

OPEN SPACE

The Daoist view of Creation is that there is a common 'fabric' to the Universe called Qi - and it is all mixed up together in what's called 'Wuji' - 'Primordial', or 'Undifferentiated' Qi. Continuously coming out from (and returning to) this Undifferentiated Qi, lighter Qi rises and becomes energy (called Yang Qi) and heavier Qi sinks and becomes matter (called Yin Qi) to give us the phenomenal Universe that we experience through our senses; the Daodejing Chapter 42 summarises:

*All things are held in Yin, and carry Yang:
And they are held together in the Qi of teeming energy¹*

Being Universal and formless, Undifferentiated Qi can manifest itself as anything - one such manifestation is 'space' (sometimes referred to as 'emptiness' or 'nothingness') - this can range from the space between galaxies to the space between the electron and nucleus of an atom².

We, as humans with sensory capability and consciousness, therefore perceive the Universe as comprising three fundamental states - matter, energy and space. Within and outwith us, space is predominant because matter and energy could not exist without it, let alone function, yet seldom do we ascribe to it any value. As an analogy, our Yin/Yang existence can be likened to a wave on the sea, with space being the vastness of the ocean below that creates, supports, controls and, eventually, reabsorbs that wave. Daodejing Chapter 11 identifies this:

*If you mould a cup you have to make a hollow:
it is the emptiness within it that makes it useful.
In a house or room it is the empty spaces - the doors, the windows - that make it useable.
They all use what they are made of to do what they do,
but without their nothingness they would be nothing.*

As a universal model the above is very interesting, but how do these concepts inform our Taiji practice (as both an art form and an allegory for life)? In our Taiji Form we utilise space in dimensions we understand, such as distance (yielding, blocking, deflecting etc) and time (gearing, pausing etc), but where do we put our focus, our intention? Chapter 37 of the Daodejing uses a phrase that could be applied to the potential, catalytic and enabling function of space:

doing nothing, and yet (through it) everything gets done (Wuwei)

What follows is a quick look at some of the aspects of 'space' that inform our Taiji practice and our wider interaction with the Wuji of the Universe.

1 Note: All Daodejing quotes are from Kwok, Palmer, Ramsay translation, pub. Element, ISBN 1-85230-916-4

2 For a quantitative view of space, see 'The Creation - Animation Europa Technologies' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1FisCdAW0c>

Context

In the case of a doorway, the door is matter (Yin Qi), the hinged function is energy (Yang Qi) and the space of the doorway is Undifferentiated Qi. BUT, this space is bounded by a doorframe, a 'context' for the space, without which the whole door assembly would be pointless. Likewise, consider a Singing Bowl where the air within it is Yin Qi, its vibration when struck is Yang Qi and the volume inside the bowl is the Undifferentiated Qi, but the brass shape of the bowl gives its shape 'context'.

Undifferentiated Qi, being Creation, is both Universal and has unlimited potential. Once we put part of it into a 'context', then options are reduced; however, this limited space is still connected to the unlimited space of the Universe - the space in the doorway is still connected to the space in the rooms (or whatever) either side of it: the space in a bowl is still connected to that on the outside. In Taiji, practitioners range in the context of space in which they practice from the Universe, to the Dojo, to the millimetres between the fingertips on the hook of Single-Whip. But generally, whereas we keep our attention on the wider space, our intention is limited to the space subtended by our 'Qi bodies'; the space in the immediate vicinity of our physical body is the 'context' in which we move.

In our Taiji practice, we use space in our postures; it is from the openness of the postures that we achieve power; we can subtend an arc with the Ward-off posture but, unless we open the 'context' of that space, the posture is weak and hence pointless. So what is the 'context' in this case? WE ARE THE CONTEXT- our bodies, spirits, hearts and minds, and our relationship with the wider space of our environment and the Universe; and so, in his 'Song of Form and Function', Cheng Man-ch'ing opined:

'The whole body is a hand, and the hand is not a hand'

Openness

What good would a doorway be if it were bricked up, or if a Singing Bowl could not resonate? Likewise, the more 'open' we are the better we function. In the case of Ward-off, clearly the joints of the arm and shoulder should be extended (to rely on 'closed' muscle-power alone is useless), but also the back, the waist and the legs; additionally, our whole selves should not present a blockage:

- the body's flows should be open and not be impeded by pollution in the lungs, cholesterol in the blood vessels, Damp in the Alimentary Canal, postural compression of the spine, Cold in the Uterus and so on
- likewise, the Heart/Mind should be open with no thought of past or future, expectations or preconceptions, chronic or repressed/excess emotions
- finally, the Spirit should be open and light with a clear purpose to provide the space (for example, by yielding or pausing), and hence access to the infinite potential of the

Undifferentiated Qi of the Source, to make a balanced response from the stillness at our centres, rather than simply an impulsive reaction.

Only when we are open in ourselves can we hope to make use of the space around us, and it is through this openness that we find the stillness within.

Potential

Undifferentiated Qi, containing a mix of all possibilities, has infinite potential; once that Qi becomes matter or energy, then it's potential is massively reduced (Quantum Physics talks about '*collapsing into a singularity*'). So, for instance, carving a figure out of a block of wood reduces down to one the number of possible figures that you could have carved - indeed, when Michelangelo, was asked about the difficulties of sculpturing his David, he reputedly said: "*It is easy. You just chip away the stone that doesn't look like David*". The Daodejing advises us to be like an 'Uncarved block' in the sense that, as a 'defensive' martial art, we should keep our options open as long as possible.

In our Taiji we create space to give us options in our sensory dimensions - so we yield or deflect to give us space in distance, and we pause to give us space in time in order to respond; but we also aim to give our minds space by not succumbing to preconception, expectation or anticipation. In other words we maximise our options by not committing too soon. Indeed, once you have made a choice (such as an action or a thought) you are 'attached' to it, whereas not to do so leaves you more openly 'connected' to all the options available. Chapter 8 of the Daodejing advises:

Like water, the sage should wait for the moment to ripen and be right

Continuing that theme into the realms of whimsy, why would you write something on a piece of paper when you could have it blank, why would you want an answer when you can have the question, and is not the prospect often more enjoyable than the realisation?

Moving

In order to physically move in one direction, space must move in the other (this is the principle by which electricity works, and how waves can travel thousands of miles yet the water only moves a matter of inches). Yin and Yang Qi follows intention (Yi); so in order to physically move into a space we must first move into it with our intention. In his 'Art of War', Sunzi said:

*"The victorious troops seek confrontation in combat only after they have already triumphed;
whereas the vanquished troops seek to win only once battle commences"*

So, in our Taiji, we occupy the ground (space) before we move into it. Taiji 'walking' is how we do this - so virtually in every move in the Form we lightly place a foot into the space that we intend to occupy ('as if walking on ice') and then, if we wish to proceed, move the rest of the body into it as if 'pouring our weight from one leg into the other'. Occupying the ground before we move into it has a number of benefits:

- it can be varied - Repulse Monkey occupies the space that we've just left, so it is often known as 'moving forward whilst stepping backwards'
- as we're perfectly balanced whilst making the move, we can change our minds at any time and alter our course of action
- the centre of each move is generally outside of the body, thus allowing the space to absorb and adapt to accommodate external changes
- if we are balanced, if the time is right and if our intention is clear, then the move will arise by itself; then, as in Bagua, we may well feel we are being 'sucked into' the space and the move, being authentic (De), will therefore be effortless (Wuwei)

For later

Another way that Undifferentiated Qi manifests itself is 'continuous change'; how does this affect the way we think we move, if in fact we do? From 'Wheel of Death', Roshi Yasutani explains that movement can be considered to be a transformation of Qi rather than the transportation of matter:

Were I to stand up and then move a few feet, it would generally be thought that the same person made both movements, but this is not so. The truth is that the person who got up and the one who moved forward are not one and the same. This can be made clearer by comparison with a moving news bulletin. The letters are apparently moving, but as we know, each letter is in fact formed separately by the rapid flashing on and off of lights and there is no movement of the letters.



On a personal note

My Taiji form of preference is the Fan Form. The fan not only extends and enhances the Yin/Yang functions of my Empty-hand Form but also, through its almost symbiotic relationship with the body, greatly increases the number of spatial configurations available such as leverage, concealment and distraction. When practicing the Form, I find that the potential to use space seems almost limitless.