophy, a chart showing Deep and Surface structure appears below. Included are a few Chinese terms to help you understand the similarities between NLP and Taoism, T'ai Chi's primary philosophy. Lao Tzu was the founder of *Taoism*. (*Taoism* is a practice for enhancing your relationship with Nature, and differs from what later became known as the Taoist religion).

EXISTENCE

Surface structure = *Tai Chi tu* — the Great Primal Beginning — fullness

Deep Structure = *Wu Chi* — the Absolute — a priori — emptiness

To strengthen your NLP understanding of the kind of transformations that take place between Deep and Surface structure, here is the first adage from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (*The Way of Wisdom*).

*Experience is beyond the power of words to express
To define: Terms may be used
But are none of them absolute.
In the beginning of Heaven and Earth there were no words,
Words came out of the womb of matter;
And whether a man dispassionately sees to the core of life
Or passionately sees the surface
The surface and the core are essentially the same,
Words making them seem different
Only to express appearance.
If name be needed, wonder names them both:
From wonder into wonder Existence opens.*

— Witter Bynner's translation



TAKING A T'AI CHI BREAK

In the beginning of this article, I mentioned how popular animal forms were in ancient times. Pick out one of the five (5) animals from Hua To's list—the dragon, tiger, leopard, snake and crane. And make up some movements that this animal might do early in the morning. Rise up and begin slowly. This is more the tortoise's speed than the hare's.

After a few minutes, relax and draw in a long, full breath. Master Yang Yang suggests that the time you spend practicing Tai Chi is a way to "improve yourself and change yourself a little bit at a time." Another master, Cheng Man-ch'ing, said the most important reason for practicing T'ai Chi "is that when you finally reach the place where you understand what life is about, you'll have some health to enjoy it" You can too. Be bold. Lead by your own example. You did this sort of thing when you were a kid. And who was it who said that we must return to the state of a child?

T'AI CHI-ing NLP's NEURO-LOGICAL LEVELS — *The mind may produce diseases and cure them.* — Paracelsus, *Libri Di Virtute I imaginativa*

Examining the similarities between T'ai Chi and NLP can be a linguistic and experiential delight. Let's start with the fact that the Latin root of the word for examine is *exima*, meaning *the point of balance*. What better place for us to pick up a discussion about T'ai Chi. You will soon learn how to find and then move from your physical *point of balance*.

T'ai Chi teaches that a person must gain their balance in any situation before they can cultivate deeper experiences. To shoot for a deep or powerful experience before developing balance shows inadequate pacing. NLP calls the *balanced point* where practitioners begin their client work, "Up-time." This nominalization reflects the exact pattern required for correct pacing—first balance oneself, then connect with another. To reverse this order is the beginning of confusion.

The chart below gives you a peek into T'ai Chi's window using NLP lenses. The level of *Intentions* has been added to the NLP *Neuro-Logical Levels* developed by Robert Dilts. At the environmental level, Tai Chi masters suggest you hold your practice in the same area and at the same time everyday. This shows how ancient NLP's *spatial anchoring* or *psycho-geography* actually is. By studying the congruency at each level, and then experiencing it in the exercises presented below, you'll understand why T'ai Chi has consistently been regarded as a Way of Wisdom.

NEURO-LOGICAL LEVEL COMPARISONS

NLP Logical Levels

1. Environment
2. Behavior
3. Capabilities
4. Beliefs & Values
5. Identity
6. Intentions
7. Spiritual

T'ai Chi Play

- Rooted feeling in legs and feet
- Connects one movement to the next
- Balancing strength with relaxation
- You have abundant resources and are safe
- Health and longevity
- Gain mental and emotional stability
- Your body is the temple of your spirit

CLUES TO THE WAY OF MOTION—*Master Chen Fake reached the pinnacle of Chen T'ai Chi. He fought with all kinds of martial artists after he moved to Beijing (around 1928) but he never hurt anyone and never said anything bad about other people.* — Feng Zhiqiang²

T'ai Chi players move along the lines of least resistance called Tao. The Chinese pronounce this word "dow," while the Japanese say "dough," as in Aikido (see *Anchor Point* Aikido articles in Nov. 2000 and March 2001). Both convey the same meaning of *Path*, also known to the Western world as *Way of Wisdom*. Find out how the Way moves in you! This is the best chance players have of learning how to position themselves in postures with movements that best catch on to the flow of motion within. This internal motion is called *chi*, and is the very substance that flows through our meridians and nourishes our organs, glands, and muscles.

Now that you've had a chance to learn some T'ai Chi philosophy and contrast the Neuro-Logical Levels, let's see how easy it is to move like a T'ai Chi player. This will allow you to learn something significant about your own somatic syntax and cerebral structures. So find a comfortable space where you feel free to move your *psycho-geography* around. In this next exercise, you will blend your NLP knowledge with the action of T'ai Chi movements. This will allow you to develop a deeper knowledge of NLP and yourself. OK let's play T'ai Chi!

T'AI CHI PLAYS THE LOGICAL LEVELS —

The most fundamental instrument of leadership is your own body and nervous system.

—Robert Dilts, *Visionary Leadership Skills*

Take a natural step forward with your right foot. Let the step be a comfortable length—not too long or short. Now, simply shift your weight by smoothly moving your hips forward and then back. When you glide forward, inhale... And when gliding back, exhale. Do this at least five times.

Imagine that your body is a wheel. Your hub or *Center* is just a couple inches below your navel. When you inhale or exhale, breathe into and from Center.

Next, extend your arms directly forward, about the width of your torso. Let your palms face each other as you inscribe a circle

in front of you. When your hands are furthest from your body, your weight shifts to your front foot. When your weight shifts back, your hands inscribe the back part of the circle. You can go either clockwise or counter-clockwise. Essentially you will be moving like a huge ocean wave—everything goes forward at the same time (hands and shifting weight) and everything goes back all at once.

Now you can play the Neuro-Logical Levels. Feel that your body is rooted in your legs and feet the whole time. Notice how you can connect each movement to the next without any breaks. Your strength comes from your balance and the power of relaxation. This relaxation fills your mind with abundant resources from the Way and gives your body a safe feeling (since part of the art is martial practice and your subconscious knows that).

To embody the Intentions and Spiritual levels, players aim to gain substantial mental and emotional benefits. They also recognize that their body is, to some degree, a vessel through which the Way can run its course. The Spiritual level becomes palpable when you feel as though your head is suspended from the sky. Through such awareness your spirit notifies your body of the steady movement flow. This gives each movement freedom and imparts a natural zest for life whenever you practice. As Spinoza said, "Make the body capable of doing many things. This will help you to perfect the mind and so

to come to the intellectual love of God." Now continue to relax and move again from your Center, so you'll receive benefits from all seven levels at once. Please consider practicing for at least three to five minutes before reading on. Then stand still for a minute with your knees slightly bent, head as though suspended from above. This has the effect of clearing your mind. It's like letting a soup sit for a few minutes before serving.

NLP LINKS TO T'AI

CHI—*The most fundamental tools that we have for conducting our lives and building our futures is our own body and nervous system.*

—Dilts & DeLozier, *NLP Encyclopedia*

Somatic Syntax helps us recover and express parts of our deeper structures that may be deleted or distorted by other means of expression. For this reason, bringing our knowledge more "into the muscle" helps deepen our understanding and wisdom. Thus, T'ai Chi is excellent for people who lean toward the kinesthetic representational system or who will lead better balanced lives by investing more time doing so. Often intellectuals benefit the most from studying Tai Chi, since it is nearly opposite from their usual endeavors, which not only emphasize but stress the mind.

T'ai Chi is a powerful martial and therapeutic art. Practicing it gently opens up your neurology

by directing your *first attention* to mastering the motions and your *second attention* to studying the flow of *chi* on the *Path*. Circulating the *chi* (the flow of movement inside yourself) is one of the keys to successful practice. This results in greater health, mental clarity, and life-style stability.

T'ai Chi practice is designed to help you live a more balanced life—to learn the art of following the *Way*. One of the most exciting things about T'ai Chi is

that it is a kinesthetic way to prevent you from *double tracking* (spacing out). The effect of splitting your consciousness is to fall off balance or lose your place in the form. This indicates that you have just stepped off of the *Path*.

T'AI CHI PRACTICE—*The best exercises of all are those which can not only train the body but also delight the mind.*

—Galen

Performing T'ai Chi is like tending to a hearth. It provides welcoming, warmth, protection, and nourishment. With extended practice T'ai Chi can become a martial art, known as T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Balanced postures are blended into a continuous choreography of grace, comfort, and ease. John Grinder noted in *Turtles All the Way Down*, "One of the signals that you've mastered something is that you use the minimum effort necessary to carry it out." T'ai Chi develops this kind of mastery by relying on a blend of complete relaxation with energetic vigor, much like a prowling cat.

Learning to move like a T'ai Chi player is like studying for your

Practitioner and Master Practitioner levels, only more physical. In NLP you first learn forms and procedures (Meta models and phobia cures, etc.), then you discover how to ad lib by integrating your therapy and business talents with your other life skills. T'ai Chi has a similar training pattern.

To reframe T'ai Chi in NLP terms: go down into your deep structure. Let a few gems float up into consciousness that will teach your bodymind how to surf along those lines of least resistance (*Tao*). Now you may enjoy attempting to capture the indescribable connection between T'ai Chi and NLP. The easiest thing to do is start practicing movement patterns that are rhythmically repeated until they flow together. Musicians do the same thing when they go over their scales and basic chord progressions. Familiarity with basic movement

tracks then provides you with opportunities to use them to the advantage of your health and well-being.

Get up now and slowly stroll around the room. Open your arms wide above your head and breathe in. Listen to your body. Gently lean your spine to one side and then the other. Now gently arch your spine back and bend forward. Exhale as you lean into each stretch. Just move in slow motion. You can even pretend to be your favorite animal. What about modeling a river flowing or a willow tree swaying in the wind? Sway and swim around the room for a few minutes just relaxing with every new motion. Or go find someone and sway together! Soon you will feel the *Flow* known as *Tao* to the ancients and as the *Groove* to the rest of us. The smooth groove is right there in your next motion! Feel it?

Footnotes:

¹ Wen-Shan Huang (1974) *Fundamentals of Tai Chi Chuan*, Hong Kong, South Sky Book Company.

² Feng Zhiqiang interviewed by Yang Yang, *Tai Chi Magazine*, p. 15, Volume 24, No. 3, June 2000.

³ Wolfe Lowenthal (1991) *There Are No Secrets*, Berkeley, CA, North Atlantic Books.



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