



Animated by spirit

By Bryan Nuttall

Spirit is one of those multifaceted ideas that seems to keep on recurring within Tai Chi discussions and practice. It is an ambiguous word loaded with hidden meaning, ephemeral by nature and difficult to explain let alone understand. Spirit is a very difficult concept to grasp; it is loaded with hidden and subtle qualities. We may say a horse has spirit and it is implied that it has unbridled freedom, a quality not altogether tame or domesticated. We may say a tiger has spirit and it would be seen as ferocity. We use words like he or she is lacking in spirit. Or if someone is said to be a free spirit, then we may perceive a person who is perhaps unconventional, unpredictable. Even a team can be said to be imbued with an esprit de corps and nations are not exempt either. This collective spirit is seen as a coming together of an emotional and mental bond that has the ability to protect through adversity to achieve a goal that individually would be impossible.

Shen is one of the three treasures (san bao) in Chinese medicine one of the fundamental substances that make up the living body. Jing is the source of life, our inherited essence as is the source of life. Chi, the next of the three treasures that grows out of Jing, is the ability to activate and move Shen. Therefore Shen is the vitality behind both Jing and Shen while animate and inanimate movement are indicative of Chi and instinctual organic process reflect Jing human consciousness indicates the presence of Shen. These three substances relate to health (essence), strength (chi), and vitality (Shen). Essence is seen as the roots, you inherited strength derived from your parents. Chi is likened to the connecting stem, life force rising and expanding out of the roots, whilst Shen is seen as the final expression of that growth, the blossoming of the flower, or the ripening of the fruit. Though we can not see spirit in the physical sense we can certainly sense it. We know when someone has it, when we lack it. Indeed spirit is explained as a force that animates the body of living things. If some one has spirit in a general sense it is seen and understood they have a thirst for life or for something in particular. As we shall learn
32 spirit is not a motivating force but the pure expression, the vitality behind that force or action. By its very nature, someone animated by spirit will by its overflowing, ebullient

nature affect others that come in to contact with it. It is the light in the eye, the smile on the face, the glow and lustre of the skin. It is one of those unanswerable mysteries that what animates one person will probably make another indolent. But in its pure sense spirit is life giving and life enhancing; it is a quality fundamental to our Tai Chi practice. So what is spirit and how do we go about cultivating this fundamental quality in our Tai Chi practice?

The Chinese word for spirit is Shen; the character describes etymologically speaking a lightening bolt striking an altar expressing something miraculous Shen implies the vitality of consciousness or the light of consciousness. When combined with Jing, (essence) and Chi, it is one of the three fundamental treasures of the body (San bao). The character Shen carries the meaning to extend and to create. Ancient practitioners of Chi Kung shaman could also be called Shen or spirit stretchers, adepts that had the ability to animate their spirit for many different purposes including healing, divining, dispensing knowledge and wisdom for unifying the strength of the clan or tribe.



Chinese character
of "Shen"

It is interesting to note that Yang Cheng Fu, when he created his version of what now is seen as the classical Yang posture, he incorporated into it the idea of stretching out extending the postures, this became known as the big or large frame. His reasoning so I am led to understand was that with larger more extended movement it naturally stimulated the mind of intent Yi, to grow and therefore increase Chi flow, so imbuing the posture with spirit. This was the reasoning behind the saying no Yi no Chi, so to develop Yi we have to create this feeling of movement in the physical body

That being so, correct posture is fundamental both to Chi flow and Shen, Chi being the support which allows the Shen to emerge, Chi cultivation is fundamental to Tai Chi practice as well.

*With out the body truth cannot be realised
Without the body the tao cannot be attained*

Spirit is seen as the ultimate realisation the truth called by many names the tao, Tai Chi, the supreme ultimate, void nature, Wu Chi or great accomplishment.

The spirit is the commander of the Chi; this spirit is seen as the mind and intent in Chinese, it is likened to a wise benevolent emperor, who lives in the heart. But he has to spread his wisdom throughout the body. This is done through the blood and the animation channels. when you define your weight clearly in Tai Chi, when you expand through the arms, when you sink your chest and lift the back, when you turn and sink in the kua, you are naturally stimulating these deep animation channels, you are strengthening the Chi and awakening the spirit. This spirit is the wisdom mind its quality is all encompassing, expansive open and clear. If the Chi is not stimulated, the spirit will not open rise and expand in a natural balanced way. Then the spirit held captive in the heart, causing emotional turmoil finding recourse to use its energy inappropriately.

There are many myths and fairy tales alluding to this, the wise king being usurped and held captive in distant castle, locked a secret hidden dungeon; or the emperor under the spell or an evil wizard as examples. When the spirit is held captive, when it is distracted, when it can not spread its beneficial influence it is said disease can easily enter the system.

Taoist believe that the individual person is overly active, restless, too busy, or too fiery, our spirit which is said to be calm, quiet, and still as tranquil and reflective as a mill pond, is weakened disturbed by inappropriate activity. It can also be sidelined, becoming dormant; suppressed through the social conditioning and psychological baggage that is heaped upon it through the course of our lives. Our weakened spirit easily becomes lost confused and slowly disappears from conscious awareness. When this happens the body's energy unable to be controlled by the spirit becomes more fiery, agitated and unstable, the heart uses this energy for its own sensory self-gratification. The emotions unfettered by the control of the spirit run amok, at the beck and call of external events and situation. In fact we can fail know our own mind anymore. In Chinese medicine extreme Shen disturbance is seen as mental disorder we loose our natural discernment, we become unable to interact fully in social conditions. This likened to a controlling spirit which creates the mind of fears and phobia's or worries and doubts. If the spirit is nourished and influenced by this restless fire, it raises the spirit, but that spirit has no grounding no support so easily becomes scattered and confused.

This state, corresponds in western medicine to stress, the fight flight response, burning out, defensive and over reactive,

There is a parable with alludes to this down fall of the spirit, and what happens when the king, the spirit of his kingdom, can not interact.

A wise king lived in a castle on a hill, below him was his town. when he wanted to speak to someone or find out what was happening in his kingdom a person would come up from the town to speak to him, but one day they stopped coming days turned to weeks and so he sent his advisor down to the town to see what was wrong. But he never returned neither did the next one or the one after that. Eventually the wise king was there all by himself, finally he decided to go himself to the town and he walked down the hill. when he arrived at the town he found he recognised many of his advisors and people who had on numerous occasions been up to see him but they shunned him, refused to speak to him as though not recognising him, he soon realised sadly they had all gone mad. He tried to tell them this but would not listen. He looked for a reason as to why this should have happened. But to no avail. It was a hot day and he was thirsty so he went to the well, there he found the reason. The well was poisoned, in vain he tried to tell them not to drink from it, but they would not listen. He tried to dig a new well, but all they saw was him messing about in the dirt of the earth and they laughed at him thinking him mad. So, reluctantly he went back up the hill to his castle horrified at the madness of his subjects. The years went by and the king found himself lonely, isolated, shunned by his subjects until finally unable to take it any more, he went once more down into the town. There; he too decided to drink from the well, immediately the people rejoiced that the king who was mad and lived on the hill had finally regained his senses.

When the spirit is listened to or cultivated then the kingdom is happy and relaxed, its people friendly open and communicative. Spirit that is raised and nourished by this quality will be calm, steady dependable, logical and practical, firm yet steady. When the spirit of the wisdom mind is able to govern wisely your will, will be firm. This spirit is like water: cool, calm, somewhat introspective and an infinite source of wisdom. This cooling aspect of the mind when properly cultivated can settle peacefully in the heart, bringing equilibrium, stability, clarity, awareness and vitality, but above all health. This state is related to the parasympathetic response - the part of the nervous system that supports and nourishes the body. It is the healing aspect of the body. What we attempt to development in our practice is a natural symbiotic relationship, harmony of body and mind, between, fire and water or simply yin and yang.

Good spirit is cultivated by stillness whether in movement or standing. Stillness has to be there for spirit to manifest

*The body is like an eagle preying on a rabbit.
The spirit is like a cat about to pounce on a mouse,*

Whether in movement; the constant circling of the eagle or stillness; the cat preying on a mouse as this aphorism states so eloquently, our intent our awareness is always present. In our form we practice slowly, but the slowness is not just a state of action it is there also to generate a state of mind that is free from impatience, worry and anxiety.

It is said that by sinking our Chi to the Dan tian eventually our Chi permeates to our bones. This stimulates our essence to transform to Chi and our Chi to transform to Shen. This practice is very simply it is all based in the Chi Kung if we wish to raise our spirit first we need to sink our energy to the Dan tian. If essence is the root of Shen, the seed from which our Shen can grow, then sinking the Chi is like watering and nurturing our seed bringing to it the right environment for growth, light heat water, it is difficult to cultivate Shen in a noisy, erratic over heated environment.

Someone once said that if all you have was two pence, one penny should be spent on bread to give life and the other on a flower to give meaning to life. The flower feeds the spirit, for the spirit needs feeding as much as the body. This is the essence of Chi Kung practice; to nurture and therefore feed the spirit.

Chi Kung is the practice of making the body still to revitalise and harmonise the body only then can the spirit be invited to return. Chi Kung in essence is quite simple stand still do nothing. In practice one has to develop the will to do nothing. This is more difficult that people think. If Jing and Shen are harmonised, the Chi does not disperse. To stand still then makes the body as still as possible which allows the mind to quieten naturally. You can not hurry the process; simply try to refrain from



unnecessary movement like, scratching that itch, or looking needlessly about the room or hall. These reactions are all ways in which the emotional unfocussed mind, which loves distraction and erratic movement tries to gain the upper hand once more. By allowing disturbance to predominate, a multitude of seemingly good reasons can arise as to why at that moment one should be doing something other than quiet simple practice. The system has an innate sense, it knows it is under assault; and distraction is its way of trying to resist change, and that it is the spirit the higher self that is leading that change.

One often finds that Chi Kung in class is easier than at home. Our mind out side of its cosy environment becomes more focused. While also the group dynamic, the spirit of the group supports you. This Chi Kung poem just about says it right.

*To stand still results in the minds settlement
The minds settlement in sense of tranquillity,
Tranquillity in a sense of security,
Security in wholesome thinking
And wholesome thinking in great accomplishment.*

Chi Kung axiom

As we stand, thoughts come and feeling arise but try to keep your mind firm do not let your mind or spirit be drawn off by them, but similarly do not try to ignore them. when thoughts and feeling arise that are uncomfortable simply acknowledge them, a bit like waving at someone you recognise rather than crossing the road have a chat with them; then realising you are late for that appointment. We have to make sure the posture is comfortable and correct, we have to keep our attention relaxed but firm if we force it, it just creates stress, distorts our Chi flow causes tension and blockages, and a reason for giving up.

"I can't go on your inner voice tells you; this is killing me." "Is it is it really?" As one teacher questioned me, when you realise it is not really killing you, that you are merely being overly dramatic; when you can see the truth of the difficulty, then you are making progress! If you start shaking or are in discomfort simply acknowledge that is as far as you can go at that moment, stand up relax, smile, know you have done good work and when ready try sinking down again. Remember you are doing it for your own self.

Many sensations come and go in the practice of Tai Chi and Chi Kung; these sensations are nothing special just mental and emotional clutter that you need to let go of. Treat your practice no different than you would if polishing an old familiar mirror, as the years of dust and grime are removed, you start to see your self reflected in a new light; you can stay for a long time admiring preening, or run away, giving up in horror at what you look like but the mirror is still there it reflects the truth, it has to be polished. It is said that a mirror can see in to your soul and it is a brave person who can look into that mirror and like what they initially see.

How then can we tell if our practice is growing and developing along the right path? How can our spirit be strengthened? The cultivation of Chi brings its own sense of confidence and confidence strengthens the spirit makes you open more happy and contented. The bottom line is; are you developing, are you confident things are changing and for the better? Sure, there are the niggles about various aspects of practice and periods when frustration may occur; things take time to integrate, but the development curve should generally be in a upwards direction.

It is a fact that when teaching and testing postures each person tests differently. Each persons Chi, intent, physical structure, and mental understanding is quite different unique in fact. Personally I will test each person differently; maybe at first simply adjusting their posture is enough for some. While with others you can perhaps give a little more. When testing postures we want to first get a sense of the posture the shape the feeling of it, the person testing needs to proceed with awareness and sensitivity, listen to the person's energy, to their spirit, how do they react to you? Do not go barging in at first - nothing is achieved initially by this method. Some people need coaxing out to meet your force, others need relaxing settling back. Don't burden them with too much or if you are on the receiving end, try not to take in too much. Try to get a sense of one simple thing, one concept and build on it. Don't be afraid to change or to get it wrong; listen, experiment and play. When we see and experience a whole list of things we should be doing but are patently not, our spirit can take a battering. One week we may get something right, the following week we may equally fail. Sometimes it is not that we have physically got it wrong but mentally got complacent. As a teacher one of the main things I am learning to do is to recognise when I need to up the amplitude of my intent and when I can turn it down. One never stops learning adjusting changing, it is the way Tai Chi is it is a living system.

Developing and teaching good spirit also entails, giving positive feed back and good support. In Tai Chi we can talk about positive feeling not just positive thinking. Good teachers nurtures the spirit in their students, not knock it back. Every time we fail we may begin a negative feed back loop, we start to worry feel worse and tension creeps in, making things even worse. Teachers should note here that it is fine and well to push over your students but choose carefully who you try to impress and why! Some students with strong spirit may revel; whilst others will easily get despondent confused and may eventually leave.

A famous Tai Chi master once replied when asked if Tai Chi makes you live longer. No was his emphatic reply, but it can make you happier in spirit and being happy will make you live longer.

Once we have the confidence of understanding our practice we can start strengthening our spirit. this is on going through correct training correct guidance correct understanding. Exercises will change, movements become more challenging; even the testing will change becoming more direct; maybe the martial side starts to emerge and you begin to feel comfortable with It after all it is all just testing your spirit. Our movements, animated by spirit become a perfect antidote to modern living.

I will leave you with the words of Huai Wan Tsu and his advice on cultivating Shen

Order is the passing through without disturbance that enables action.

If Jing and Shen are rising Chi does not disperse. This is right this is the rule.

*The rule means fairness, fairness means passing through without disturbance;
passing through means Shen.*

Shen means when trying with great concentration to see it, one can see it.

When trying with great concentration to listen, one can hear it

When trying with to do with great effort and focus, one can do it

*Therefore, upset melancholy and anxiety can not come in; the Chi can not be
attacked.*

Be pure in ones, concentration, be quiet don't change, ignore things around one

Keep a serene state of mind

When you move, move according to the rule of heaven;

These are the ways to cultivate Shen.

