All natural things curl, swirl, twist, and flow in patterns like flowing water. Thus we sense something similar in clouds, smoke, streams, the wind-blown waves of sand on the beach, the pattern of branches against the sky, the shape of summer grasses, the markings on rocks, the movement of animals. Even solid bones have lines of flow on their exterior and in their spongy interior. Spiders build their webs, caterpillars their cocoons in water-like spirals. The rings in an exposed log look like a whirlpool. And looking up in the night sky we can see a river of stars. Alan Watts once remarked to me, “In nature, the shortest distance between two points is never a straight line, but a wiggle.” One need only follow a deer through the woods to verify this; animal trails meander like dried stream beds.

The Chinese call this water-like pattern which is everywhere different, yet everywhere the same, li. Li originally meant the natural markings on jade. By extension, the Chinese character came to mean the asymmetrical pattern and order of nature, an order that grows from the inside-out, the way a tree grows from a seed. Artistic creations may also express li— for instance a sculpture that incorporates the natural shape and texture of stone or a hand shaped pottery bowl on which the glaze has dripped into beautiful random patterns. The opposite of li is zi, the rigid order of logic or of things that are clearly the result of human manipulation, such as an automobile. A perfectly round bowl with a symmetrical design along its circumference demonstrates zi and soon bores the eye.

I learned about the difference between li and zi the first time I tried to draw a bamboo with a Chinese brush. My teacher gazed at my work and frowned, “This is not a bamboo, but a lamp-post! Have you ever seen a bamboo straight up and down or with exactly the same number of leaves on each side?” The teacher took my brush and dipped it in the inkwell. Then he lifted the brush and immediately pressed it onto the rice paper. He asked himself, “What is it? Ah, I think it is a sparrow.” Adding a few brush strokes the “splotch” turned into a marvelous sparrow, ready to fly off the paper! My teacher remarked, “The mind must be natural!”

Human beings are part of nature and are thus capable of manifesting the natural beauty of li. The philosopher Lao Zi (fourth century B.C.) says, “People follow the earth; earth follows heaven, heaven follows Tao, Tao follows its own nature.” Li is inborn; zi is acquired— unfortunately it is too easily acquired in a society that urges us to follow clocks rather
than the cycles of nature. Rushing about from one place to the next, spending more time reading or thinking about life than living it, we lose the grace of our animal-nature. “Slowness is beauty,” declared the artist, Rodin.

The flowing, graceful exercises of Taiji Quan help us to slow down and pay attention, to recapture and express that part of ourselves that we share with the animals and the rest of nature. Even the mind becomes supple and more alive. Flowing internal energy creates flowing consciousness, the mind freed of ruts.

River Flow

Taiji Quan has been compared to a great river because each posture flows smoothly into the next without break. More precisely, Yang and Wu Style Taiji Quan are like a river or stream, but the ancient Chen Style is like the ocean, with changing rhythm and power, like crashing waves and slow retreating tides. Confucius said, “Could one but go on and on like this, never stopping day or night!” Rivers are the veins of the earth, carrying nutrients from one place to the next, dissolving and reforming the elements of nature. Similarly, as long as our inner streams — veins that carry blood, meridians that carry qi — remain open and flowing, we enjoy vibrant health.

The Taiji Quan master may not have large muscles. His or her strength is concealed within, like a steel bar wrapped in cotton. Suppleness is necessary to develop strength. The more relaxed you are, the stronger you can become. Tension constricts the blood vessels and qi meridians, resulting in impeded circulation, malnourished tissues, and weakness. Lao Zi says, “People are supple and soft while alive, but hard and stiff when dead. Grass and trees are supple and pliant while alive, but dried and withered when dead.” A living tree has sap and water flowing through it. Similarly, a living person has blood and vital breath (qi) flowing through the body.

Taiji Quan cultivates “internal strength” (nei jing), the supple power of flowing water. When attacked, the martial artist moves out of the way, “neutralizing” the opponent, like water flowing around a rock. The attacker is frustrated as he discovers that the object of his attack has disappeared. His strike lands on empty space. But when the Taiji Quan fighter counters, his power is amassed like a tidal wave. His whole body strikes as one unit, his fist hitting like the end of a battering ram. If his punch is blocked, he slips around the block, again like flowing water, and strikes again.

Water has no fixed shape of its own, but rather takes the shape of the terrain over which it flows or of the container that holds it. It adapts itself to both season and place: freezing in winter, dissolving in summer, becoming mist and dew in the heavens, springs and lakes on the earth. Similarly, the Taiji Quan student is flexible and adaptable. Her mind is empty of preconceptions and able to understand without the filter of belief systems. She greets life without rehearsal or fixed strategy.

While practicing Yang Style Taiji Quan, the body moves on a plane, with little up or down motion. Hips, shoulders and eyes are level, as though the pelvis is a basin of water filled to the brim — any inclining or bobbing up and down would spill the water. Level movement stills the waves of the mind. The mind becomes like a quiet pond, the surface reflecting things just as they are, without prejudice or partiality.

Water is also a symbol of humility. It seeks the lowest ground, following the path of least resistance. There is a Chinese saying, “Going with gravity is wisdom.” Thus, while practicing Taiji Quan every part of the body should relax (song) and sink (chen), seeking
its lowest level, like water flowing down hill. It is important to note, however, that sinking does not mean collapsing or slouching. Rather, the body should feel like a tall, graceful tree with deep roots. The shoulders are dropped, the chest relaxed with the ribs just hanging effortlessly; the lower abdomen is allowed to protrude naturally; the knees are bent so that the weight of the body can be felt dropping down through the legs; the feet adhere to the ground. Even the breath feels as though it is “sitting” in the lower abdomen. As you inhale, the lower abdomen and lower back expand gently; as you exhale, they contract naturally. This way of breathing massages the internal organs and allows more efficient gaseous exchange. The breathing rate slows down, and the heart beat becomes more regular.

Quality, Not Quantity

Taiji Quan emphasizes quality rather than quantity. How can you move more intelligently, with less wasted effort? Where can you let go? How do you feel? Rather than: how far can you stretch, how many repetitions can you perform, how quickly can you move? Not that speed, flexibility, and power are unimportant for a martial artist! A boxer who can deliver two punches in a second is superior to one who is only halfway to the target in the same period of time. However, the primary way to achieve quantitative improvement is by paying attention to small qualitative factors. The rule in Taiji Quan is wu wei, “non-striving, no unnecessary force.” The practice of Taiji Quan teaches you to tense only those muscles needed for any given task, and with only the exact amount of tension required. If four ounces of force is required, do not use five! That one extra ounce is stress, resulting in loss of fluidity, impaired coordination and reaction time, and a break in your defenses that can be taken advantage of by a sparring partner.

The Power of the Circle

Taiji Quan movements imitate the circular and coiling shapes found in ponds, clouds, dewdrops, and meandering streams. The circle conserves and circulates energy within the body. Because of circular movement, the Taiji Quan student feels more energized after practice than before.

The circle is also the strongest shape, the most resistant to external force. Hold your arm in front of your chest, with the elbow bent at a 90 degree angle. If someone pushes against your bent arm, he can easily topple you. But if your arm is held in a circle in front of your body—as though embracing a sphere—it is difficult to push. This is called peng jing, resilient or buoyant force. Qi fills a rounded shape and creates peng jing, like water flowing through a rounded hose. If the hose is sharply bent, the “energy” become blocked.

If you push against someone who has mastered peng jing, you rebound with doubled force, as though hitting a tightly inflated basketball, or as though buoyed up by a deep well of qi. The fuller the body’s supply of qi, the more weight it can float, that is, the more powerful an incoming force it can repel. Peng jing is one of the secrets behind the ability of Taiji Quan masters to withstand injury from falls, flying objects, or fists! Peng jing prevents or lessens the likelihood of injury during the practice of any sport.

Cultivating the Spirit

Water is the most impressionable natural element. Throw a pebble in a lake and watch the ripples. A slight breeze will send a wave of vibration through even a puddle. Water is sensitive to heavenly energy as well. The heat and light of the sun cause fluids to rise and
fall in trees, creating the seasonal changes. We all know that the moon determines the ocean’s tides. Lumberjacks find it difficult to control logs on a river during the full moon, as the logs tend to get washed ashore. However, during the new moon, logs flow towards the middle of the river. Similarly, the moon controls the tides of blood in the human body, causing menstruation to synchronize with a particular phase of the moon and affecting the thinking and dreaming of both men and women.

This impressionable quality of water allows us to see and know the world. Water forms a transparent film through which light enters the eyes. It transmits sounds through the inner ear. As mucus and saliva, it allows smell and taste. Without water to help carry messages across the synapses, there would be no sense of touch. When the whole body moves like water, as in the practice of Taiji Quan, we cultivate sensitivity and permeability to the qi of heaven and earth. We becomes aware of what the Lakota Indians call the wochangi, “the spiritual influences of nature.”

To move like water is to return to the source of being. Mankind evolved from a watery environment. The human embryo looks like a fish during its early development. The first crawling movement of an infant is an undulation, like a tadpole learning to swim. According to most religious traditions, water is the first element (in both importance and order of creation). “God breathed over the face of the waters.” Brahma, the world creator, floats on a lotus in Vishnu’s abdomen. In the Buddhist Lankavatara Sutra, the “universal mind” (alaya-vijnana) is compared to a great ocean.

Perhaps the most important message of water is change itself. “Everything flows,” said Heraclitus, “You can’t step twice into the same river.” The human body, like the body of the earth, consists mostly of water and is therefore in a state of constant flux. The intellect creates an illusion of permanence; we freeze the changing processes of life into concepts. But for health of body and mind, we must learn to flow with life, to ride the currents. We discover that the Buddhist principle of “impermanence” presents not a reason for despair but an opportunity for more sensitive and intelligent living. Taiji Quan can help us to, in the words of the Diamond Sutra, “Awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere.” Through Taiji Quan practice we discover that “Go with the flow” is more than a metaphor. It is a spiritual practice and a way of life.