

# An Interview with Adam Mizner

By: Peter Deadman

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## Abstract

Sifu Adam Mizner, though relatively young, is increasingly recognised as one of the most accomplished masters of (yang style) taiji in the world, as well as a dedicated practitioner and teacher of neigong and meditation. As anyone can see from his many YouTube videos his skills are quite extraordinary. On a personal note, I can say that having been around the internal arts (mainly qigong) world for nearly 40 years, I've seen a lot of fakery where students throw themselves around when subjected to the 'qi powers' of so-called masters. I had more or less given up hope of witnessing what Adam demonstrates. I hope this discussion will be of interest to anyone who is fascinated by the many dimensions of qi, health and emotional and spiritual development.



**PD:** You've said that you turned to the external martial arts as a troubled teenager and they offered you the discipline you needed to get your life back on track. This is the kind of thing we more often hear about Western boxing - I wondered why you chose a Chinese martial art?

rather than boxing or some other discipline for two reasons. One was that I knew someone training in Chow Gar Tong Long<sup>1</sup> and the other was that I was inspired by a documentary I'd seen about the Shaolin monks and the way they lived – combining meditation with gongfu and the apparent superhuman feats they performed. So I thought that was more suitable for developing discipline of the mind and body rather than sport or getting into ring fighting with boxing. I was more interested in the pure discipline, in 'the way' so to speak.

**PD:** I believe you started practising taiji in earnest when you were 20. My observation is that most people only turn towards more internal practices when they're injured or get too old to keep up with demanding external styles. What was it about taiji that inspired you and drew you away from the external martial arts?

**AM:** I was 16 when I started both gongfu training and meditation. But my first gongfu teacher also recommended that I train in taijiquan. He told me that training taiji was like putting money in the bank for later and the time would come when I'd want to withdraw those funds. So I began training in taiji from day one, even though my interest didn't really lie there. That went on for maybe four years. Then, when I was 20 I became very inspired by some people that I'd met and by some videos of Huang Sheng Shyan.<sup>2</sup> He was old, but he was throwing young guys around and having an absolute blast – laughing, having a great time. This really inspired me. I was used to the gongfu world of angry, violent masters that really weren't the happiest guys, and the happiness and joy, as well as the skill, made me delve deeper and deeper into taiji. I was still training in gongfu and was

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**AM:** Yes that's correct. I turned to gongfu as a method for finding very much needed self-discipline. At that time in my life I was going through troubles with the law and the kind of things that happen if you're young and irresponsible. It turned out to be gongfu

sparring and fighting, as well doing lots of meditation and qigong. Then one day I was sparring with a dear friend and I felt very aggressive towards him, I truly wanted to hurt him. This upset me and I reflected on it and realised that every time I trained like this I developed unskilful mind states and negative energy – a kind of static between me and my friends, so at that moment I quit external gongfu and focused only on taijiquan and meditation.

**PD:** Can you tell us a bit about your teacher/s. Do you still have teachers?

**AM:** Over the years I've had seven primary teachers. It's been quite a few years now since I've had a formal teacher, but I'm still always learning. I have taiji friends and we share with each other - that way we both grow. Maybe in the future I'll have another formal teacher – that would be nice. Either way we're always learning. When you teach you're learning, when you practise you're learning. You can learn from almost anybody that's got any experience. It's a continual path and we are forever students.

**PD:** You say that taiji is unnatural in that it requires us to go against all our evolutionary conditioning and change our minds and bodies into a new form – what you call the 'taiji creature'. What does this mean?

**AM:** Yes I consider taijiquan to go against the grain. Our natural inclinations are to meet force with force, for the qi to rise when we're threatened, to use muscular contraction when we're under stress or when we apply power in the body. The normal athletic activity of contracting the muscles, using bone and muscle to generate power - that's the natural way. The natural way also moves from the source, from the absolute, to taiji, to yinyang and to manifestation in the ten thousand things. The unnatural way – or the path of reversal – is to experiment, to research, to train, to understand yin and yang, and to cultivate them, gradually over time seeking an almost unattainable balance between yin and yang which we call taiji. This state is so unnatural and so rare that when you touch somebody that has taiji it feels alien – your nervous system doesn't know how to respond. It's because this equilibrium between yin and yang, the state before their separation into the ten thousand things, is something which no normal objects or beings possess. From there, that equilibrium, that balance, allows us to penetrate through to emptiness and return to the absolute to achieve Dao, nirvana or whatever you want to call it. This is why I say it's unnatural because it's against our natural inclinations of force, anger, rising up and it also goes against the stream – the stream from the Dao down to the manifest things. It's the path of reversal – from the manifest things up towards the Dao. As for the idea of the taiji creature, that's about building the body. One

of the great mistakes in taijiquan is that people focus on technique and application but they don't change who or what they are. It's not simply about what you do, it's how you do it and what is actually doing it. So the body that functions in the normal way, which I like to call natural or normal, is the one that plays football, boxes and things like that. It uses contraction and normal forces. The taiji creature functions in a completely different, radical way. It uses song (releasing) to generate movement. It uses internal mobilisation of the qi to generate power. This creature must be built from the ground up. The process involves a profound level of opening the body, releasing the tissues, transforming them to allow open space for the qi to accumulate. Once the qi has accumulated, we call it sinking the qi. Then you're ready to actually do taijiquan. You become the creature. This creature, when it moves and does the taiji forms, it could be said to be doing taijiquan. If you've not yet built the creature and you're practising the taiji forms, you're only doing the outer shell of the taiji form. It's what I call counterfeit taijiquan. It looks like taijiquan, it smells like taijiquan, but when you go to use it, it leaves you lacking.

**PD:** You teach that power in taiji comes from developing and directing qi. The core practices you teach include song and sinking. How do these develop qi?

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**AM:** In taijiquan the power is generated by the mobilisation of the internal or nei qi. This is not the same as mobilising the qi through the channels of the body, or rather not through the channels that you would use in acupuncture. The qi is mobilised through the jinlu, or the roads of jin, the roads of power that we develop through the specific exercises of taijiquan. Song, or releasing, or letting go – when we let go of contraction we open up space in the body. We don't need to imagine space or fabricate space because that would just be a delusion. Instead we release where we're holding and constricting the potential space. When there's an empty space, nature will fill it, and what it fills this space with in this instance is the nei, internal, qi. So as we open up and song, more qi fills the body. Over time it accumulates. Now we do this in a specific process of sinking, so we fill from the bottom up – that's the way. We gradually fill up the body. Song opens up, the qi fills bit by bit. It's like filling a bucket of water with an eye dropper, one drop at a time. One drop every day. This is what we train when we practise standing stake [zhan zhuang]. The qi fills bit by bit through sinking, and over time the body fills with qi. When you're full of qi, we call it pengjin. Pengjin [ward off energy] is the basis of all the

skill of taijiquan. Without pengjin you cannot perform taiji correctly. So song, and sinking of qi, are the basis of all taijiquan skill.

**PD:** I know you don't like defining qi and anyway it does seem an untranslatable word, but you suggest that as far as taiji is concerned qi manifests as waves through the body. In Chinese medicine we talk of the inter-relationship of qi, blood and body fluids – does that resonate with you?

**AM:** Yes I'm always reluctant to translate qi. I consider the traditional terms to be the necessary technical jargon of the art. Imagine if you went into a physics class and you demanded that they translated all the physics terms into the Chinese terms that we find in the internal martial arts. You'd be kicked out. But many people demand exactly that when they come to learn the traditional arts. My understanding of what qi is has changed time and time again. You could consider it a process of change inside the body as well as a process of change that happens in the world around us. You could consider it the life force. You could consider it as the transfer of information. All of these are correct. Qi is a process, it involves change, it's what keeps us alive. Without qi, we die. It carries information – in fact it has its own intelligence. So it's best to not translate it. What qi means depends on the art that you're practising and the exact method you're practising at a given time. To define it in a specific way goes against the tradition. Native speakers use it in so many different ways we have to give up the idea of translating it. Yes in taijiquan the qi must move in waves – like fluid. It's more like fluid mechanics than balls and levers mechanics; we're not trying to use leverage and the joints to trick somebody with angles and leverage. When the body has sunk and accumulated the qi, or achieved pengjin, then it becomes a kind of hydraulic system and we can manifest these waves - which we call mobilising the qi - inside the body. This is how you make power in taijiquan. Is there a connection to the fluid inside the body – there certainly is. Is it the same – it certainly is not. We're already full of blood but that doesn't mean we're full of qi, at least not the qi we use in taijiquan. One of the paradoxes of qi is that it's both a thing and not a thing. A process and a substance.

**PD:** Softness overcoming hardness, embracing the yin, responding sensitively, filling through emptying ... the principles of taiji seem to echo the *Daodejing*. Has early Daoist philosophy been an influence for you personally and for taiji in particular?

**AM:** Yes in my early years I was deeply influenced by both Daoist and Buddhist philosophy. I was engrossed in the meditation of both systems and constantly reading and studying. Taijiquan was founded by the great adept and

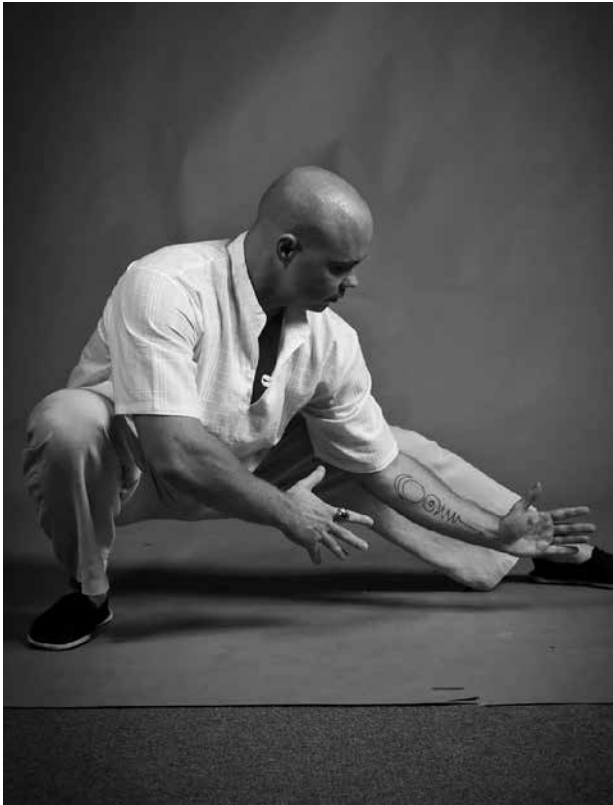
immortal Zhang Sanfeng. He was trained in the Shaolin temple and was a master of snake and crane gongfu. Later he travelled to Wudang mountain and learned Daoist internal alchemy. His understanding of alchemy and gongfu led to the creation of taijiquan. When he received the transmission from the Mysterious Warrior (Xuanwu, a Daoist deity) it had to filter through his personality and that which he knew – alchemy and the Shaolin arts. Actually, the philosophy for me is not a great influence. I try not to get too caught up in it. It risks getting too sectarian – arguing between this and that school. Practice is my great influence. When you practise and start to see results, it doesn't matter whether you're practising Buddhism or Daoism. The proof is in the pudding. My focus is practice and the attaining of skills rather than obsession and attachment to different philosophies.

**PD:** Do you find that everyone has an equal potential to develop taiji skills if they practise correctly and for long enough? Or do you find that some people have a special talent and if so, what is it?

**AM:** No. Not everybody has an equal potential. No two beings are equal in any given way. There are only differences – that's part of the beauty of life. The most important thing to achieve skill in taijiquan is to find an authentic method and somebody to teach it to you. After that the main criteria is sincerity. Physical talent and natural capacity have something to do with it but a more profound quality than physical talent and natural ability is your mind. How sincere are you towards the practice? Do you dare to follow the principles purely or would you throw them away for a quick victory? It's common that people forget about song, forget about yielding, forget about softness when they're pushing hands and will revert to speed and power, resorting to external skills. This shows a lack of sincerity and devotion to the art and then the art will not take birth within you. Can everyone achieve the same level? Of course not. Where in life does that happen? However, no matter what level we achieve, if we are sincere, the art will bring us great benefits - health, self-defence and liberation of the mind. What more can one ask for?

**PD:** One definition of health in Chinese medicine is free flow of qi and blood. Since taiji seems to cultivate this through release and soft movement, it should powerfully promote health and well being. Is that your experience?

**AM:** Yes, my experience is that my health has improved year on year. My body was a uncomfortable place to be when I was a young man. I did some very, very hard gongfu training and fighting which was definitely not good for me. Now that I'm getting older my body is more pleasant than ever. I wake up with no pain and I go through my



day abiding pleasantly in my body. The main reason for this is that the qi flows freely. All the channels are open, all the cells are nourished by qi and blood, everything is changing as it should. So yes – I totally agree with this definition of health. The change of the qi and blood, the ability to do things, to be robust, to not get sick – these are signs of health. In my experience, taijiquan gives you exactly that.

**PD:** Meaning no disrespect to the martial applications of taiji – ones which you demonstrate with such skill – most of us spend much more time just living than having to fight. In what ways do the principles and training of taiji help us to lead more cultivated lives?

**AM:** I could not agree more. Taijiquan gives you three major benefits. Self-defence or martial arts skill, health and what I like to call cultivation, or the spiritual aspect. Fighting is a stupid activity. It leads away from harmony and health, it's unskilful in every way possible and for me it's the least important part of the art. It makes up the smallest segment. Health is more important than fighting. If you've ever been really sick or truly injured, at that moment nothing else matters. Money doesn't matter, your passions don't matter, what matters is your health. The problem is that martial arts, or rather fighting, can damage your health directly. We all get old, we get sick and then we die. This means that health also is a failing pursuit. Even as we pursue it, we have to realise it's not going to work out for us. That's why our ultimate purpose is

cultivation of the mind – spiritual cultivation. It's the only thing you can actually keep – the only thing that's worth all the effort, all the input, in the end. Genuine training will give you growth in all three aspects of the art, but it's my strong opinion that cultivation of the mind is 90 per cent of the purpose of the art. And 90 per cent of that last 10 per cent is health, leaving only a small fragment in the end for self-defence.

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**PD:** There is a saying, 'The best is the enemy of the good'. It is clear from what you teach and embody that most taiji practitioners are working at a fairly superficial level – what you call 'empty form'. Yet it's also true that probably every single person who practises taiji gets some benefit from it – mental, physical and/or social, indeed there's quite a body of research demonstrating that. Do you find this a contradiction?

**AM:** I don't really see that. I think the good is part of the path towards the best. We should aim high. When we aim high, we'll be the best we possibly can. If we aim low, we won't reach our potential. Essentially yes, it's all good. Any taijiquan is good for you, meaning getting out and breathing and moving is good for you. That said, many people destroy their knees with bad taijiquan; they spend time doing bad taijiquan when they could be doing something else that would be more beneficial, like swimming or walking on the beach. There are many things that are better exercise than bad taijiquan. So I think it's a necessary service for people like me and other teachers to try and improve the standard of taijiquan around the world. To give people a chance to get some of the great benefits this beautiful art has to offer. As long as what people are learning is cutting them off from those benefits, that's not great for the student. But absolutely I agree that getting out there and doing some exercise and moving and being social is much better than sitting on the couch at home and watching TV. Still, it's a disservice to the actual art. It comes back to sincerity. If we don't really understand the art, perhaps we shouldn't teach it. And we should look for somebody that does understand it to guide us. This improves our health, improves the state of the art, improves the health of other people and is only positive in the end. So I would say that the good is a stepping stone towards the great.

**PD:** I know you practise qigong tuina. Can you say more about it, for example where the tradition comes from, how you learnt it, what it's used for, what are the main methods and what its strengths are as a treatment method.

**AM:** The method that I practise is quite rare, even in mainland China. In order to develop this skill you need jin – internal power. So traditionally it was a method only used by martial arts experts. Basically what we do is we send the jin into the patient and it reorganises the soft tissues and the skeleton to correct errors in the posture and in the system of the patient. It's incredibly effective. I've had so many injuries over my martial arts career and I've had pretty much every kind of treatment. This is certainly one of the most effective that I've ever had. I'm saying that as both a patient and a healer. One of its great benefits is that the treatments actually stick. The changes last. The treatments are quick and powerful and transform your body. When your posture is no good, when you're hunched, the blood and qi don't flow correctly and the nervous system is under stress. So when we correct the body, make the posture upright and open, the blood and qi flow, the nervous system is open, the entire body functions correctly and is able to heal itself. It's something you have to experience to understand.

**PD:** Most societies face a growing challenge in dealing with mental and physical disease. Are there any simple principles you would advocate for practitioners of Chinese medicine and their patients to follow to enhance their health and wellbeing?

**AM:** I'm not an expert in Chinese medicine by any means. I'm a meditator, I practise qigong and neigong, and I practise qigong tuina but by no means understand the intricacies of Chinese medicine. But I do observe a trend in modern culture that equates health with some kind of purity, like you're living in a bubble. People are becoming so pure, they avoid everything. But my experience is that they're simply not robust. If anything goes wrong, they get sick. I wouldn't call that health. To be truly healthy you must be robust – able to endure things when they're not perfect, able to work, able to eat bad food if you have to and it doesn't affect you. To be around sick people and not get sick. Now if you live in a bubble of purity, that's not what happens. So gearing your patients to a more robust, stable and sustainable health is the way forward. It allows people to enjoy their life, to be strong and healthy.

More about **Adam Mizner's** work can be found at [www.heavenmanearth.com](http://www.heavenmanearth.com) and [www.discovertaiji.com](http://www.discovertaiji.com).

*Peter Deadman* is the founder of the *Journal of Chinese Medicine*, the author of *Live Well, Live Long*, and a practitioner and teacher of qigong.

## Endnotes

- 1 A southern Chinese martial art, one of the four major schools in Southern Praying Mantis.
- 2 [https://heavenmanearth.com/en/grandmaster-huang\\_39.html](https://heavenmanearth.com/en/grandmaster-huang_39.html).