

The “True Nature” of Taijiquan by Al Simon

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Whenever Taijiquan practitioners of diverse backgrounds gather for discussion - whether it's in person at classes and workshops, or in print in magazine articles and letters to the editor, or even in the “virtual world” of email and World Wide Web message boards - certain topics come up time and time again.

These topics generally revolve around the question: what is the “true nature” of Taijiquan? Is Taijiquan first and foremost a martial art, even though relatively few practice its martial aspects? Or is Taijiquan primarily a mild form of exercise for health? Can Taijiquan bring benefits without practicing its martial aspects?

And beyond Taijiquan's true nature are other closely related topics. For example, which is the most authentic style of Taijiquan? Is Chen style more authentic than Yang style, because it is older? Is Yang style more authentic than Chen, since Yang was the first style to be called by the name “Taijiquan?” Should the Wu, Hao, and Sun styles be considered authentic, since they are derived from the Chen and Yang styles?

Are the traditional family styles of Taijiquan (such as Chen, Yang, and Wu) better than modern styles (Beijing 24-step, for example)? Are “older” family forms (such as “Old Yang”) better than more recent family styles (such as Yang 108-step)? Are long forms better than short forms?



Carole in Wu style, Al in Yang style –
which style is “better”?

And beyond Taijiquan styles, we have questions about the nature of mastery. Who are the bona fide masters of the art? Is lineage important for mastery? Can one be a master and not be a lineage holder? Can one be a lineage holder and not be a master? How do we compare masters, teachers, and practitioners of disparate styles for authenticity and proficiency?

These are important questions for getting at the true nature of Taijiquan. Unfortunately, there's a lot of disagreement among Taijiquan practitioners about the answers to these questions. Most of the debate is good-natured, though some disagreements generate heated arguments, angry letters, and nasty email exchanges (“flame-mail” as it is called).

Often the debates seem endless. For example, since I started “online” in 1995, I’ve seen the same “Taijiquan is a martial art” vs. “Taijiquan is a health art” exchange on the Web dozens of time. And time and again I’ve seen online “style wars” – the “my style is the only authentic style” debates – between devotees of dozens of styles!

Though I guiltily admit to having engaged in a few of these exchanges over the years, I recently began to wonder if it would be possible to put an end to these “endless” debates. Is there any way we could come up with final answers to these questions? Can we come to some agreement about the true nature of Taijiquan, its styles, and its masters?

Shedding a Light on Taijiquan

I believe that the debates about Taijiquan have much in common with similar debates that occurred in the area of physics early in the 20th century. One specific debate that seems of particular interest concerned the “true nature” of light.



Is Taijiquan a martial art, even if relatively few people practice it for self-defense?

In 1905, physicist Albert Einstein published a paper explaining the “photoelectric effect” – the release of electrons that occurs when light shines on a metal surface. Einstein’s explanation, for which he won the Nobel Prize, demonstrated that the true nature of light was made up of tiny “particles” or discrete concentrations of energy, not “waves” of continuous energy as had been previously thought.

This explanation of “light as particles,” and its later experimental proof, directly contradicted an experiment from 100 years earlier. This experiment by British scientist Thomas Young had proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that light was composed of waves of energy, not individual particles. “Light as waves” had been an established fact of physics for over a century until Einstein!

Einstein’s findings seemed conclusive: light was made of particles, not waves. But Young’s findings also seemed conclusive: light was made of waves, not particles. So who was right: Young or Einstein?

Physicists divided into “wave” and “particle” camps. Both camps debated the topic endlessly. Part of the seriousness given these debates was due to the fact that the findings extended beyond the nature of light down to the fundamental nature of all matter in the universe!

(It should be noted that in the middle between these two camps, some scientists postulated that light was actually made of “wavicles,” entities that behaved as both waves and particles. But this explanation begged the question. If wavicles had properties of both, why would they choose to behave consistently as waves in Young’s experiment, but consistently as particles in Einstein’s?)

Let’s stop at this point, because analogies between this physics debate and a number of Taijiquan debates seem self-evident. Compare this set of statements:

- Light is first and foremost a particle.
- Light is first and foremost a wave

with this set of statements:

- Taijiquan is first and foremost a martial art.
- Taijiquan is first and foremost a health exercise.

These two sets of statements seem analogous. Or how about these two sets:

- Young’s experiments have been in use for 100 years; they’ve more than stood the test of time. Hence, they must be correct.
- Einstein’s theory and results are based on a more recent understanding of the properties of light. Hence, they must be correct.
- Chen style is the original style of Taijiquan and has a much longer history than any other style. It is a better style to study.
- Wu style is a more recent innovation based on the principles of natural movement. It is a better style to study.

No doubt we could find more analogies, but at this point, we are tempted to ask several questions. First, how did physicists resolve their debate? Were they able to get past these disagreements to discover the true nature of light? And finally, would their solution give us a clue to solving our disagreements about Taijiquan?

Something not so Rotten in the State of Denmark

In the 1920’s, Niels Bohr, a Nobel Prize physicist in Copenhagen, Denmark, devised an explanation that provided the key to resolving the “wave vs. particle” debate in physics.

Bohr stated the “true nature” of light was neither waves nor particles. Bohr stated that “waves” and “particles” gave us *models* of light’s behavior, not explanations of its true nature.

Bohr, along with physicists Max Born and Werner Heisenberg, both of Germany, went on to formalize what is now called the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum physics. This interpretation states that:

1. Certain characteristics (such those involved in measuring light as a wave or a particle) cannot be measured at the same time with certainty.
2. This “uncertainty” derives not from a measurement problem, but from an intrinsic property of the complexity of nature (in this case, the nature of light).
3. Because the observer, the measuring apparatus, and the thing being measured (in this case, the scientist, the experiment, and light) form an indivisible whole, the models describe more about the limitations of the observation than about “the true nature” of the thing being observed.
4. Therefore, we should refrain from discussing “the true nature,” as such discussions are meaningless. Discussion should always be framed in operative terms – that is, terms that refer to the operations made during the observation.

According to the Copenhagen Interpretation, the statements “light is a wave” or “light is a particle” are meaningless. They purport to say something about light that we don’t actually have a way of observing. Moreover, these statements lead us to make premature judgments about the inherent qualities of the “true nature” of light.

However, saying that “light acts as a wave (or a particle) in certain experiments” expresses exactly what we know to be true. These statements refer to the operations that were made (i.e., the experiments). And a benefit of this approach is that the contradiction between “light is a wave” and “light is a particle” vanishes when we think operationally!

Many considered this Copenhagen Interpretation a revolutionary breakthrough, not just in how we approach physics, but also in how we think about any complex subject. Scientists, psychologists, philosophers, engineers, and thinkers in many wide-ranging disciplines all have adopted “Copenhagenism.”

The reason for this wide acceptance? Copenhagenism has successfully resolved many “seemingly contradictory” ideas in these disciplines, simply by making explicit how those ideas were generated.

Before we go any further, it may be interesting to note a few areas where Copenhagenism has not gained widespread acceptance. These have included Western medicine (including

some areas of medical research), politics, religion, business, and even the everyday thought processes of the “general public” or the man or woman “in the street.” These areas, in the main, still use habits of thought that are now more than one hundred years out of date.

This may explain why innovations in areas that use Copenhagenism, such as modern technology, have completely outpaced areas that haven’t adopted it, such as medical research, political negotiations, business management, and even personal relationships. It may also be why most of us feel “out of step” or “stressed” by modern technology, modern social problems, modern work practices, and even modern relationships!

To Be or Not to Be, That “is” the Question

At this point, it would seem logical to apply Copenhagenism to our Taijiquan discussion in order to see if it resolves any of the contradictions. To do this, we need to reformulate statements about Taijiquan into operational terms. So how do we frame statements in operational terms?

From the pioneering work of semanticists Alfred Korzybski and D. David Bourland, Jr., we have a simple method to accomplish this. Korzybski and Bourland have stated that if we merely eliminate the verb “to be” in English when used to express Identity or Predication, we avoid making “non-operational” statements.

In other words, we can speak in operational terms by avoiding statements of the form “X is Y,” where Y is a noun phrase or adjective phrase. This method, often called E-Prime (English-Prime), keeps us from straying into premature judgments about what we know or don’t know.



How do we speak “operationally” about Taijiquan?

Bourland uses the example of “John is a farmer.” What things do you think about John when you hear this non-operational statement? Now read these next five statements:

1. John farms three acres.
2. John owns and operates a 2,000-acre farm.
3. John receives \$20,000 a year from the government for not growing anything on his farm.
4. John, after living in the city all his life, has just bought a farm.
5. John grew up on a farm and has farmed there for 61 years.

Most people would say that “John is a farmer,” based on any one of these five statements being true. However, each statement carries quite a different meaning from the others. And in the third statement, John is actually being paid not “to be” a farmer!

By avoiding the verb “to be” in Identity or Predication, we also avoid making contradictory statements where no contradiction exists. Had physicists used E-Prime to talk about “light” from the beginning, they might have saved themselves years of pointless debate!

Taijiquan ... E-Primed and Ready

So how do express what we know about Taijiquan in E-Prime? Let’s take as an example one of the most persistent debates about Taijiquan, the “martial art vs. health exercise” debate. This debate consists of the “contradictory” statements:

1. Taijiquan is first and foremost a martial art.
2. Taijiquan is first and foremost a health exercise.

In order to translate these “contradictory” statements into E-Prime, we need to describe the operations that produced these observations. Unfortunately, since these statements are taken out of their original context, we don’t know the exact operations.

For purposes of this example though, we can cite possible operations that may have produced these statements. So here are some possible translations of “Taijiquan is first and foremost a martial art” into E-Prime:

- 1A. Taijiquan may be practiced for self-defense.
- 1B. Comparisons with historical documents show that the movements of Taijiquan derive from Chinese *kung fu*.
- 1C. The founders of Taijiquan came from martial arts backgrounds.
- 1D. I practice the fighting applications of Taijiquan.
- 1E. Our teacher drills us in the martial applications of Taijiquan.
- 1F. I get a lot of benefits from the martial aspects of Taijiquan.

Now let’s make some E-Prime translations of “Taijiquan is a health exercise”:

- 2A. Taijiquan has many health benefits.
- 2B. A research study has shown that the movements of Taijiquan help improve balance.
- 2C. Many practitioners use Taijiquan to improve their health.
- 2D. I practice Taijiquan for health and relaxation.
- 2E. Our teacher emphasizes the health benefits of Taijiquan.
- 2F. I get a lot of benefits from the health aspects of Taijiquan.

All of the possible translations in both groups avoid the verb “to be” in Identity and Predication, and hence they are operational. The first group (1A through 1F) definitely supports the statement “Taijiquan is a martial art,” while the second group (2A through 2F) supports “Taijiquan is a health exercise.”

Yet no statement in the first group contradicts a statement in the second group, and vice versa. And no statement “overstates” the case. Each describes exactly what we know to be true, no more and no less. And, as you can see, using E-Prime has simply and effectively resolved one of the most persistent debates about Taijiquan!

A Taijiquan By Any Other Name

Now look at the statements below. These non-operational statements from Taijiquan practitioners (including those I myself have made at times) can be considered “meaningless” as written. As an exercise, see if you can come up with examples of translations into E-Prime in order to make them meaningful, operational statements.

1. Taijiquan is a method of Daoist cultivation.
2. Taijiquan is “moving meditation.”
3. Chen style Taijiquan is the most authentic style, as it was the originator of all other styles.
4. Yang style Taijiquan is the most authentic, as it was the first style to be called by the name of “Taijiquan.”
5. Wu style Taijiquan is the most authentic, as it is the style most closely based on the principles of natural movement.
6. A traditional family style of Taijiquan (such as that of the Yang, Chen, or Wu families) is the best, as it is an unadulterated teaching of the early masters.
7. A modern style of Taijiquan (such as Beijing 24-step) is the best, as it incorporates the best of the traditional styles with modern innovations.
8. Old Yang style is better than the current Yang 108-step, because it was the original Yang style.
9. A long form of Taijiquan is better than a short form, because the greater number of movements shows that it is more comprehensive in scope.
10. A short form of Taijiquan is better than a long form, because the smaller number of movements shows that it is more focused in scope.
11. “Taijiquan” should not be called “Taiji”, because “Taiji” is a philosophical concept and “Taijiquan” is a discipline based on this concept.



Don't just read this section! Do this exercise to really understand how to write and think operationally about Taijiquan.

12. Master X is a legitimate master of Taijiquan, because he is a lineage holder in the Yang style.
13. Master Y is a legitimate master of Taijiquan, because he studied for 25 years with a member of the Chen family.
14. Master Z is a legitimate master of Taijiquan, because he is certified by the Beijing Institute of Physical Culture.

The Dao of E-Prime, or Why Lao Tze was Right

Please don't just read through the above assertions. Take some time to convert them into meaningful statements using E-Prime. You will find the time well spent for several reasons.

First of all, E-Prime gives you a simple tool for identifying meaningful and meaningless statements about Taijiquan - and indeed any subject. Secondly, E-Prime prevents you from wasting time in pointless debates and arguments about Taijiquan. Thirdly, E-Prime can improve your practice of Taijiquan, by clearing up any fuzzy thinking in your approach to the art.

Finally, and most importantly, E-Prime reinforces the most fundamental principle of Daoism, the philosophical heart of Taijiquan. What is this principle? It's the one contained in the opening words of Daoist philosopher Lao Tze's famous work, the *Dao De Jing*: "The road we talk about isn't the same road we walk on!"

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