

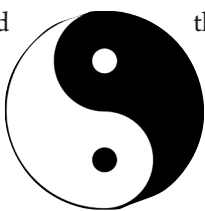
Tai Chi Lessons for Negotiators

ALISHER FAIZULLAEV | APRIL 2012

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

People who live in the industrialized world are often emotionally detached from each other; modern urban life has narrowed many of our senses, and we are losing acuity in our feeling of ourselves and others. Accordingly, most people tend to understand negotiation as just a rational process, as a mental game they play around the table in competitive interactions with others. There are many, predominantly rationalistic models and concepts of negotiation that propose rather calculative approaches and algorithmic thinking and pay little attention to human sensuousness, feelings, intuition, spontaneity, creativity, and body language. Tai Chi can be helpful in realizing more intuitive, sensual aspects of dealing with others in negotiation and could give modern negotiators useful insights in making fuller use of their human potential.

Tai Chi, as an ancient Chinese internal martial art, has deep philosophical roots in Taoism. Tao can be understood as a natural “way” of existing or an unconstrained “path.” Taoist natural action, or doing without “doing,” can be metaphorically compared with a watercourse in nature: water moves with ease; it is flexible and soft but has inner power and can overcome enormous and solid obstacles. One of the fundamental principles of Taoism is represented in



the Tai Chi diagram of the “supreme ultimate fist,” with the symbols of Yin and Yang—the unity of seemingly contrary forces. There are many illustrations of mutually contradictory but complementary opposites: male and female, high and low, left and right, day and night, hot and cold, etc. Tai Chi as a mental and physical practice is based on the balance, dynamic equilibrium, and unity of Yin and Yang—the driving forces of the universe, nature, and human existence.

Though based on the same fundamental principles, different schools, models, and forms of Tai Chi exist. Some emphasize its martial art applications, others its meditation or health aspects. Tai Chi is also practiced now as a sport. Here we would like to discuss some negotiation applications of Tai Chi as a soft, psychological, martial art.

In modern negotiation literature there are a number of well-known dualistic concepts, such as “distributive vs. integrative bargaining,” “positional vs. interest-based negotiations,” and “value claiming vs. value creating.” We often see the letters “vs.” between these two types of negotiations, since many scholars and practitioners understand them as opposites, or reverse phenomena. It is a different story with Yin and Yang. According to Taoist philosophy and Tai

Chi thinking, Yin comprises Yang, and Yang contains Yin. They are always presented within each other, and one cannot exist without the other. In other words, Yin and Yang are nondualistic concepts, and using them in negotiation analysis and practice requires a nondualistic understanding of human nature and of the negotiators' connection with the opponent.

A Tai Chi approach to negotiation implies a dynamic balance between Yin and Yang moves. This means that a negotiator has to combine in his or her behavior both Yin and Yang components: on the one hand, to be receptive, cooperative, adaptive, integrative, empathetic, and practice corresponding, listening, giving in, accommodating, and reconciling, i.e., a soft negotiation style; but, on the other hand, to be assertive, competitive, distributive, antagonistic, and practice opposing, compelling, speaking, taking in, hampering, and enforcing, i.e., a firm negotiation style. In Tai Chi, however, softness is combined not with brute hardness, which is itself associated with stiffness and rigidity, but with inner power that enables one to overcome tough obstacles, as in the case of a watercourse. Some schools of Tai Chi recommend softness of heart and hardness of mind, or outer softness and inner hardness.

Laozi, the ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, wrote in his classic *Tao Te Ching*:

*Men are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.*

*Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.*

*Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life.*

The hard and stiff will be broken.

The soft and supple will prevail.¹

So soft is not weak.

Tai Chi has so-called “form”—individual exercises—and also a sparring practice named Push Hands. Tai Chi form is a foundation for noncompetitive or competitive Push Hands, and their slow, relaxed, and smooth movements and dynamic meditative drills train the practitioner in mindfulness, concentration, inner strength, and flexibility. We can approach negotiation as a mental form of Tai Chi Push Hands, where both sides try to maintain their inner balance while the partner or opponent strives to destroy it by “pushing.”

We can use the word “partner” in the context of noncompetitive (integrative) Push Hands negotiations and refer to the “opponent” when speaking of competitive (distributive) negotiations. However, according to Tai Chi philosophy, any noncompetitive interactions contain some competitive elements, and no competition can exist without an element of cooperation. In both “integrative” and “distributive” negotiations, the negotiator can succeed only if he or she is mindful of and sensitive to the opponent, achieves a close connection with him or her, and understands and uses the other side's strengths and weaknesses. All these things require a sense of *oneness* with the partner/opponent.

1. Stephen Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching Persona* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 76.

Here are some basic concepts and tips for conducting the Tai Chi Push Hands style of negotiation.

Mindfulness: Be aware of yourself, the opponent, and the environment; be attentive and sensitive; connect with the opponent, and experience his or her strengths and weaknesses.

You should not only be well prepared for the negotiation but also be “here and now”; pay full attention to your partner, including his or her body language, the process, and the environment; organize the best mode of interaction, using nonverbal communication, space, and table arrangements. Good interpersonal contact, containing handshake, eye contact, and empathy, helps interactions and engagement with the other side. Get a sense of his or her “center”—the basic stance and arguments. Keep connected with the opponent. It is useful to practice some “negotiation intelligence gathering” on the partner’s psychological state and attitudes by chatting for a few minutes about the weather, sports, or other neutral subjects. Every negotiation has its own atmosphere and energy; it is important to feel this, use it during interactions, and change if necessary by verbal and nonverbal means.

Nonresistance: Be soft, relaxed, calm, flexible, natural, and genuine; release tensions; breathe naturally; respond to force by yielding, avoid stiffness and rigidity, receive the partner’s moves with gentleness.

Confrontation, hostility, and aggression in negotiation can be eliminated only if you are relaxed; if you are tense, the other side will also become tense. Tension-free negotiators are more aware and sensitive; they can be more creative and make better use of their in-

ner strengths. Many weak and inexperienced negotiators reject the partner’s arguments immediately under the pressure of their own inner tension—often this is manifested in their body language and muscle tension. Let the excessive emotions and negative energy of the opponent go. Tai Chi Push Hands negotiation suggests that direct confrontation with the partner or opponent can result in losing one’s balance. It is better to use a “yes, but” technique, though to employ it nonmanipulatively, with understanding and real meaning. Absorb the power of the opponent nonconfrontationally while keeping your balance.

Reflectiveness: Be receptive—this is the best way to become assertive when necessary; try to learn more about your partner and his or her stance; respond to the situation and your partner’s moves with gentleness; turn his or her actions into interactions; combine Yin and Yang moves, and follow their dynamism.

Questions and arguments are your main moves in negotiations, though your body language, attitudes, energy, and feelings also affect the negotiation process. Do not keep attacking the opponent’s nonessential arguments; always target the other side’s central line of argumentation (put pressure on the center) while retaining your own principles. Remember: Good negotiators tend to ask questions and welcome the other side’s questions. Open questions, clarifications, paraphrases, summations, as well as nonverbal matching (body with body, gesture with gesture, voice with voice, etc.) with the counterpart are the instruments of engagement. Respond to your partner’s questions with interest and consideration, and question the weak sides of the opponent’s position especially. Do

these moves with gentleness, sometimes just the tone of your voice or the movement of your eyebrows can make a difference. Be soft in receiving questions and firm in answering them; be receptive to your opponent's arguments and assertive with your own arguments. However, your firmness and assertiveness should not be ostentatious, but connected with your inner strengths and balance. Any verbal assertions carry tangible pressure, but tactful questions contain gentle pressure. Those who use strong declarations, allegations, and affirmations may become overstretched, and it is easy to destroy their balance just with gentle questions. It is important to use both listening and speaking powers, and soft questions are one of the most powerful tools of great negotiators.

Modesty: Avoid overextension and extremes; do not become overstretched; extreme movements can make you unbalanced; do not overdo or underdo; use simple moves and expend only such energy as is necessary.

In negotiations speak smoothly; do not be too fast or too slow; do not become overexcited or tranquilized; do not push your partner too hard; do not use excessively strong or abusive language—if the other side is receptive and “empty,”² then you will just lose your balance. Avoid overcomplicated phrases and sentences, use clear and simple questions and arguments. Do not put yourself in stressful sitting or standing positions. Follow the natural path of interactions during the negotiations, and sense the

2. To be “empty” means to be free from tensions and distractions; “emptiness” allows the negotiator to mobilize quickly and react to the questions and arguments of the opponent. It is very difficult to unbalance the stance of the “empty” negotiator.

right time for a break or for ending the session. Good negotiators are neither overconfident nor unassured, they do not hurry and do not linger.

Mobility: Always be mobile and steady in your mobility; use circular movements,³ space, and natural gestures to engage your partner; do not lose your connection with him or her, and keep your body position upright; draw the other side into your center, and maintain your inner balance.

Your mobility is your ability to listen and speak, to be receptive and assertive, to follow the partner's line of argument but not depart from your own central, fundamental points. Naturalness, softness, and easing tensions help you to be mobile and flexible, to respond to and neutralize your partner's points and make your own points. You have a better chance of keeping your inner balance when you are able to construct discussions around your own strong arguments (drawing the other side into your own center). There are also physical and spatial aspects of mobility: Sometimes you can use space effectively, especially if you are losing connection with your partner, by leaving the table, walking around, and having informal conversations, or by engaging in discussions in the corridor. However, do not overextend and overstretch yourself trying to convince your opponent—this may destroy your balance.

Tai Chi is a complicated art and takes years to master. The same applies to the Tai Chi martial art of negotiation. It requires inner strength

3. Circular movements prevent the Tai Chi practitioner from stretching; in negotiation circularity means constructing arguments around the strongest ones and questioning the opponent's arguments from different sides (“surrounding”).

and genuine respect to the opponent. This style of negotiation gives the negotiators the opportunity to realize their strengths and weaknesses and find a solution in real interactions. Some may like it, but others may prefer different types or styles of martial art in negotiation. Some

skillful diplomats somehow practice it. In any case, even small insights from Tai Chi might be useful in constructing a more comprehensive negotiation style, strategy, and tactics. A big journey begins with a small step.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Alisher Faizullaev is a 2011–2012 Fulbright Scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University and the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown Univer-

sity. He works as a professor and the director of the Negotiation Laboratory at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. His email is negolab@gmail.com.

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University
Washington, DC 20057

Telephone 202-965-5735

Fax 202-965-5652

Web site <http://isd.georgetown.edu>