

“Moving up & down” – A phenomenological investigation of somatic learning in Tàijíquán

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Abstract

In the somatic practice of Tàijíquán higher-order qualities like “feeling centered” and “letting go” are cultivated [1] in relation to working with and attentively sensing – “listening to” – the moving body [6].

The practitioner's experience and somaesthetic awareness is thus instrumental in shaping and learning movement.

Based on phenomenological methodology, we investigated our practicing of the minimalist Tàijíquán exercise “up-down movement”. Here we present first results concerning the questions:

- How we subjectively control and explore the moving body in Tàijíquán**
- How experience changes during practice**
- How this could relate to a changing organization of movement & development of technical skill**

1. Method

Participants – Two co-researchers, 7 years & 1 year of Tàijíquán experience

Procedure

- individually, describing and reflecting one's experience while practicing
- getting a feel for the other's experience
 - discussing the individual protocols & thoughts
 - adaptation of “phenomenological interviews” [2], but both interviewer & interviewee reflected their experience
- identifying common structures, invariant to the individual experiences

Rationale

- Why being both researcher and practitioner?**

→ no hetero-phenomenology without auto-phenomenology [4]

- Why interviewing another person who also is both researcher and practitioner?**

→ facilitated bracketing & variation

2. The exercise “up-down movement”

“Up-down movement” has been developed by Master Huang Sheng Shyan (1910 - 1992). Fig. 1 and 2 show the two alternating positions one goes through while sinking and rising along an imagined vertical axis.

The movement is to be initiated through “letting go” of bodily (and mental) tensions. One goal of continuous practice is to synchronize the movement to form a continuous flow.

3. Results

The attentive practice of the exercise involves an *interplay* of the acts of imagining, moving, and sensing.

imagine – images guide movement, e.g. moving along the imagined, vertical axis

move – letting movement happen, initiated through loosening tension

sense – sense relaxation, pressure in feet, etc.

a) Attentive control & monitoring interplay ...

- Sensing is directed** – towards qualities, body areas, anatomical structures, movements etc. as given by the exercise

→ **Monitoring** for sensing discrepancies, but also positively, for having the right “movement feel”

- In general, no “simple” sensations** – e.g. “the pelvis tilting” can be experienced as motor image, sensation, and felt movement as *one*

Fig. 1: *Starting position*. “V stance”, the heels are closed, toes are opened. The legs are nearly stretched. The back is in a naturally curved position. The fingertips rest at the side of the thighs.



Fig. 2: *End- and turning position*. The body is lowered, knees are slightly opened. The pelvis is tilted forward, the back is lengthened. The shoulders are dropped, elbows opened, while the finger tips remain resting on the thighs. (Source: Hella Ebel, Taijiquan. DVD)

... & exploring the moving body

- Unclear correspondence** sensation-interpretation
 - not knowing how to precisely sense s.th.
 - unforeseen & ambiguous sensations can result from an initiated movement
- Mismatch** of attended image & body feeling
- Subtle movement variations** allow to observe occurring sensations
- Better conceptualization** of any aspect of the movement allows *movement modification* and *finer-tuned sensing* of movement-related changes

b) Experiential changes during practice

feeling overwhelmed with attending to and executing the multiplicity of exercise directions

frequent fluctuation between various aspects

certain irritations disappear, new ones arise

mastering certain aspects, turning to new aspects

increase of holistic “movement feel” and ease of execution

→ **Reflective, object-directed** awareness is in the foreground of Tàijíquán practice [5], i.e. scrutinizing one's experience of the moving body [6]

→ But Tàijíquán also aims at cultivating holistic movement feels (e.g. “letting-go”) that exemplify a background, but **felt pre-reflective, performative dimension** of experience [3]

→ The acquired simplicity and clarity of experience can be perceived as **aesthetically pleasing**

c) Changing organization of movement

- first, partial movements are established
- integration into more connected, synchronized movement
- holistic “body feel” used to initiate movement

→ Standing & moving relies on a learned, dynamic, and autonomous organization of the body

→ **Tàijíquán interferes, works with, and develops a different organization**, possibly through cultivation of skilled attention [1]

4. Conclusion

Tàijíquán can be categorized as “movement-based, embodied, contemplative practice” [7].

“Listening to the body” is at the core of somatic practices [6] like Tàijíquán.

→ Tàijíquán is ideal for investigating the relation of mind and body in somatic practices

→ Results might be also interesting for disciplines that do not usually highlight somaesthetic awareness [8]

Literature

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