

Presentation 2-2

Transforming Vulnerability into Strength - The Way of Martial Arts and Inclusive Taijiquan

취약함에서 강건함으로의 변화: 무도와 포용적 태극권



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Introduction

The inscription of martial arts on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage is a momentous recognition of its profound contributions to humanity's well-being and sustainability. This gesture also celebrates human wisdom, creativity, and determination in developing strategies and promoting shared values to collectively adapt to environmental and social changes and overcome incredible environmental and social challenges.

This paper shares my work in developing and implementing wheelchair and inclusive Taijiquan programs for vulnerable populations across the continent. It aims to showcase the enduring wisdom of Taijiquan, a form of martial arts, in fostering self-confidence, ability, unity, grace, well-being, and the desire for flowing nature for vulnerable populations. In doing so, this paper also demonstrates that martial arts of all forms, including Taijiquan, are not only born from human values but also embody and practice them.

Martial Arts as an Adaptation Strategy

From the beginning, human pioneers faced an enormous and wide range of challenges as they adapted to their natural environment. Compared with the forces of their environmental conditions and the abilities of those countless four-leg predators with whom they competed for the same natural resources, the ability of humans would best be characterized as vulnerable, minimal, disabled, and incomparable. However, relying on a unique and gifted mind and the wisdom gathered by it, our pioneers transformed the vulnerable human body into a force that not only has empowered humanity to overcome formidable natural and social challenges but also has transformed these challenges into their abilities to successfully co-existed with the constantly changing environment. The persistent efforts in overcoming the challenges of natural conditions through the long and hard adaptation journey not only advanced human biological and cognitive developments but also provided them with a wealth of knowledge and wisdom, which laid the foundation for the later developments of increasingly complex adaptation strategies, including the development of martial arts worldwide.

From the cultural and adaptation perspective, the emergence of martial arts exemplifies human creativity in developing methods and strategies to transform their vulnerability into strength, overcoming formidable challenges at both environmental and social levels.

Evolving from basic hand-to-hand fighting techniques to multifaceted healing and empowerment systems, the development of martial arts, including its principles, practice methods, and primary functions, has not only been shaped by cultural philosophies, knowledge, admiration of the natural world, human values and the changing of social and cultural life and contexts but also has become the embodiment of these ideas and practices.

The sustainable development and popularity of martial arts throughout societies and time evidence the effect of its practice in empowering our mind and body and contributing to social and cultural developments. Such profound effects of martial arts on the population and social well-being also underline its ability to unify people of social classes through cultivating and promoting shared human values, which are fundamental and instrumental to the continuation of an organized human journey.

Values, Power, and Nature

Developing and sustaining shared human values for any human group are critical to the success of human environmental and social adaptations. Although early human groups developed values specific to their environment, social and subsistence contexts, and strategies cross-culturally, these values are remarkably similar. These values resonate across various cultures, highlighting our shared humanity and challenges. Throughout time, they have served as the rationales and source of 1) developing individual and group confidence, mental power, and resilience, 2) guiding social collaboration, 3) building social cohesion, 4) developing self-identity, 5) personal fulfillment, 6) creativity, and ingenuity, 7) motivation, and inspiration to navigate the complex social and personal life, etc.

The origin of human values is a complex and multifaceted subject that intertwines early philosophical thoughts, environmental and social challenges, subsistence strategies, the development of social organization, and the ways humans learn about and make sense of life.

However, they were products of humans' efforts to adapt to the natural and social environments. Throughout human history, many early thinkers, from the Thales of Miletus (624-546 BC), Heraclitus (535-475 BC), Empedocles (490-430 BC), Plato (427-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322

BC), to Lao-Tzu (571-471 BC) and Confucius (551-479 BC), and other indigenous philosophers all observed the intimate relationship between the ways of the natural (world) and human social lives. They advocated that humans are not only a part of nature but interconnected with the ever-changing natural world. As the early philosophy of Daoism states, the natural world is everlasting. What makes the natural world everlasting is that the *Dao*, or the *Way* of the natural world, can unify all things and direct them to flow gracefully, navigating through the changes and challenges. Engaging the “unified graceful flow” not only serves as the manifestation of power but also creates power.

Therefore, the concept of “power” and “ability” in the minds of early philosophers is relative and contextual. It is the effect of the flowing and transformative process between opposites – the *Yin* and *Yang*, for example. The terms “yin” and “yang” are not two rigidly defined beings; they are used as metaphors to illustrate the concept of “unity of opposites.”

The relationship between the discernible phenomena of opposites in nature, for example, day and night, four seasons, tall and short, cold and hot, and strange and weak, are neither antagonistic nor tangible. They are mutually inclusive and transform from and to each other like a running river in the spectrum of changes. A running river's power (*yang*) results from its gentle, continuous, and formless flowing movement (*yin*). Therefore, formlessness, effortlessness, simplicity, and fluidity make the *Dao* (*yin*) in the natural world a source of all lives (*Yang*). The “*Dao*” refers to the mind in humans.

Therefore, humans must learn from nature to transform their vulnerability into empowerment by cultivating a fluid, formless, and centered mind. This ancient philosophical postulation provides profound enlightenment to humans in their efforts to navigate the powerful and changing environment and social conditions. For humans, physical power and ability are always relative and limited, but the power and ability of the mind can be unlimited.

A Flowing Mind and a Flowing Body: The Birth of Taijiquan

For humans, nature has been a source of both challenges and wisdom. The indescribable and immeasurable amount of power and ability it has, its graceful, flowing, and effortless way of demonstrating its power and cultivating a life for all beings, became the aspiration of early martial artists to develop a form of martial arts to cultivate a power that has “no limit.”

As ancient wisdom prescribes, to achieve this power, one must cultivate a fluid, formless, gentle, calm, centered, and engaged mind, like the *Dao* for the natural world. This mind can become the body and effortlessly make the body flow like water. By unifying all parts of body movements, including breathing, the mind can transform the body into a system, creating a force of four ounces (body) to deflect one thousand pounds (challenge).

This form of martial arts was first categorized as internal martial arts. Later, it was named Taijiquan.

The name Taijiquan consists of two concepts. Taiji refers to the ultimate supreme, a state of being that can give birth to immeasurable power. Quan means fist or method.

Taijiquan thus refers to a practice method of cultivating a state of mind that produces immeasurable power. Manifested through the metaphor “a force of four ounces deflects one thousand pounds,” Taijiquan practices intend to cultivate a calm and fluid mind to unify all body parts (four ounces) and direct its movements, creating energy (a force) to embrace and transform the external force (one thousand pounds). Shaped by centuries of drastic social changes, wars, and uncertainties, Taijiquan movements have been constantly modified, transforming it into a multifaceted mind and body healing and empowering art benefiting people of all health conditions beyond cultural boundaries.

Modern Times and Modern Challenges

In the modern era, rapid social changes and technological advancement have dichotomous effects on our lives. On the one hand, they have profoundly improved economic productivity and social conditions and transformed our way of life. Still, at the same time, they have intensified the complexity of social structure and engagement and stratified human ability. The prevalence of worldwide conflict, economic instability, increasing social and gender stratifications, urban violence, fast-paced and multitasking-orientated working environment, ageism, and ableism presents ever-daunting challenges, requiring individuals to navigate a rapidly changing landscape while striving to maintain their physical, mental, and emotional fluidity and well-being.

Especially the prevalence of ageism, genderism, and ableism have created a powerful effect in minimizing the value of what we all have and the fact that the human body and mental tendencies are fundamentally fluid, diverse, and changing. The propensity to socialize and moralize binary classifications of the human body and mental conditions, such as “healthy and unhealthy” and “normal and abnormal,” have not only reinforced the rigid and stigmatizing views about individuals who have those conditions but also created social and psychological constraints and challenges for them to fulfill their values and engage in life with confidence and integrity.

According to the data provided by the World Health Organization, mental health decline accounts for a significant portion of the global burden of disease and injury. It contributes to approximately 16% of the overall burden of disease and injury in individuals aged 10-19 years. Worldwide, mental health disorders affect 1 in 4 people, depression is the leading cause of disability, and suicide is the second leading

cause of death among 15-29- year-olds. In 2021, healthcare organizations in the U.S. declared a national emergency in children's mental health. The picture would be even grayer for the vulnerable population.

Approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide live with a physical, mental, sensory, or intellectual disability, about 80% of which are in low-income and middle-income countries.

According to recently published data by the Center for Disease Control & Prevention in the U.S., adults with disabilities reported mental distress 4.6 times as often as those without disabilities.

Ancient Wisdom with Modern Application

While all traditional practices carry cultural significance and historical value, their sustainability is often attributed to their adaptability to social, cultural, and environmental changes and their potential impact on upholding core cultural values. The long history and the continuing sustained effects of Taijiquan practice on the well-being of our mind and body in the modern era are credited to its invaluable wisdom of strengthening the body through empowering the mind. The central conceptual idea that provided the foundation for the development of Taijiquan is the proposition that, though the human body's abilities or powers are limited and relative, the power of the mind is unlimited. Taijiquan does not view the body's power as a tangible and quantifiable entity that only focuses on muscular strength and anatomical perfection. Instead, it sees power and body condition as fluid and contextual, manifesting the ability of an integrated and gentle mind and body to flow as a system. This unique approach, which redefines strength and turns vulnerability into a power source, empowers the mind and benefits all bodies. As the continuation of evolving social complexities in which our mind and body conditions and capabilities are increasingly fragmented and contested by social challenges, this unique approach and practice will undoubtedly continue to provide vital contributions to the empowerment of contemporaries in navigating through modern social life in which the narrowly and rigidly defined and practiced concepts of ability and normality challenge the human potential, creating the vulnerability of so many.

Dancing in the Chair – the Beauty of Wheelchair Taijiquan

On September 5, 2008, fifty wheelchair Taijiquan practitioners dressed in white silk uniforms and moving in slow, graceful harmony performed the "Thirteen Postures of Wheelchair Taijiquan" on the main stage of the Beijing 2008 Olympics/Paralympics Cultural Festival, one of the kickoff events for the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Paralympics the next day.

"They moved so beautifully, and it was so inspirational--as if they were dancing in the chair," was how one of the reporters on the scene described them."

This wheelchair Taijiquan performance was organized by the Beijing 2008 Olympics Committee and the China Disabled People's Federation (CPDF). The focus of developing this wheelchair Tai Chi Chuan program is more than to practice Taijiquan in a wheelchair. It also intends to make the practice a transformative, empowering, and flowing experience. To achieve this purpose, the routine of the 13-posture Wheelchair Taijiquan program incorporated the forward rolling push of the wheelchair and the making of 90 and 180-degree turns between specific transitional movements, enhancing and highlighting the dynamics and flow of the practice while giving particular artistic effects.

We conducted a study to explore the practice experience of these wheelchair Taijiquan participants. The team asked each participant to provide a list of noticeable changes they have experienced since participating in the wheelchair Taijiquan. Of the 49 respondents, 173 positive changes were reported, ranging from physical improvements to enhanced social and psychological well-being. Of these 173 experienced changes, 53% were in the physical/body well-being category, and 47% were in the social and psychological well-being category, including improved self-confidence.

The project team also conducted a focus group interview with a smaller group to explore why many participants experienced a positive change in self-confidence through the practice.

When asked why so many people felt that participating in the wheelchair Taijiquan had improved their self-confidence, some shared that the enhanced physical and emotional conditions through the practice provided them great confidence in managing their family and social lives. Many also said they were encouraged to practice wheelchair Taijiquan in public places since the practice does not highlight their disabilities and gives them a sense of normalcy. A male participant commented: "When we practice at the park every morning, people look at us with admiration, and it makes me feel so proud and confident. Now I always look forward to going out to practice Wheelchair Taijiquan." When asked why practicing at the park was so important, a female participant added: "That is where [ablebodied] people practice Taijiquan in the morning, and we wanted to show them that we [people with disabilities] also can perform Taijiquan, and we can perform it beautifully."

During the conversation, a participant said he felt like a bird while practicing the wheelchair Taijiquan. After I asked how so, he explained: "it would be hard for people who do not use a wheelchair to imagine how we [wheelchair users] perceive the concept of space.

Before making every move, I must calculate how far I can go. My physical and mental spaces are determined by how far and high I can reach. The circular movement of Tai Chi Chuan changed my mental image of my physical boundary. I can move gracefully and infinitely when I am practicing the wheelchair Tai Chi Chuan, which makes me feel [like] I am so free."

One practitioner from a rural region of the country shared this sentiment, “People like me” had never dreamed that one day we could be invited to demonstrate “our ability” and to have “our disabled body” appreciated on an international stage. For me, I had always been depressed about my disability since I was a young girl. I was always concerned about how others would look at me, and I often perceived myself as a burden to my family and society because of my disability. Being selected to participate in the wheelchair Taijiquan demonstration for the Paralympics was the greatest gift of my life. It tells people like me that we are not a burden and can contribute to society and the world just like others.

Empowering through the Nature Connection: Working with Inner City Youth

Many inner-city youth face innumerable and daunting health risks across the globe.

Broken family care structures, widespread street violence, poor economic conditions, and lack of resources continue to contribute to the rise of many health, behavioral, and emotional challenges. Developing practical, suitable, and sustainable intervention programs that effectively alter the current trend is imperative and challenging.

With the support of a grant from the U.S. Health Resource and Service Administration (HRSA), we collaborated with the Boys & Girls Club in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern region of the United States to introduce a unique, short, adaptive Taijiquan program to a group of inner-city youth who attended the summer camp hosted by the Boys & Girls Club. One of the aims of this project was to explore how Taijiquan practice could influence participants' perceptions of power. Twenty-five youths, 14 girls and 11 boys aged 7 to 14, participated in this 8-week-long program. This 8-week Taijiquan was attended by 25 adolescent campers, 14 female and 11 males, aged 7 to 14, with each session lasting 30 minutes and held once a week.

Considering the age of this group, we created a four-movement Taijiquan program form in which two movements were from the Yang style and two from the Chen style Taijiquan programs. By mixing the graceful, slow, and flowing Yang-style Taijiquan movements with the fast and dynamically expressed energy of the Chen-style Taijiquan movements, this program intended to give the participants an embodied experience of the power of embracing and unifying through gentle flow while enjoying a simple but fun and engaging introduction to the art of Taijiquan. Taking the truism of “a picture is worth a thousand words” to heart, the program used familiar images to clarify the complex ideas. The project’s instructional process chose nature metaphors and similes to guide learning and practicing the four Taijiquan movements. Shortly after completing this project, a program evaluation team conducted two focus group interviews with a sample of participants: four girls and six boys. The team asked each group what they remembered the most from participating in the class. The following table illustrates the top ten items provided by the participants.

Table 1. The Impact of Adaptive Taijiquan Practice to Inner-City Youth N=10

Girls Group	Boys Group
Yield and redirect	Yield and Redirect
Rooting is to maintain one’s balance.	Gentle with Balance
Calm but focused	Focus
Gentle but with direction	Flexible like Bamboo
Yield like bamboo, redirect like a wave	Stand like a Tree
Stand like a Tree	Moving like Water
Flow like Water	Golden Rooster (stands on one leg)
Golden Rooster (stands one leg)	Look through the Wall
Sit like a Mountain	Push the Mountain
Punch like a Whip	Deflect Distractions

They were then asked to identify the top three phrases they thought were important for their everyday lives. For the girl’s group, “Flow like water” was selected by everyone; the second one was “yield and redirect,” selected by 3 out of 4 girls, and the third-ranked was “Punch like a whip” and “yield like bamboo” each received two votes. When the evaluation team asked why they thought “Flow like water” was the most important theme for everyday life, all four girls agreed that this simile helped them stay calm throughout the day or whenever they got stressed.

For the boys’ group, “Deflect distractions” received all six votes; “Focus” and “Golden Rooster stand on one leg” each with five votes. The boys’ discussion for “Deflect distractions” and “Focus” were essentially the same. Both had real-life applications in avoiding violence, focusing on school/home responsibilities, and having courage.

Inclusive Taijiquan for Disabled Veterans

Like people with disability in the general population, veterans with disabilities, including PTSD, also face unique challenges in meeting their health, including emotional needs. Based on the understanding that this population is diverse in both body/physical and mental conditions, a short inclusive Taijiquan program was developed to make the Taijiquan practice suitable for all physical/body conditions. Focusing on “yielding and redirecting” through gentle and flowing movements with deep breathing, this program offers four different practice modalities to practice the same choreographically sequenced seven postures (movements), including 1) walking, 2) seated, 3) standing, and 4) the wheelchair practice modalities. Another feature of this program is that participants can choose any of the four methods in a group practice setting and synchronize each movement while moving together in unison. The intended goal of this approach is to promote individual empowerment through experiencing the effect of social & emotional bonding and unity. The underlying idea for these practice modalities is that, regardless of our differences in physical abilities, we can all practice Tai Chi Chuan to create a flowing, expanded, graceful, unified energy and to empower our minds and bodies.

From 2017 to 2023, the project team, funded by seven consecutive years of grants from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, partnered with the VA Healthcare system and implemented this program at 85 VA medical centers nationwide. This inclusive Taijiquan has become one of the most popular mind and body empowerment programs among disabled veterans in the country.

Throughout the seven years, we conducted many interviews with program participants, including healthcare providers/instructors, to learn the program's effect on their well-being.

Following are the summaries of some key themes that emerged from these interviews, reflecting how adaptive Tai Chi Chuan practice can empower practitioners by meeting their needs and perceived life values despite their disabilities.

1) A Sense of Healing and Wellbeing

The positive impact of practice on the mind and body is one of the most popular benefits participants shared: reduced bodily pain, increased range of motion, improved general wellbeing, sleep quality, and mental focus. A practitioner shared that practicing wheelchair Taijiquan was the few occasions he did not feel his body pain. Some participants who did not use a wheelchair but enrolled in the training due to their back and leg joint injuries told us that the practice helped ease the fear of body movement (Kinesiophobia) and helped them regain their confidence in engaging in physical movements. One participant added, “The practice brought me back to my golf game.”

A female Veteran who endures both physical and mental challenges. After a few years of participation, she shared,

“I have several problems, which range from back problems, some paresthesia, things along the lines of suffering from depression, and that exacerbates my PTSD. So, when I come here, it's like a reprieve from everything else; it helps ground and center me... I often feel numb to the world, what's going on, and things like that, and just being here helps me reconnect with myself because you have no choice but to feel what you're doing while you're doing it here. It's very thought-provoking and body-inducing. My first time here, I came in a wheelchair, and now I'm using a cane. It's been amazing.”

2) A Sense of Ability

The sense of ability is another fundamental and shared value, giving us motivation and well-being and shaping how we experience and engage with the world. When we believe we are capable, we're more likely to take on challenges, pursue goals, and actively engage with life. The positive changes in mind and body well-being experienced by many participants also contributed to their enthusiastic motivation. For many participants, for example, the turning and wheeling of the wheelchairs as a part of Taijiquan movements gives them a sense of ability and power. A healthcare provider who frequently uses this program working with her veterans/patients shared with us,

“Wheelchair Tai Chi Chuan provides the participants a sense of transformation and empowerment. The wheelchair (or other assistive device) is an integral part of the movement, adding dynamic and beauty to the form. It turns a disability into a capability. It is powerful and inspiring to watch veterans performing the sequence in unison, all breathing and moving as one.”

Another healthcare provider/instructor stated,

“By making the wheelchair movements an integrated part of their Tai Chi practice, the participants improved self-esteem by feeling more empowered and not limited by their mobility device. Making the form inclusive for people in wheelchairs, traditional barriers can be broken that would typically exclude them from enjoying the benefits of Tai Chi practice.”

3) A Sense of Renewed Warrior Spirit

One veteran told me that when sitting in a chair, flowing with those gentle martial arts moves alongside others, it “is the only time I do not feel disabled.”

The enduring appeal of martial arts for many stems from a blend of physical, cultural, and philosophical elements that resonate with our innate drive to “overcome” on various levels. Many participants with disabilities (and healthcare providers) shared that low self-esteem is quite common among individuals with severe physical disabilities. The sense of losing one’s sense of value because of disability and enduring the pain kept many socially less engaged. The gentle, circular, and flowing movements of adaptive Tai Chi can give participants a renewed body and spirit. Many veterans told us that providing implications in martial arts for these slow and gently flowing movements makes the practice experience more “close to home” and enjoyable. A veteran participant commented, “The slow, gentle, and circular movements help me embrace and redirect forces, which is also the beauty of martial arts application in life.”

Although many healthcare providers do not have martial arts practice experience, they share the importance of using this strategy with their veterans. They recognize that many veterans appreciate the strength, beauty, and discipline that martial arts training requires.

Showing the martial arts applications of these movements makes the learning and practice of the movement more appealing, as many veterans often have difficulty visualizing the benefit of the slower movements.

One healthcare provider/instructor commented,

“Though I do not have a martial arts background, I know that many veterans I work with do. Often, when an individual experiences an injury or disease that causes disability, they are also left with a sense of vulnerability. The martial arts aspect of Inclusive Tai Chi Chuan can restore a sense of strength and counteract the vulnerability that an individual with a disability may be experiencing.”

4) A Sense of Community and Unity

One of the unique features of inclusive Tai Chi Chuan is that the same seven sequenced movements can be practiced using standing, sitting, walking, or wheelchair modalities. In a group practice setting, participants can choose any of the four methods to practice and synchronize each movement while moving together in unison. One veteran told me during a break of practice, when she saw everyone in the class, in a wheelchair or standing or sitting, and using one arm or two arms, flowing together in sync with the music, she felt so happy and empowered that she forgot where she was and why she was here.

Many participants reported that the camaraderie developed during the practice made them want to return after each class. They elaborated that there are no differences in body and health conditions or divisions in social situations and views when they practice together.

There is only a shared collective flow, forming a unified energy that feels beautiful and powerful.

A participant shared,

“The class was very enjoyable... Not only did Tai Chi help me physically with the exercises and mental things, but I also found it almost as rewarding to meet and connect with other veterans. I find that it is almost as rewarding as the exercise and the brotherhood that we have as veterans. It’s special and like nothing else I’ve done in life.”

A healthcare provider/instructor told us,

“In my experience leading Tai Chi groups where Veterans are both seated and mobile, the group comes together as one. All Veterans have a warrior heart, soul, and spirit. Veterans seated or using a wheelchair in the group reported feeling empowered as part of the group process. With the ability to teach the form from a standing, walking, seated, or wheelchair position, ALL Veterans in the group can move and flow as one.”

5) A Sense of a Part of Nature

Metaphors and similes shape our perceptions about life and the world around us.

Positive metaphors and similes that convey uplifting, inspiring, or optimistic ideas and images can evoke feelings of hope, growth, and healing, communicating complex ideas and concerns in a more engaging and relatable manner.

Over the years, many healthcare providers have shared their experiences using this strategy in their clinical practice. A healthcare provider/instructor commented,

“When emphasizing “Sit like a mountain, stand like a tree, flow like a river,” I found many participants were able to increase a sense of internal local control, self-efficacy, and self-empowerment.”

Another healthcare provider/instructor said,

“Picturing nature or a movement simulating an activity helps to learn postures and create flowing motions. This allows participants to understand the motions and move easily and with less frustration or pain.”

6) A Sense of Beauty and Power

“When I practice wheelchair Taiji, I felt like flying with my chair... I felt so free and powerful.” - A wheelchair Taijiquan practitioner.

In 2022, we conducted a small study to explore the patterns of healthcare providers' initial impressions of wheelchair Taijiquan. One hundred

and forty healthcare providers, many of whom are veterans as well, participated in this study. Most of them did not have Taijiquan practice experience, and very few had seen a demonstration of a wheelchair Taijiquan. Before introducing this program to them, we demonstrated the 7-posture inclusive Tai Chi Chuan program using the wheelchair modality. Then, we asked the participants to list three short phrases or words that best characterize their impressions of the demonstration.

After conducting a statistical analysis of lists the 140 healthcare providers provided, we identified five major categories of impressions: flow, power, calm, mindfulness, and aesthetics. In the category of Aesthetics, the listed items also included phrases such as “artistic,” “beautiful,” and “graceful.”

Conventionally, these impressions are usually least likely associated with wheelchair movements. The prevalent use of social categories such as disability and disabled body often denotes a negative impression of people with different body conditions. The design of this inclusive Taijiquan program makes an assistive device a tool for body flow and creating beauty, changing our perception about the function of these assistive devices and promoting a positive outlook of the practitioner and their participation.

Conclusion: A Flowing Mind, Body, and Spirit

“Flowing is not just a principle of the Tai Chi Chuan movement. It is also a way of life.” - a veteran participant.

The six thematic benefits shared by program participants were all the effects of flowing movement. Being in flow is a way of describing the Taijiquan movement. It is also the way we describe nature and define beauty. In both the natural and social worlds, flow is the process of cultivating and a result of power. In the natural world, flow is said to be powered by the Way of Nature, the “*Dao*” prescribed by ancient thinkers. In the social world, flow at the social and individual levels is powered by our minds. Therefore, when our minds are tranquil, fluid, centered, unified, and flowing, so will our bodies.

The increasing social complexity in its structure, stratification, rules, and moralities, as well as the demands for multitasking, consumerism, ableism, and ageism in modern times, have presented enormous challenges for maintaining a tranquil and flowing mind and body at both social and individual levels. Embodied by the essential universal values, the continuing popularity of many forms of martial arts, including Taijiquan, in modern times and throughout the world not only demonstrates the role that these practices can play in empowering our mind and body to navigate the complex and challenging social landscape, but it also underlines the importance of upholding these universal values to continue to our journey with graceful flow despite our vulnerabilities.

The wheelchair and inclusive Taijiquan introduced here also serve as a practice and metaphor. They imply that though our body's abilities or powers are limited and relative, facing the challenge of the complexity of modern times and the future, the power of the mind is unlimited. To empower the body and our ability to engage in the complex and challenging social life, we must empower the mind. A calming and flowing mind not only can effectively unify the body parts, turning them into a gently flowing system, but it can also lead the flowing system to create a “soft and embracing” force (four ounces) harnessing “one thousand pounds” of external challenges.

Flow is at the heart of martial arts and part of Taijiquan's enduring legacy. In 1971, during an interview with Pierre Berton, the host of The Pierre Berton Show, Bruce Lee offered the following statement, encapsulating the philosophy of flexibility, adaptability, and the power of being fluid in practicing martial arts and engaging in life.

“Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless—like water. Now you put water in a cup, and it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle, and it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot, and it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow, or it can crash. Be water, my friend.”