

Qigong, Taiji, and Nature



The story of an Emoyeni Retreat

9-11 October 2009

Richard Jordi



TaijiNature

A Wailana~WaterWays
collaboration

自然太極



TaijiNature

Rooted to the earth

Rising to the sky

Moving like water



TaijiNature is collaboration between Faith LeLievre (Wailana Internal Arts) and Richard Jordi (WaterWays Taiji and Qigong). Faith and Richard live half way across the world from each other, so their collaboration allows them to enjoy the magic of opposites in time and space.



With Faith living on the volcanic Island of Hawai'i, and Richard on the southern tip of Africa where two oceans meet, their collaboration brings a shared celebration of elemental forces of nature. Faith and Richard seek to infuse their practice and teaching with the spirit of nature that inspired the origins of Taiji and Qigong.

The TaijiNature project aims to develop our ability to use Taiji, Qigong, Bagua, Hsing-I, Liung Yi, and Liu He Ba Fa (Water Style) to connect more strongly with the nature that is around us and within us.

As we accompany movements in nature through physical and meditative practice, we develop a sensitivity to our own internal patterns. Through the regular practice of these internal arts, we nourish and enhance our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. We enter a space of quiet

observation in which we explore our co-emergence with nature. When we practice with this approach we build our capacity for connection, communication, movement and change. We develop the Qi that we need in order to live sensitively and significantly in the world.

To best facilitate an experiential connection between our inner nature, the nature of our practice, and the natural environment, TaijiNature workshops and retreats are conducted in wilderness surroundings.

Instructions and training are built around core principles that we discover and explore in natural settings through practice, contemplation and conversation.

Contact Faith at taichifaith@gmail.com Contact Richard at Richard.Jordi@uct.ac.za

Qigong, Taiji, and Nature

The Story of an Emoyeni Retreat, 9-11 October, 2009

The Emoyeni (Place of Spirit) Retreat Centre is situated on the northern slopes of the Magaliesberg mountain range in the North West Province of South Africa, about 100 km from Johannesburg. The Magaliesberg, running west to east and lying between highveld savanna and bushveld, is one of the oldest mountain ranges on earth, and is also a cradle of early human life and settlement. While Emoyeni places us in the heart of nature, its proximity to the Platinum mines near Mooi Nooi keeps us mindful of enormous social and environmental challenges.

Twelve of us came together in October 2009 for a weekend **Qigong, Taiji and Nature** retreat at Emoyeni, led by Richard Jordi from Cape Town. The practices and teachings of the retreat were related to movements and patterns in nature.

Here, Richard presents his experience of the retreat as a short written story. This story is presented as follows:

- Words from participants
- Patterning Nature through the Five Elements
- Free Form Taiji
- Practice in the world

Back: Amanda,
Ahmed, Mervyn,
Samantha, Antony,
Maren, Andrew.

Front: Moyra, Richard,
Presha, Evlyn

(thanks Wendy for taking the photo!)



Words from participants....

Samantha

I was a bit apprehensive coming to the retreat because I had never done Tai Chi before. The write-up to the retreat sounded really good – I liked the idea of joining the discipline of Tai Chi to nature. From the start of the retreat, I could immediately see that Richard is a perfectionist and a born teacher. He spoke in such great detail about how one should hold each move – from the weight shifting, to the positioning of the hands. I have tried out the form that we learnt at the retreat in my office and there was almost enough space – just need to take smaller steps.



I loved learning about the energy centres and I could visualise these during the movements – bringing my palms together *just so*, placing my hands in front of my abdomen *just so*. I enjoy learning about how to harness and increase my own energy though I am a beginner in understanding the complex concept of chi.

We practiced a lot during the retreat but I never felt exhausted. We were all so keen to learn and refine the movements that our enthusiasm kept us going. We also kept the mood light – laughing and having fun. Perhaps my favourite activity was spending time in nature improvising with whatever we could see. That showed us the spirit, context and history of Tai Chi through direct experience.

Thank you Richard for taking time out to teach us and for your quiet energy. I enjoyed meeting you and would love a follow-up session. Good luck with taking TaijiNature forward. We would also love to meet your teacher – I can see how she has inspired you. Maybe one day....

Antony

Too pensive and heavy is the observation I must make of myself in practice, using the mirror of your photos.

Thank you for a very useful workshop; I am attempting to incorporate the form we learned into my daily qigong practice... not quite there yet!





Amanda

I very much enjoyed the weekend and the opportunity to learn new forms of qigong. I have miraculously remembered the whole of the 5 Elements, but have so far kept away from the mirrors. Though the look of the thing is important, I always find it much more useful to try to get into the movement through repetitive practice and trying to ‘feel’ the movements.

On this note, the one thing I would have appreciated more of during the weekend, was time to practice each of the movements alone, and as we learned them. I always tend to learn best this way. I also really enjoyed our discussion on Saturday evening, as this gave us the chance to reflect on our own practice and its meaning in our lives.

Evlyn

Thank you for sending all those photos; I especially liked the tai chi in the bush! Again, thank you for the step by guided step through the elements, then, with the help of the manual, I am progressing to get the movements, hopefully, hard-wired; and I have got to work on the chi!



Moyra



Ten silent Tai Chi dancers swimming in spring’s exuberance. Turning, circling, defining pearls in the air: connecting heaven and earth. Our bare feet cool on the soft grass under shade cloth; relaxing the week’s adrenaline into the earth. We bend slowly to lift an imaginary rock and then stretch up and dive into the sky.

Golden fish circling their mountain in the herb garden pond. The Mozambiquan cobra eats the frog on the sandy path that evening. Then they are both gone.

I stand with monkey knees on the little wooden bridge waving slowly like the long reeds. Back in the office this week I download the photo Richard sends. Oh Goodness! A thousand lifetimes of weariness struggling between earth and heaven.

Patterning Nature through the Five Elements

The Five Elements is a modern introductory Taijichi sequence created by **Chungliang Al Huang**. This short set contains all the basic elements of Taiji – relaxation, grounding, balance, centering, flow, precision, and co-ordination of the body, mind and spirit. The sequence invites us to pattern or accompany nature's five elements of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, and to express our internal experience of those energies. The Five Elements formed the core of our practice at Emoyeni.



Grounding yourself

Gather energy from the left.... and from the right....stepping out as you start to gather from the right. Bring this gathered qi down to dantian in the centre. Grounding yourself, feeling your feet rooted firmly in the earth. This is a heavy yin movement, seeking to settle, centre, and ground you.



Ready to engage

Drawing energy up from the earth, prepare yourself, pointing towards the sky. This is a light yang movement, hands in chong position, ready to engage.

Opening up

Stepping back, softening, opening yourself up to what life has to offer, letting your arms settle into the infinity of the horizon



Centering

Touching the sky and earth and aligning yourself vertically between them, finding your central place in the universe – the experience of being human.



Gathering

Drawing on all that is available to us by gathering energy from the sky and earth into a ball and sending it out by pushing it forwards.



Fire

Connecting with fire – stretching into an upward movement of yang energy – joy, exuberance, passion, giving from the heart.



Water

Dissolving fire with water – the yang energy of fire changing to yin energy of water, a downward movement into quietness, receptivity, vulnerability.



Wood

Holding and embracing wood which is nourished by water. Outward movement as we embrace and circle the tree, and feel ourselves firmly rooted in the ground as we circle.

Metal

With our right and left arms we scoop up the metal from the earth as the treasures of our labour and our efforts.

We dig them out of the earth and bring them down in front of our eyes in the palms of each hand to look at. Then we form them into a golden ball that symbolises all that is precious to us in this world.



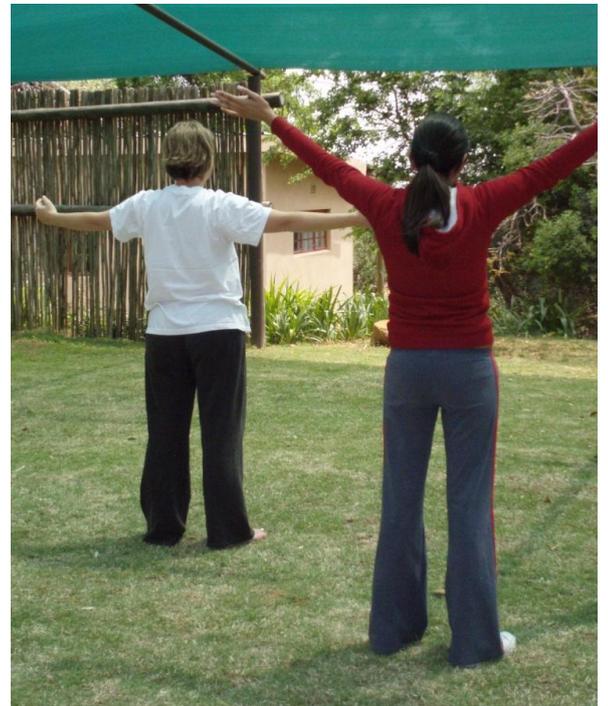
Earth

We return to the earth all that is valuable to us and feel the pleasure and freedom in doing so. A feeling of letting go as we return the gold back into the earth with the out breath and the dropping of the arms. We release our gifts so that we can travel lightly.

Embrace Tiger Return to Mountain

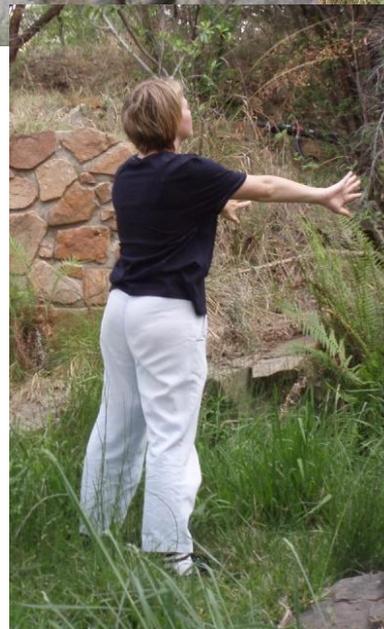
We cross our arms and bring them up in front of our body over the head where we open up our arms to bring the energy down the sides of the body and then up to chest height, again crossed at the wrist – in all of this we are embracing tiger – which is to embrace everything in our lives.

We bring our hands in front of the chest, softly circle the fists and release them as we separate our hands and sink the energy into dantian. We return to the mountain and come home.



Free Form Taiji

**“Many movements mimic the shapes and movements of animals, plants or other natural phenomena. However, while practicing these movements, you don’t completely mimic the physical shapes and movement; rather you dissolve into the phenomena, striving to attain the unity of their shape and spirit.”
(Master Helen Liang)**



Practice in the world

As with any meditative or spiritual practice we need undisturbed space and time for qigong and taiji. But for us to develop and realize their full potential we need to take these practices into the routine, as well as the challenging parts of our lives.



We can do this in big and in small ways - by applying a fresh "taiji awareness" to the movement of our bodies, to our presence and interaction in the world, and to our attitudes and behaviours in relation to others. With time, our taiji and qigong practices can shift how we experience ourselves in the world.



On the simplest level, we can pay attention to how we move our bodies. Am I well grounded when I am standing? Am I conscious of shifting my weight from one leg to another when I walk? Do I lead my movements from my centre? Are my shoulders relaxed? Do I breathe deep

into my lower abdomen? Am I aware of my expansive and contracting movements? Do I allow and enjoy the opposing movements of my limbs to give me balance and harmony? Am I lifting my head up to the sky?

We incline naturally towards balance and grace in our movements when we are relaxed and present to what we are doing.

This integration and harmony of the body and mind is the nature of taiji.



Can we apply these principles of natural movement to how we move around the kitchen when we cook a meal, or when we bend to lift heavy things? Where is our centre of gravity when we walk? How do we sit when we drive a car? Can we settle into a standing qigong posture when we are waiting in a queue?

Paying attention to our bodies is not just a physical activity. It is a mental and emotional quality of being aware of what we are doing in the present moment. Our bodies take shape around what is happening in our hearts and minds.

On the Saturday night of the retreat we talked about how our practice of taiji and qigong has affected our lives. People spoke of how they have cultivated a sense of well-being. Some said their practice has helped them to develop a more spacious attitude in difficult relationships. Others spoke of how valuable taiji and qigong are for easing the stress and tension of work.



We made reference to the “wu-forms” that come from Daoist wisdom - practices that help us to cultivate an aware and sensitive response to interactions and experiences in our lives. There is wu-wei (unimposing action); wu-zhi (knowledge that is not based on assumptions); wu-yu (non-



possessive enjoyment); and wu-ming (appreciating movement and change in things). These wu-forms help us to avoid routine or knee-jerk reactions. They ask us to appreciate the uniqueness of every situation and interaction so that we can respond with a deference towards what that particular situation requires. This is not submission or passivity, but an appropriateness that has the potential to influence a situation.

The wu-forms are attitudes and behaviours that Daoism encourages us to cultivate in order to bring enchantment to everyday experience and to help us make the most of every situation. They help us to avoid projecting our fears and desires, so that we can better collaborate with opportunities that present themselves. This perspective can be useful in trivial as well as in serious experiences and situations – in how you relate to being stuck in a traffic jam; how you engage with something that angers you; how you relate to the dynamics of a difficult relationship; or how you respond to injustice in the world.



The sensitivity and awareness cultivated in taiji and qigong help us to develop a disposition of sensitivity, awareness and clarity. After our conversation on the Saturday night we did a short Pushing Hands practice as a way of physically listening to, and engaging with one another’s energy, and learning how to respond appropriately.