

Ziran – the Chinese concept of naturalness



Ma Yueliang

In general, everyone understands and agrees that the movements and breathing in Taijiquan should be natural. However, students of Taijiquan – particularly Western students – react with a mixture of amusement and helplessness when they meet with difficulties in the execution of movements, and are advised to conduct them, “completely naturally”. This is usually attributable to a misunderstanding based on ignorance about the background meaning of the Chinese concept of *ziran*. In Taijiquan, *ziran* is translated as “naturalness”. But *ziran* is a concept that has both a colloquial and a philosophical meaning.

自然
zì rán

Ziran is a two-character word that consists of the characters *zi* and *ran*. A simple translation would understand the word as a combination of its single components. The dictionary (The New Chinese-German Dictionary) translates the sign *zi* with “self” and *ran* with “so”. Combining its single components would thus render *ziran*: “self-so”.

This is quite a simple translation, and it does indicate the original idea that informs the *ziran* concept. In an expanded entry in the same dictionary, we find under *ziran*: “nature, naturally, by itself, to let something take its [natural] course”. *Ziran* can simply be equated with nature, but it also indicates the inner nature of all beings and things, which are self-so.

If one studies the history of Chinese philosophy, one finds the first usage of the concept of *ziran* in Laozi, in Zhuangzi, in the mohistic canon, and also in Xunzi (see also Röllick).

An essential concept of Taijiquan, whose importance is repeatedly stressed, is naturalness. This concept is often used when referring to the execution of movements. For example, Wu Yinghua says: “Whether in the form or in pushhands all movements should be natural.” (Ma, p. 24) It is also used to stress the naturalness of breathing. In an interview with the journal “Martial Arts”, (p. 8), Ma Yueliang answers the question of whether the study of Taijiquan is associated with any particular technique of breathing: “No, only breathe naturally.” Ma Jiangbao expounds that instead of controlling the breath or adjusting the movements to the breathing, one should breathe as usual when learning the form. A deep and full breathing is achieved through regular practice, and “breathing will adjust quite naturally to the movements.” (Ma, p. 53)

The concept of *ziran* was developed as an answer to the question, ‘what is *dao*?’ In Laozi, verse 25 says, “Human beings follow the law of earth, earth follows the law of heaven, heaven follows the law of *dao*, and *dao* follows the law of *ziran*.”

Bauer explains: “the expression *ziran* literally means “to be so by itself”. It is first used in the *Daodejing* and refers to the structure of Tao, which cannot be referred back to anything else.” (Bauer, p. 202)

Within daoist tradition all of this implied that through retreating back to nature, one could be nearer to *dao*. In observing and imitating nature, and through rejecting human culture, one could perfect one’s own character. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD these ideas changed. It was no longer absolutely necessary to search for *dao* in nature, but rather one’s own self became the mirror of *dao*. Bauer says that, “it is the sole acknowledgement of the own self in all expressions and activities of life which is the decisive feature of ‘naturalness’ and ‘freedom’, which can be found in nature and *dao* as well as in the ideal/perfected human being.” (Bauer, p. 203)

According to Wu Yinghua the demand for naturalness can be explained by referring to the origin of many movements of Taijiquan in traditional Chinese martial arts. These movements were developed in accordance with human physiology and the laws of nature.

身心自然
shēn xīn zì rán

In Taijiquan one says: “*Shen xin ziran* – body and heart/mind are natural.” Through calmness of movement and stillness in *xin* (heart/mind) students/practitioners of Taijiquan shall find and cherish their naturalness.

This form of naturalness refers to body and mind and is not assumed to be automatically there, but needs to be worked for and maintained in a continuous process. This becomes apparent when Ma Jiangbao (Ma, p. 53) says about the practice of breathing in Taijiquan, “Although breathing should not be consciously directed, the correct breathing can only be achieved if the body’s posture is correct: upright position of the head, upright coccyx, upright back, lowered shoulders, elbows and pelvic hips.” These are the very preconditions, which for most people are not given as matter-of-fact, but need to be achieved and sustained through regular Taijiquan practice.

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· Ma Jiangbao, *Tai Chi Chuan*, Mach: Art, Ratingen 1998.

· *Martial Arts*, Heft No. 8, Martial Arts Verlag, Stelle-Wittenwuth 1986.

· Röllick Hermann-Josef, *Der Ursprung des Ziran-Gedankens in der chinesischen Philosophie des 4. und 3. Jh. v. Chr.* Europäische Hochschulschriften: Reihe 27, Asiatische und Afrikanische Studien, Bd 51, Heidelberg, 1994. (*The Origin of the Ziran Idea in Chinese Philosophy in the 4th and 3rd Century B.C.*)

