

Li 理 by Louanne Richards

The Cosmic Breath

Every ancient tradition seeks to understand how the world and all of life came into being. The early Daoists and the Classical Chinese medical scholars were guided by their way of perceiving the world. Their insights gave them the understanding that the Cosmos began with a Supreme Breath - an expansive outpouring from the source which set the *Dao* 道 in motion and gave birth to everything that exists. This was the origin of *Yin and Yang* and the impetus for the myriad patterns of movement. The patterns of the stars as they moved around the pole star, they named *Wu Xin* 無心. The innumerable patterns, such as the waves in the sea or shifting desert sands they named *Li* 理.

Li is the inherent principle or visible impression attached to every living phenomenon. For the Daoists, *Li* shows the hidden dynamic which lies behind the creation of all embodied forms. What appears to us as movement that is frozen in time is the result of the power of cosmic sculpting. We can think of *Li* as the inborn nature of everything that surrounds us - the feathers on a bird's wing, a leopard's spots, the spirals of a snail's shell or the individual network of veins that make up a particular leaf. This is a beautiful and vital way of perceiving the myriad aspects of Nature. Not only are we miraculously immersed in shapes and patterns which make up all the individual forms, but the patterning shows us the incredible power that is at work behind every phenomenon.



The Dao in Action

The elements - wind, water, earth, air/metal and sun/fire - are powerful influences or disturbances that often form patterns. Sometimes it is possible to actually see the shaping taking place, for example at the liminal edge of ocean and beach when waves are crashing in and causing shapes to occur in the sand. The immediate etching as it appears on sand will shift, but when the elements continually strike land or rock an indelible imprint is formed. *Li* can directly show us the *Dao* in action!

The way we come to this perception is through our senses. For T'ai Chi practitioners, *Li* can be a profoundly tactile experience. It becomes an extension of our Chi Kung practice as we sense the shaping of forms in Nature. If we can experience the T'ai Chi form as an embodied reflection of *Li*, our practice deepens and the Short or Long, Fan or Sword forms become ways of expressing the various patterns of energy that play through every aspect of life. Each gesture evokes a bird's wing or a bird's foot, the stillness of a praying mantis or the alertness of a cat, the endurance of a mare, the sinewy strength of a snake or the constant pulse of the elements as we absorb their rhythms in each moment.



Without this visceral sensing we would be less aware of the cosmic imprints. If we immerse our sensual selves in the turbulent dance of the elements, we may on occasions discern the emerging imprinting or patterning that comes from the Dao.

As Wang Bi (in his commentary on the I Ching) said:

Dao is the ultimate

Li is the possibility of knowing that.

It is Dao that rules everything - existence and extinction.

"We can know the 'li' not the 'dao'."

My grateful thanks to Tew and also to Elizabeth RoCHAT de la Vallée for her remarkable seminar on *Li*, which prompted me to write about *Li* and T'ai Chi.

This is an edited version of a longer essay, now a booklet available to buy for £3.50 (£5.00 includes p&p). Proceeds of sales will go to the Jade Screen Project <http://jadescreen.co.uk/donate/> which provides free herbal medicine to NHS frontline workers. Contact louannerichards@gmail.com