MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY: T'AI CHI THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SATIPATTHANA SUTTA

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The Satipatthana Sutta is an early Buddhist text, recalled from a talk the Buddha gave at Kammassadhama, a market town of the Kuru people. This pragmatic map of practice in present moment awareness has now been much popularised across many disciplines and groups – in varying degrees of depth and authenticity!

Such is its profound and comprehensive approach, that there are many accompanying texts and learned talks to help us better understand this core Buddhist teaching. I have only tapped into a very small number of them here. What strikes me as most important is that the Buddha wished us to find out for ourselves, to apply all that he explains to our own experience.

So what does the sutta mean for me; how do I work with it, and how does it relate to my practice of t'ai chi? How do mindfulness and t'ai chi overlap, and how they can be applied with the same discriminating ardour?

> One of the central dimensions of satipatthana meditation to be brought into being is balance.[1]

These words from Bikkhu Analayo could just as easily be describing t'ai chi practice.

Sharon Salzberg and others have described mindfulness as a dynamic practice; I have long thought that my own t'ai chi training is a moving meditation that echoes all the teaching in this sutta.

In Analayo's diagrammatic metaphor of the wheel of Satipatthana (*see figure 1 below*) I found an amazing overlay with the yin/yang symbol. The component parts of the ever-rotating cycle making up the whole circle, which continues to turn as we tread the path of awakening. Just as yin and yang of the taiji are the inherent components of wuchi – the state of nothingness from which everything manifests.

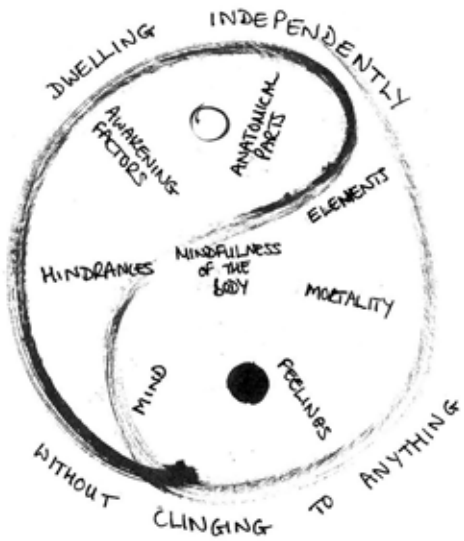

FIGURE 1

In his book *Symbolism and Myth in the Art of Taiji*, Tew Bunnag writes:

> The binary dynamic between yin and yang is not fixed and polarized but is in a constant continuum of changing textures and shades… an ever changing flow of energy and moments of pause and return to the source, the Wu.[2]

The whole point of any practice is to keep doing something, repeat-

edly – in this case, staying in present moment awareness, all the time. But most of us get lost somewhere along the way and this sutta offers a map to guide us back. Similarly, I find practising t'ai chi gives me a valuable means to return and notice what is going on, using my body as the anchor, the tethering point. It stops my intellectualising and pins me into my physicality, helping me see where my actions are coming from.

The Satipatthana Sutta outlines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of the mind, of objects of the mind.

It starts with mindfulness of the body. Joseph Goldstein writes, 'Through mindfulness of the body we learn to inhabit the body and be fully with it, such that it can become a foundation and reference point for the continuity of mindfulness.'[3]

I was once told that this sutta is about remembering – and I thought then, how it brings us back to all the members of our body, right here now.

Using the body as our focus, we practise meditation as we trace and maintain (or not) our full awareness of what is arising. Similarly in the t'ai chi form we are connecting with our physical body to keep centred in order to fully experience what is going on. It is a meditation practice of unbroken awareness and full attention.

As Tew Bunnag says:

> At the heart of the art of t'ai chi is the development of awareness. The 'internal' aspect of the practice stems from this. 'Slowing down' and 'sinking' provide the atmosphere whereby the capacity of awareness can be awakened and explored.[4]

We go through a repeated sequence (the form) to keep us returning to this moment - we come back to wu chi, holding the space, not moving, and sensing what is an appropriate response.

In the Satipatthana Sutta there is a repeated refrain that occurs thirteen times following each of the specific meditation instructions for the four foundations of mindfulness.

> In this way, in regard to the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] one abides contemplating the body [feelings, mind, dhammas] internally, or one abides contemplating externally, or one abides contemplating both internally and externally. One abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body [feelings, mind, dhammas]…. the nature of passing away in…… or the nature of both arising and passing away in. Mindfulness that 'there is a body' [feelings, mind, dhammas] is established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.[5]

We keep coming back to this anchoring point of balanced presence. In meditation as in t'ai chi – Tew Bennag again:

> Our aim in the form is to fully connect with our breath and harmonise our moves with the in (yin) and the out (yang), to respond appropriately to where we are. We develop our capacity to be fully attentive and to keep centred in the body so that the tai chi emerges from, and returns to, stillness and silence.[6]

One of the first of the pragmatic teachings in the Sutta is to focus on our breathing and how/where we feel it in the body. The instruction is to pay attention to our breath as a way of steadying the mind, so we can see

more clearly what is really going on. Becoming aware of our breath, we can then follow it and slowly become one with body and mind. Thus the three elements of breath, body and mind become calm and become one.

Similarly at the opening of the t'ai chi form we connect to the three levels, harmonising the three tantiens (centres) of awareness in the belly, heart and mind.

> The hsin (heart/mind)
> mobilises the ch'i (breath).
>
> Make the ch'i sink calmly,
> then it gathers
> and permeates the bones.
>
> The ch'i mobilises the body.
>
> Make it move smoothly
> then it easily follows
> (the direction of) the hsin.
>
> *Wu Yu-hsiang*

Once this is established (and maintained!) we can widen our focus of awareness to incorporate our actions, our every bodily move. We navigate each activity, in each moment. Thus we feel for the right amount of yang and yin in the body/heart/mind as we do the form, and our dance with life.

The sutta leads us into knowing the visceral quality of this physical body and its inherent empty nature, as our component elements change and finally decompose.

Through the t'ai chi form we also connect with the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. How much more restorative and alive the t'ai chi becomes when we truly connect with these elemental forces that underpin our seasonal pattern - these same elements that dissolve as our life force recedes when we die.

Part of the martial code of t'ai chi is to be ready to face death at any moment – to be equanimous with this and to imbue our practice with all four qualities of the Brahma Viharas (metta, karuna, mudita, ubekkha – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity). Touching in to our own, and universal, vulnerability as we work through these qualities is essential preparation for any warrior. Accepting that all is interconnected and all will change is part of this warrior training.

Just as the t'ai chi warrior trains to not only face, but to lean into whatever is presenting, so the Buddha encourages us to fully look at the elements of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. If we can simply experience things clearly as they are, not desire or cling to them, we can fully experience the joy of letting go of these patterns of agitation, desire and hatred. Without attachment to any outcome, both the Buddhist meditator and the t'ai chi practitioner can simply be at ease in breath, body and mind, just as it is.

Having said this, t'ai chi practice can be relatively easy in the anonymity of a large group or being outdoors on a fine day. But what happens when the conditions change making it less conducive to train? When our feelings start to jump up and down and nudge how we react? Can we press the pause button before we get involved with it being a pleasant, unpleasant or uninspiringly neutral situation? This plays out

particularly when we start applying t'ai chi in partner work and our sense of joyful wellbeing is disturbed by an unexpected push that takes us off balance. Is there the necessary awareness to trace back to the root of this particular feeling, and to see how transient it is? Without this pause, we could just push straight back and experience the ensuing fallout. But when we can acknowledge and rest in the joy of being fully aware of the rise and fall of each moment, the practice itself can encourage us to persevere.

In the third foundation of mindfulness the emphasis is on noticing the general quality of the mind as it is influenced by different mind states, moods and emotions. The instruction is to notice when these states are present, and equally when they are not. How they arise and how they pass.

Alongside the wide-ranging mental formations that we call feelings, (which are so pervasive that they make up the whole second foundation of mindfulness), the sutta identifies 28 more mental phenomena – great opportunities for noticing! Desire, anger, ignorance, disturbance, narrowness, limitedness, lack of concentration, lack of freedom, dullness and drowsiness, agitation and remorse, doubt – and their opposites. In mindfulness, we try to practise with bare attention, seeing everything and knowing when these phenomena are present, and equally when they are not.

In the t'ai chi practice, if we become preoccupied and narrowly focussed, we can literally be swept off balance by these feelings and the corresponding move we make may be completely inappropriate. With the clarity of bare awareness we can respond more skilfully, and not get caught up in an escalation of the situation.

> All the feelings of grief and joy, elation and anger are reactions to external things. But reacting to external things puts the emotions into motion, and they are really a disturbance in the regulation of the qi [chi] which in turn causes a disturbance to the heart. This is why we have to act according to form and cultivate the art of the heart.[7]

Desire and anger are particularly useful to work with. When we try too hard, wishing for something other, or when we puff out with simmering rage we so easily overextend our base and become imbalanced – literally uprooting ourselves and falling flat on our face. Similarly when we are contracted with fear or are easily distracted, we simply do not notice what is actually happening. By coming back to being fully present in the wu chi of the form, by re-membering, we can pull back from being stuck in extremes of yin and yang.

When it comes to evaluating feelings as pleasant or unpleasant, I find it helpful to consider them in terms of yin and yang. They are simply energy that will change moment by moment to a lesser or greater degree. We try not to react, or overreact, simply noting their quality of expression with equanimity. Keeping in our centre of open awareness.

The fourth and last foundation of mindfulness is a comprehensive list of the basic organising principles of the Buddha's teaching; the hindrances, the aggregates, the sense spheres, the factors of awakening, the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path. And again, there is the encouragement to be aware of all of these arising and passing away, as well as the conditions which allow or inhibit this passing. They offer us several schemas to develop greater insight into the way the mind works, gradually refining our awareness to an increasing depth of understanding.

Contemplating the five hindrances we might be able to notice what is preventing us from seeing clearly. Considering the five aggregates shows us what we hold on to in our sense of self, our sense of identity. Having clarity of intention, to keep coming back to being aware of what is happening, is really important. Similarly, in t'ai chi, where our intention goes, the energy will follow. Where we look is where the energy can be directed.

The sutta posits our investigation fully in the body when we turn our attention to the six sense gates and their corresponding objects (eyes/form, ears/sound, nose/smell, tongue/taste, body/touch, mind/objects of mind). From these stimuli we might trace the feelings that so quickly arise in reaction and lead to a consequent unskilful action. We might not need to act at all, but simply stay in the wu chi, neither yin nor yang, receiving or giving.

> Our awareness and sensibilities, our experience of our physical body as well as the emotional and spiritual levels of our being are constantly being shaped and transformed by the practice (of t'ai chi).[8]

The seven factors of awakening offer us positive qualities to encourage our discerning investigation - offering us tools to keep us assiduously exploring what is presenting in the mind. These could be seen as 'anti-hindrance' tools – with the proviso that they be used appropriately, with awareness and skill.

Similarly there is the path which has 8 ennobling factors to guide us. I have found it really helpful to feel how I might apply my physical response in a t'ai chi move in order to better understand a chain of reaction triggered by my mind.

When we begin to learn t'ai chi we start off very slowly in order to better understand what is going on. It is a widely held misconception that t'ai chi is never done at more than a snail's pace. However, once we have learnt the fundamentals, at the slow pace we call earth, we can then explore the faster rhythms of water and fire and their creative, and destructive, qualities. We can go fast – but not be hurried or off-centre. The skill arises always in clearly seeing what is going on.

As we repeat the sequences of the form we endeavour to maintain full awareness of what is going on both within us and all around us. Our senses are open to receive the stimuli sufficient to inform our bare awareness. We keep our warrior code of applying skilful amounts of yang and yin in every situation, treating each moment as if it is the only one and not bringing in any automatic reaction conditioned by a previous pleasant or unpleasant time.

When I first learnt the t'ai chi form I was told I was just at the beginning of a long journey of discovery. We all have to start with the outer form, with the step by step learning of each move in a choreographed sequence. But then my real learning began as I penetrated deeper into the inherent qualities of this somatic practice and to find my own authentic understanding of each step along the path. It is not that we never lose balance or focus, but that we know when we have, and how to come back to our sense of full awareness.

No matter how wonderfully my teachers have explained and inspired me, it is I who has had to bring patient attention to the stance, the moves and the essence of t'ai chi. I have had to practice, diligently and ardently. And still must. There are times when I do the t'ai chi, and there are times when there is t'ai chi. I am 'barely' there – simply doing the practice with

no craving, nor repressing; dancing the joy of the moment. I am looking deeply, seeing the nature of all dharmas, as they reveal themselves.

As I write this I am also reminded of the end of the sutta which says we can realise the fruits of mindfulness practice over a long period of time or merely in this very minute. We must start, and we must continue.

NOTES

1. Bhikku Analayo, 2018, *Satipatthana Meditation: A Practice Guide*, Windhorse Publications
2. Tew Bunnag, 2020, *Symbolism and Myth in the Art of Taiji*, Todos tus Libros
3. Joseph Goldstein, 2016, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Sounds True Inc.
4. Tew Bunnag, 1988, *The Art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan*, The Buddha Vipassana Trust
5. Joseph Goldstein, ibid
6. Tew Bunnag, 2020, ibid
7. Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee. 2006, *A Study of Qi in Classical Texts,* Monkey Press
8. Tew Bunnag, 2020, ibid