

## CHAPTER III: WHAT IS TAIJIQUAN?

"The ability to laugh and dance with the universe!" (281)

"A close-form martial art which uses unusual strength derived from postural transmission of ground-based power." (383)

One of the first items in the survey instrument returned by 216 Taijiquan teachers was the request "Please offer a single sentence definition of Taijiquan." One hundred and ninety-one respondents, 88%, provided one. (Percentages given in this chapter will be of the 191 positive responses to this question unless otherwise noted.) The two definitions above suggest the range of the responses and illustrate the difficulty of fixing upon a single definition of Taijiquan.

A few teachers refused to attempt a definition. One said "Sorry, Taijiquan is too broad and complex to reduce to a single sentence." Another said "It is impossible to define Taijiquan in one sentence." Yet another said "Grand ultimate cannot be defined using words or language." Two said simply "No," while another wrote "Bull---t," which might have been intended as a definition, but was probably a commentary on the researcher's effrontery in suggesting the task. Eighteen respondents, for whatever reason, left the item blank. If definition were easy, the question need not

have been asked. The responses demonstrate the depth and complexity of the art, and the wide range of approaches to it taken by teachers teaching in America.

One respondent, who went on to give a definition, began with "Not applicable: you can find definitions in books" (49). This is true. However, this research was not concerned with what "authorities" say it is, but with what teachers themselves, in their own words, believe Taijiquan to be. This research sought the connotative, the operational, the functional definitions--and there are many--rather than some formal, abstract, denotative sense of what it is supposed to be. In this context, even the few who may have resorted to a book provided useful data, for this also reveals which definitions they believe. Nearly all the definitions were clearly original, whether off-the-cuff or highly crafted. Some parroted standard phrases: for example, 29 respondents, 15%, used some form of the phrase "moving meditation," and 16 respondents called Taijiquan an "internal art." The choice of a stock phrase, however, is again an indication of belief in that phrase, and invests it with meaning.

The phrases teachers either select or invent in order to convey their sense of Taijiquan, with the forms and principles they practice and the methods by which they teach, are windows onto the state of Taijiquan instruction in America--facing toward its future. Estimating the extent to which teachers agree on certain elements of a definition--finding common ground--is the aim of this chapter. This study is also interested in the diversity of beliefs about Taijiquan: in unique and uncommon perspectives; for the future of this art lies as much in the uncommon as the common.

One respondent who declined to offer a definition said "Can you define Taijiquan in a single sentence? Why limit it to a single sentence? Different players emphasize different aspects" (20). This is a very helpful reminder. First, we do not have to limit ourselves to a single sentence, or to a single definition. Taijiquan is defined by the combined contributions of all players and teachers throughout the world. Their aspiration makes it an art, rather than a thing that can be limited by definition. A living art, a human endeavor, always moves *toward* definition but can never truly arrive. Taijiquan is a thing of the individual, a thing of the spirit. It will always be evolving, though for a time we may be tempted to accept this or that definition of it.

In this study, each word of 191 attempts at definition must be considered part of the grand definition that will always elude us. One respondent wrote that he had held on to his survey form for a long time thinking he would revise it, because every time he looked at it he realized that his definition of Taijiquan, and his view of many of the other things he had written, had changed. Finally, he mailed it so as not to be tortured by it any longer. So the definitions received represent only single attempts by individuals whose definitions are constantly evolving: no definition can be considered final.

The key to this analysis was provided by a respondent cited already: "different players emphasize different aspects." One way the data might have been reported would be simply to list all 191 definitions. Such a listing can be found in Appendix C. Yet the task of a researcher working with quote, qualitative material is to distill, to organize, to sift for significance. So this

research will both summarize the elements that emerged repeatedly and, as much as possible, listen to respondents speaking in their own words. In this way, some idea of consensus may form without losing the flavor and color that are the contribution of individual voices. Different players do, in fact, emphasize different aspects of Taijiquan. So while consensus is the primary concern, nuance has been attended to as well, in an attempt to be inclusive rather than exclusive, listening to the rough-hewn and the highly polished, the clichéd as well as the fresh; for single voices in this survey very probably are representatives of sizable proportions of the population of teachers as a whole.

The method of this analysis was to comb through the definitions repeatedly, looking for similar terms and related ideas. As these emerged, their incidence was marked and tallied. These frequency counts revealed more than 50 key terms and common elements, whose juxtaposition then suggested 6 thematic categories. These thematic categories, each composed of interrelated terms and elements, were then characterized by 6 adjectives, listed here by the frequency of the definitions containing their component elements, in descending order:

- Unitive (elements found in 134 definitions, 70%)
- Martial (elements found in 92 definitions, 48%)
- Healthful (elements found in 87 definitions, 45%)
- Mentative (elements found in 54 definitions, 28%)
- Relaxational (elements found in 44 definitions, 23%)
- Energetic (elements found in 34 definitions, 17%)

Delineation of the Martial, Healthful, Relaxational, and Energetic themes was relatively straightforward. They were defined by the presence of a small number of key terms. But the Mentative and Unitive categories required more thought and careful consideration of the conceptual intent of the words chosen by respondents. For that reason, the Mentative and Unitive will be defined after the four prior categories.

## Martial

A little less than half of the definitions used words related to martiality. Forty-nine used the word *martial*, a term dictionaries say is used to describe things having to do with wars or warriors. In common usage, however, a martial art is a generic descriptor for any system of physical discipline, usually those using pre-modern weapons and bare-handed techniques, designed to train individuals in attack and defense. Twenty-seven definitions that did not use the word "martial" used *self-defense* or some form of the word "defense." Sixteen other definitions used terms such as boxing, fighting, *gongfu*, pugilism, warrior or military skills, combat applications, and fist. These terms are connected by their intent to portray the martial aspect of Taijiquan, whether respondents consider that to be both offensive and defensive or purely defensive. Only five definitions were exclusively martial. One of these appears at the beginning of this chapter. The other four are: "Taijiquan teaches how to develop sling-shot power with the body" (24); "a Chinese martial art" (56); "one of the three internal arts (*nei jia*) of *gongfu*" (68); and "boxing based on not matching strength with an opponent" (321). The remaining 87 contained terms related to one or more of the other five categories.

Ninety-nine definitions contained no Martial elements. This seems significant, considering that Taijiquan evolved, as one respondent said, "from the ancient martial traditions of China" (95), and is recognized today in most texts and by the Chinese themselves as a branch of *wushu* (martial arts): "an internal style of *gongfu*" (115). The mainland Chinese government, and Chinese *wushu* associations around the world, are even now in the process of

gaining approval for the inclusion of Taijiquan, with other styles of *wushu*, as a sport and fighting event in the Olympic games, as Judo and Tae Kwon Do have been. The last character in the name of the art, *quan*, means "branch or style of fighting." Yet over half of the respondents in this study did not characterize Taijiquan as Martial in their definitions.

How do respondents view Taijiquan, if they do not portray it as a martial art? The terms with the greatest combined frequency were those related to motion and to the body: Taijiquan is generally recognized as pertaining to physical movement. It is called a movement art, a system of movement, the practice of movement to achieve harmony and stillness, choreographed or controlled movement, slow motion, whole-body movement, and many other similar phrases. Players seem generally to agree that Taijiquan involves physical movement, but though some consider one of the purposes of this movement to be martial training, others apparently do not. So the concept of "physical movement," simply stated, was accepted as a feature of common ground, and the search proceeded further for terms that might help define other belief-based categories. The next three categories emerged fairly quickly once the Martial elements had been catalogued.

## Healthful

Counting references to health, exercise, fitness, and well-being along with single incidents of therapeutic, medical healing, rejuvenation, and calisthenic, a category of 87 definitions emerged, related by the idea that Taijiquan promotes "healthful well-being" (344), is a healthy form of exercise, and that as an exercise system it possesses qualities believed to be beneficial or therapeutic. Despite the fact that 45% of respondents mentioned health as an aspect of Taijiquan, only one definition could be characterized as exclusively Healthful: "The art of poise and rejuvenation" (105). Otherwise, the elements that fall within the Healthful category are distributed among definitions fitting into one or more categories.

One respondent stated that Taijiquan "is increasing in popularity primarily due to its therapeutic effects" (55). Another said that it is "performed primarily for health benefits" (326). One calls it "Eastern medicine to heal western ills" (371). Many others stated unequivocally that Taijiquan promotes health or produces "many health benefits" (134). As has been noted in Chapter I, few formal studies have attempted to document these effects. Nevertheless, the claim that Taijiquan is beneficial to health is of long standing, and despite the lack of scientific corroboration, there is widespread belief among teachers that the benefits exist and can be experienced by those who take up the practice. Qualitative evidence for this will be presented and discussed in Chapter IV.



## Relaxational

Terms related to relaxation were contained in 44 definitions, 23%. Some saw relaxation as a benefit of practice: "Taijiquan is an ancient Chinese exercise that strengthens and relaxes" (19); "a practice to promote health, relaxation, well-being" (49); "Taijiquan is a relaxation/ concentration exercise" (63); "a slow graceful movement sequence which enhances relaxation skills" (251); "promoting health through relaxation and peace of mind" (331). Among these are respondents who portrayed it as a form of stress management: a way of releasing or relieving physical, emotional, or mental tension. Taijiquan "is a stress reliever" (61); "its constant soft movements promote muscle flexibility, better circulation, rhythmic breathing and concentration which in turn relieve stress and tension" (197); "[it is] an ancient Chinese exercise-art that is designed to reduce stress" (404).

Other respondents regarded relaxation as a necessary quality of the movement, a postural requirement for successful practice: "Taijiquan is a Chinese art which teaches you through relaxation, rooting, and yielding to defend yourself, improve your health, and interact with others" (57); "Taijiquan is a martial art that is based upon complete relaxation a yielding attitude and a substantial connection to the earth" (92); "a Chinese martial art with broad applications to health and well-being based on the principle of relaxation" (295); "a relaxed exercise that helps one mingle with the nature of the whole universe" (337); "Taijiquan is a slow moving meditative martial art in which the practitioner must be relaxed and at the same time mentally alert" (349); "Taijiquan is a martial art that emphasizes relaxation and sensitivity in overcoming aggression" (375).

Within the category of relaxation certain terms were included that seemed conceptually related to the two senses in which relaxation was used. Some respondents used the terms "calm," "peace," "peace of mind," "tranquillity" and "quieting the mind" in much the same way that the term relaxation was used by others. One unique response, both Relaxational and Energetic, was "learning to trust the energy that flows through and around us" (152). Indeed, as we learn to trust we can begin to let go of many of the tensions created by the delusion that we are, or can be, "in control."

So there is a belief among respondents that relaxation is both part of the process as well as a product of practice. Some tempered the term relaxation with the idea that it must be complemented by alertness (a combination implicit in *sung*, the Chinese term for this kind of relaxation): "Taijiquan is a slow moving meditative martial art in which the practitioner must be relaxed and at the same time mentally alert" (349). Another said "a slow, graceful movement sequence which enhances relaxation skills, mental focus, and physical alignment while building leg strength, endurance and stability" (251). Another said Taijiquan is "characterized by both hard aggressive and yielding movements" (205). Another: "a relaxed centering and acute awareness of oneself" (97). So relaxation, as a quality of practice, is paired with a sense of inner alertness or awareness.

No suitable adjective was found to describe the concept of *relaxation* as it is used by Taijiquan teachers. Two of the choices, relaxatory and relaxative, are associated with the use of medicines or drugs as relaxants; that is, with agents which produce a kind of passivity or enervation. A word was sought

which would include the idea that relaxation in Taijiquan is not automatic, but is of an active nature, requiring conscious agency. Reluctantly, in this instance and in the case of “mentative,” a word was coined to serve the descriptive purposes of this study. Relaxational was selected to suggest that relaxation in Taijiquan is both product and process, both end and means: a conscious activity that invigorates rather than enervates.

## Energic

Thirty-four definitions, 17%, refer to energy, or *qi* (*ch'i*). Two used the terms "vitality" or "invigoration." Two definitions which used the term "power" were not included in this category, as the reference was not clear enough to the kind of internal, non-muscular force implied by the Chinese concept of *qi* (although those two respondents may indeed have intended to imply that). Definitions using these terms generally refer to Taijiquan as a method of cultivating or developing internal energy and balancing the flow of this energy, or the energies of yin and yang, in the body. A few definitions referred to discharging energy in martial applications.

The concept of *qi* would probably be the first thing a Chinese player would consider in thinking about Taijiquan's efficacy as a health or martial art. *Qigong*, or work on *qi*, is a distinct art itself, and aspects of this work are present in nearly every Chinese art, from Taijiquan to architecture, from music to brushpainting. The theoretical and practical manifestations of *qi* in the human body are also the foundation of the Chinese *jingluo* theory of medicine. It is significant that this concept was mentioned by relatively few of the respondents to this study in their definitions of Taijiquan. Perhaps this is not surprising, as Americans of Western or European extraction do not have a concept with similar potency in their cultural background. Focus on *qi* forms a strong undercurrent in American Taijiquan instruction, but in the content analysis of definitions it did not emerge as a dominant theme.

## Mentative

Again, as in the case of Relaxational, no term was found that adequately expressed the concept defined by the elements brought together under this category. The category itself, however, seems a legitimate representation of one of the major aspects of the art of Taijiquan as derived from respondent definitions. We are here brought to the border between two languages, and between words and the realities they are attempts to symbolize. Taijiquan is a system of *applied philosophy*. It takes certain central concepts from Chinese philosophy developed over several millennia, such as the concept of the ultimate triumph of the soft over the hard, and attempts to put them into practice. It is, therefore, *philosophic*, and this term was considered for awhile as the heading for this category. In English, unfortunately, the word “philosophic” carries airy, detached overtones, and is devoid of the requisite practical implications.

Another aspect of this concept is that the mind must be actively employed: to lead the *qi*, to exercise the imaginative, imagistic faculty, to heighten sensitivity, and to extend the will. While the organic process of this is properly classified in the Energetic category, the intellectual constructs (such as the five phases of change and the eight trigrams, or *wuji* to *taiji*) employed in Taijiquan to organize movement, have a philosophic origin. The forms and concepts of philosophy are embodied in Taijiquan through *mentation*, defined here as an active instrumentality of the mind. *Mentative* was, therefore, the adjectival form chosen to represent characterizations of Taijiquan as applied philosophy, or philosophy in action. Mmentation in Taijiquan could be further

defined as the application of mental or philosophical constructs to physical action.

The presence in 54 definitions offered by respondents of terms and concepts from the philosophical or cosmological traditions of China led to the delineation of the Mentative category. Eighteen definitions used the terms Dao, Daoist or Daoism. Seven definitions specifically mentioned "philosophy," including references to Daoist philosophy, Chinese philosophy, or philosophical traditions and principles. Twenty-three definitions mention that Taijiquan is based on the concept of the balance of opposites: yin and yang, or other pairs of polar extremes "such as soft and hard, slow and fast, advance and withdraw, offense and defense" (128). Three mention the 13 postures: "Eight gates and 5 steps, the 13 postures--[this is a] traditional Chinese definition" (231). The "eight" refers to the eight energies at the cardinal points and corners of the Taiji diagram: the eight three-line images known as trigrams in the *Yi Jing (Book of Changes)*. "Five" refers to the five phases of change, known as the five elements: water, wood, fire, earth, and metal. Together, these represent the 13 postures referred to in the classic *Theory of Taijiquan*. Two respondents quoted from the classics, and these were classified as Mentative responses. Three others made reference to philosophic concepts that were not specifically Chinese: two made reference to "space/time," and one defined Taijiquan as "The art of passive resistance" (161). This did not seem to warrant characterization as Martial, and seems to resonate more closely with a philosophic approach to the art.

Eleven respondents offered translations of one or both of the Chinese written characters comprising the philosophic concept *taiji*. Only five

respondents chose to offer translations of all three characters that comprise the term "Taijiquan," though this would seem to be a logical way to define it for Westerners. Yet 4 of the 16 mistranslate *ji* (*chi* in Wade-Giles), "ultimate," as if it were *qi* (*ch'i* in Wade-Giles), "energy." One respondent states pedantically that Taijiquan "literally means Great Internal (Breath) Energy boxing (fist)" (300). Perhaps two out of three is not too bad: some scholars, such as Chan (1963) have settled for the rendering "Great Ultimate" when translating *taiji*. But though *quan* is given as "boxing" in some Chinese-English dictionaries, this is more of an analogy than a translation. Boxing is a Western sport, as dissimilar to *wushu* or *quan* as a guitar is to a *pipa*. The character for *quan*, comprised of *juan*, to sort through with the hands, and *shou*, hand, palm, or skill (Weiger, 1965) literally means "fist," but might be most accurately rendered as "barehanded fighting style."

*Tai* (T'ai in Wade Giles romanization) comes from the radical *da* which is the image of a grown person and translates as "great, noble, chief, highly, very." *Tai*, however, is more of a superlative than a comparative. Its meanings are given in Weiger (1965) as "excessive, very, supreme, too (as in too much), grand, enormous." While *da* may be great, *tai* would be greatest. "Supreme" would thus seem to be more accurate than either "great" or "grand." When Chan (1963) translates *tai* as "great," he does so in conjunction with *ji*, "ultimate." *Tai* does not stand alone. The two characters together reinforce the sense of unsurpassability, or utmost degree. The nine respondents who included an English rendering of *tai* seem nearly equally divided in their choice of "grand" (five chose this) or "supreme" (four).

*Ji* is comprised of the radical *mu*, "tree," and the phonetic *ji*, extremity, urgency, crisis. The phonetic pictures a person struggling (to feed the mouth with the hand) between the two extremes of heaven and earth. With the radical *mu* (representing wood, organic life, or nature) added to it, the meaning of *ji* extends from the life of one person to the struggle or interaction of the two polar forces in the cyclic existence of all things. But *taiji* is a composite term, and is not adequately rendered by the isolated literal translations of its two parts. The meanings of *tai* and *ji* offer etymological insight into the term *taiji*, which is something other than the sum of its parts, just as puppy love has little to do with love and even less to do with young dogs. Therefore, while an understanding of the meanings of the individual characters may be interesting and suggestive, we must understand *taiji* to be a single term.

As Chan (1963) says in an appendix entitled "On translating certain Chinese philosophical terms:"

No two translators of Chinese terms will ever agree entirely on their translations. Since each Chinese character has several meanings, different emphases by different translators are inevitable. Some terms are so complicated in their meanings, like yin (dark negative, passive, or female principle, force, or element) and its opposite, yang, that they have to be transliterated. Others call for interpretation rather than a literal translation... While personal choice is in order, there should be adequate reasons behind it (p. 783).

To what does this *taiji*, this "supreme ultimate" refer? At least one respondent implied that this term, as an adjective modifying *quan*, means that Taijiquan is the supreme or highest martial art. This is not the way a native



speaker would interpret the term Taijiquan. Like *bagua*, eight trigrams or images, in the name of the internal martial art of Baguazhang, *taiji* refers to a philosophical concept. More complete understanding of this concept can only be grasped by studying the writings of some of China's great thinkers, such as Chou Tun-I, Shao Yung, Chu Hsi, and Fung Yu-Lan. Even then, as Chu Hsi says, "The truth must be personally realized by each individual" (Chan, 1963, p. 639). Nevertheless, to summarize briefly, *taiji* is an eternal principle that gives substance to Dao. According to Fung, this principle is that of "the total substance and great functioning" (Chan, 1963, p. 759) of all things. The Grand Ultimate, or *taiji*, is the principle, contained in each part of the creation, that also regulates the workings of the whole (p. 638). The concept of *taiji* is the basis for the cosmological system of the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*. Thus, its roots stretch deep into China's past. Chou Tun-i (1017-1073), the founder of Neo-Confucianism, laid great emphasis on the concept of *taiji* and authored *An explanation of the diagram of the great ultimate (Taijitu shou)*. Chou describes *taiji* as that which generates yang through movement and yin through tranquillity. He further asserts "movement and tranquillity alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established" (Chan, 1963, p. 463).

The notion of mutually creative, complementary opposites is the heart of the energetic worldview that informs the Chinese *jingluo* theory of medicine, and is as well the theoretical underpinning of all traditional Chinese arts. The term *taiji*, then, is a very subtle philosophical concept with a long history, integrally connected to the Chinese worldview and all branches of Chinese art and science. That the martial art of Taijiquan has this appellation must be regarded as a challenge by the one who named it to all subsequent players.

Terms categorized as Mentative were:

- yin and yang 23 instances
- Dao, Daoist, Daoism 18 instances
- Supreme or Grand Ultimate 11 instances
- philosophy 7 instances
- 5 elements, 5 steps, 8 gates, 13 postures 3 instances
- the classics 2 instances
- space/time 2 instances
- passive resistance 1 instance

## Unitive

When the five categories above had been distinguished, a large portion of the conceptual content of many definitions was as yet unclassified. In fact, 36 definitions contained none of the elements thus far delineated. The material remaining was "softer" and more difficult to analyze. It seemed esoteric rather than exoteric, pertaining to the inner, subjective experience of Taijiquan rather than to appearances or outcomes. Some of the concepts seemed contemporary or "New Age," reflective of the fascination of many in the West with Eastern mysticism. Respondents spoke of Taijiquan as more than just an invigorating exercise, a system of self-defense, a method of stress release. They spoke of spirituality, a way of life, a way to achieve connection with the universe. Forty-nine respondents used the words *meditation* or *meditative* in their definitions. Sixteen respondents used the term "moving meditation," four gave it as "meditation in movement," three as "meditation in motion," and the rest employed individual variations such as "meditative motion" and "the meditative practice of total awareness in motion."

The terms and concepts that necessitated the creation of this category could be perceived as being somewhat vague, mystical, or overly philosophical. As one respondent said, putting eloquently what others struggled with less success to convey, Taijiquan is "a Chinese art based upon philosophical philosophies" (147). Unlike the Mentative category's concept of applied philosophy, this is philosophy squared: philosophy piled upon philosophy like rank on rank of misty mountain peaks. Yet an overwhelming 70% of all definitions included terms that fell within this category, and 18% of all definitions included terms from no other category. This as compared to

the 48% of all definitions that included Martial terminology, the second most common class of definitional elements (see Table III-1, Frequency of Terms in Definitions by Category).

Table III-1

Frequency of Terms in Definitions by Category

Category	f	% of 191
Respondents giving definition	191	100.0
Unitive terminology used	134	70.2
Unitive only (exclusive of other categories)	36	18.8
Martial terminology used	92	48.2
Martial only	5	2.6
Health terminology used	87	45.5
Health only	1	0.5
Mentative terminology used	54	28.3
Mentative only	6	3.1
Relaxational terminology used	44	23.0
Relaxational only	0	0.0
Energic terminology used	34	17.8
Energic only	1	0.5

Justin Stone, in a preface to Huang (1974) compared Taijiquan to yoga: “[yoga] simply means ‘Union,’ though it is often expanded to ‘seeking Union with the Divine.’ Just as definitely, [Taijiquan], properly practised, will draw one into ‘Union,’ though Union with what will depend on the preconditioning of the individual culture” (p. 10). In his own introduction, Huang (1974) referred to Taijiquan as “the new approach to the development of ‘Unitary Man’” (p. 17). Chung-liang Al Huang (1973) said “the practice of [Taijiquan] tends to eliminate the idea of in/out duality. You are the union of both as you practice” (p. 101). Delza (1961) called her book “Body and Mind in Harmony.” Most books authored for Westerners or by Westerners include this notion of integration, harmony, union; and respondents to this study, by a preponderance of definitional evidence, established this *unitive* aspect as most definitive of the art as taught in America. The term *Unitive*, that which is characterized by or tends to produce union, was therefore selected as the heading for this category.

The *Unitive* category is comprised of the following key terms or elements, drawn from definitions offered by respondents:

- mind or mental control [related to *Mentative*, but with no philosophic element implied], focus, inner awareness, concentration
- body and mind; body, mind, and spirit (harmony of)
- psychological and/or spiritual benefits
- spirit, spirituality
- meditation, meditative, centering
- inner development, self development, internal awareness
- nature, natural movement, natural laws
- way of life, dance of life, art of life and living, Being

- discovering our true Self, harmony with one's self, harmony between self and others, -surroundings, -nature, -world, -universe.

Here are a few examples of these elements in context: "[Taijiquan is] designed to follow natural laws and principles of the universe" (194); "a moving picture story of life and death and all that exists" (236); "[It is] the ability to become one with nature and balance your life" (146); "it is deep and unfathomable like the Dao and contains all that is" (372); "a practice which develops the full potential of a human being" (110); "a system in which to investigate and discipline various aspects of the event of Being, such as body, energy (life force), mind, interaction, etc., in alignment with the Principles that found this Event" (184).

## Synthesis of Definitional Categories

Having characterized the definitions received from respondents by the categories delineated above, the question "What is Taijiquan?" can now be addressed. If Taijiquan is as the respondents to this study have collectively defined it, then the best definition will be comprehensive. Denying Taijiquan its martial character, for instance, is like lopping off its arms and legs. Denying its unitive nature cuts out its heart. Denying its energetic essence cuts out its gut, its sinew. Denying its relaxational requirement removes its face (its most apparent feature) and obstructs its senses. Denying its healthful aspect stops its breath. Denying its mentative quality removes its head.

The comprehensive definitions are the exception, though, rather than the rule. (See Figure III-1, Comprehensiveness of Definitions.) One hundred and forty-two definitions contain elements from more than one category; but none of these contained elements from all six categories. Only five (2%) contained elements from five categories; 23 (12%) contained elements from four; and 51 (26%) contained elements from three categories. The five most comprehensive definitions were as follows:

1. "Taijiquan is a dance, moving meditation, philosophy, stress reliever, exercise, *qigong*, sport and self-defense" (61).

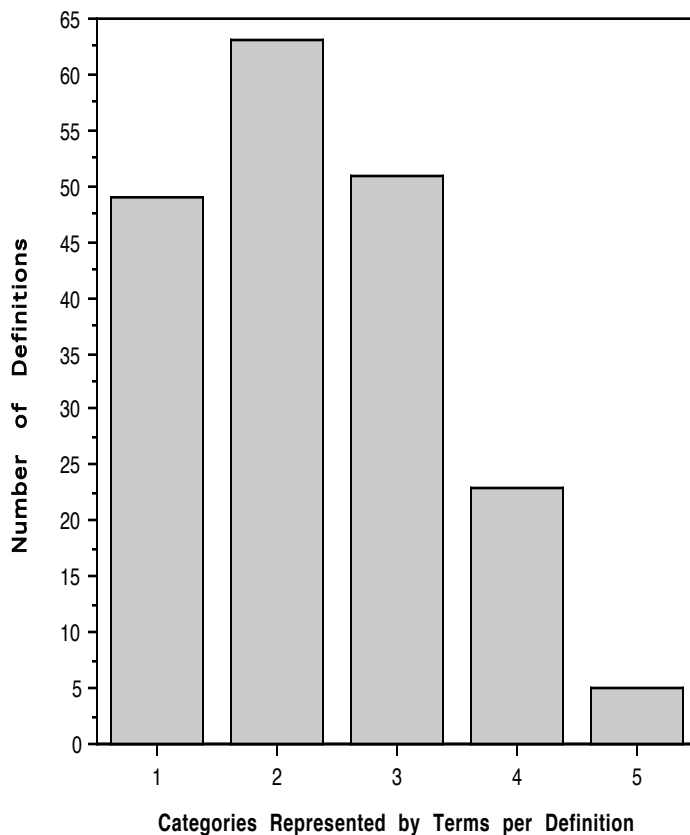
2. "Taijiquan is a Chinese soft style martial art and Daoist health practice which in its solo form combines controlled movement with conscious breathing techniques to provide a relaxed centering and acute awareness of

oneself in relation to one's surroundings enabling the practitioner to locate him/herself in current space/time" (97).

3. "A beautiful style of self-defense, exercise, and meditation done in a smooth flowing series of movements to calm the mind and energize the body" (112).

Figure III-1

Comprehensiveness of Definitions





4. "Taijiquan is a slow motion, moving meditative exercise for stress release, *qi* development, meditation, health, sport and self-defense" (176).

5. "It is an ancient Chinese physical movement art developed originally for non-opposing, non-resisting (soft) self-defense, but having such profound and comprehensive stress reduction and virtually all health benefits in the character particularly of its solo exercise form, due to the liquid, slow, continuous, soft and circular movements stemming from the roots of the feet and directed by the center of gravity in the body's lower abdomen, that its cultivation of the life energy current is as much known for these aspects as for self-defense" (286).

It is easy to see by the last definition how comprehensiveness or inclusiveness can lead to verbosity, while definitions (1) and (3) illustrate how inclusiveness can become "listy." The remaining two have a certain grace and felicity that show that brevity and comprehensiveness may not be mutually exclusive. Perhaps the general lack of comprehensiveness was the result of the constraints imposed by the survey environment, or the item itself; but it is also possible that this clustering of definitions around a few categories represents ways in which teachers in America have narrowed their definitions, and may be indicative of trends in Taijiquan instruction. In essence, the question becomes "What are teachers emphasizing?" and conversely, "What is being left out or neglected?"

One quarter of all definitions received fit exclusively into single definitional categories. Some would say, for example, that the term "martial art," in the Chinese sense of *wushu*, involving as it does the ideal of *gongfu*,

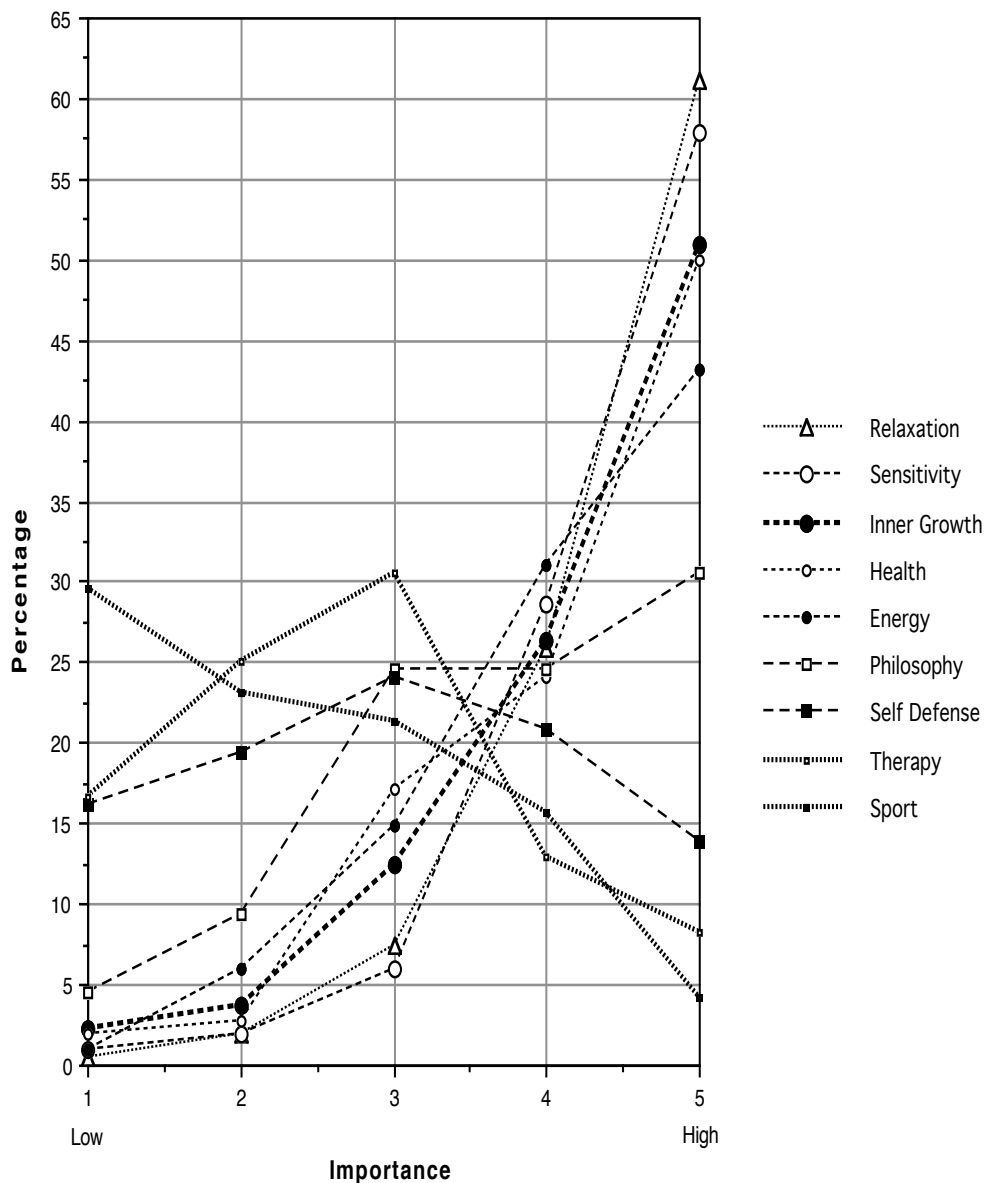
physical conditioning, mental training, energetics, etc., implicitly incorporates all of the categories outlined. But this presumes too much on the knowledge of the listener. Some would say that “meditation in motion” covers all bases; but while this also may be true given the proper perspective, it presumes too much as well. Thirty-six respondents (18%) settled for exclusively Unitive definitions (refer back to Table III-1). These respondents did not mention health, relaxation, self-defense, philosophy, or energy cultivation. Perhaps it is not too surprising that Unitive tops the list of categories whose elements were allowed to stand on their own. When you've said that Taijiquan is "a way of life," you might believe you've said it all. But it was also clear that in many responses this semblance of inclusiveness was actually a way of excluding aspects of the traditional definition of the art, such as its martiality or even its mentative character, with which players are uncomfortable, either through bias or lack of knowledge. Personal emphasis (i.e., how a teacher operationalizes their own “definition” of an art such as Taijiquan--how their actions define it) has everything to do with how that art is transmitted. A teacher who knows an aspect of an art but chooses not to teach it produces students who only know *about* that aspect. They, in turn, produce students who only know *of* it, and in their turn, they produce students who are ignorant that such an aspect ever existed. While some of those definitions categorized exclusively as Unitive were poetic, it was clear that their narrowed focus was intentional.

The term Unitive is itself very positive: 52% of respondents whose definitions were Martial included Unitive elements as well. After all, Unitive as a category includes the body / mind consideration which seems to be a widely-accepted descriptor for Taijiquan. Nevertheless, it seems that as

players talk of mind and spirit they begin to forget about body. Yet there are as many martially-oriented players not listening to “exclusively Unitive” players as there are Unitive players who have not heard the perspective of the martial *artists*. One respondent representing a point of view espoused by many players, was “adamantly against fighting” and feared that the “soul” of Taijiquan was not being taught. Other believe the soul of the art is to be found in interactive application. These groups need not be in opposition: though they gaze in opposite directions, they stand back to back on common ground.

In an attempt to elicit a more operational definition, another item on the survey instrument asked respondents to rate the importance of the potential benefits of Taijiquan as they emphasize them in their classes. The results are depicted in Figure III-2, which shows the relative importance from 1 (low) to 5 (high) assigned by respondents to various potential benefits of Taijiquan as they emphasize them in their instruction. In this context, *relaxation* was rated the most important potential benefit, though only 23% mentioned it in their definitions. The Unitive elements of sensitivity/awareness and inner growth/meditation, coming second and third in importance under relaxation, correlate well with the place of Unitive as the largest definitional category. But the benefit *energy cultivation*, rated in the upper end of the scale, contrasts with the place of Energics as the smallest definitional category; and while Taijiquan is defined by nearly half of all respondents as a martial art, the benefit of self-defense is near the low end of the scale of importance as a benefit. While philosophy/world view, for example, a Mentative benefit, shows an upward turning tendency with the

Figure III-2

Importance Rating Assigned to Benefits

other benefits at the high end of the scale of importance, self defense, along with therapy for specific ailment and performance/sport, exhibits a downward turn: there are fewer who considered it “more important” than those who considered it to be “less important.” This should not necessarily be

interpreted as a negative inference. It may be in keeping with the character of the art that many, even among those who practice it as a martial art, find its other benefits to be of greater personal or instructional importance.

Most who say Taijiquan is martial would agree it is also unitive; but many who say it is unitive would say it need not or should not be regarded as martial (Delza, "Is T'ai-Chi Ch'üan 'Martial'," in *T'ai Chi*, June 1990) Yet Taijiquan's unitive and martial aspects are not necessarily, nor even apparently antagonistic. There is a great deal of overlap and complementarity in the categories established by this study: for Taijiquan to be Mentative, philosophy needs the Unitive characteristic of mind-body training; to be Healthful, Taijiquan requires the application of mind (Mentative) to motion (Unitive mind-body) and the Energic essence; as a martial art, Taijiquan depends on Relaxational and Energic aspects, as well as the active use of the Mentative-Unitive exercise of mental and physical harmony; the Energic would be senseless without the Relaxational aspect, etc.

Taijiquan is a single phenomena with many faces. The illusion is that we must choose among the faces, and in fact, the Taijiquan community is somewhat divided over the unequal attention given to various aspects. It does not hurt for a researcher to make distinctions for the purpose of elucidation. What is divisive is the tendency of some players to draw a line, and to regard everything beyond the line as not worthy of attention. "Oh we don't teach the fighting aspect, that's not what Taijiquan is really about" "We don't talk about breath/energy" "We just do the movement and don't talk about all that philosophic stuff." In the interconnectedness of all views of

Taijiquan is the totality of the art: the potential for exchange among all schools and players.

What is Taijiquan?

**Taijiquan is an energetic, relaxational, mentative, healthful, martial, and unitive art of movement .**

This is a mouthful, and not the kind of catchy phrase one would put on a flier. It is not intended to be a definition, however, but a *formula*, derived from the definitions offered by respondents to this study. The adjectives are *placeholders* : they save room within the formula for phrases which might convey, with greater lucidity and grace, the central concepts of the categories derived. Other categories could certainly be proposed with equal validity; there are certainly other ways to conceive of Taijiquan, and even to organize the data of this study.

Naturally, words alone cannot be said to be a reliable or valid measure of a teacher's view of Taijiquan. The way a teacher presents Taijiquan in class, the relative instructional emphasis given to various aspects of the art, are far more eloquent, more operational, than a single sentence delivered in response to an item on a survey instrument. Actions define beliefs better than words. This analysis then must be viewed as conditional. Other measures, such as the delineation of the indexes in Chapter IV, may add weight to implications drawn from these definitions; but interviews and observations of representative samples within the population of teachers, for example, would add validity to the preliminary view presented here.