

A Transgender Reflection on Tai Chi, the Body and Enlightenment

By Estian Smit

Impulses to a Spiritual Quest

From atheist-agnostic intellectual to intense tai chi student to passionate yoga practitioner, and finally infatuated devotee of a charismatic Hindu guru – how does one account for such a profound self-transformation? Well, I guess for me it was a complex transition, many factors playing their role, among which: A desire for ultimate perfection – what greater perfection, after all, than enlightenment? A deep need to escape all suffering – once and for all. The lure of a new philosophy, of an unfamiliar and enchanted worldview. A sensitive nature drawn to fine ideals, subtle moods and devotional sentiments. An attraction to certain forms of charm and charisma. Finally: a desire to surrender all. Perhaps especially so my head.

Another possible factor, one I don't usually dwell on much, is my [transgender](#) history. Once in a while, though, I do wonder about it – wonder if a lifetime's worth of experiences as gender diverse outsider did not contribute a certain vulnerability to spiritual paths and gurus. If, after all, a large part of one's life had been a struggle to gain others' acceptance

Once in a while I wonder if a lifetime as gender diverse outsider in a gender-normative society did not contribute a certain vulnerability to spiritual paths and gurus.

of your [gender identity](#)¹, an ongoing effort to assert yourself in a society fraught with conventional beliefs about gender, then finding a sense of belonging can be a deep emotional need. Not to mention the wish to permanently transcend (or escape) everything, including body, mind and other people.

So in this article, and a few to follow, I will reflect on different aspects of my journey into spirituality (and out again), starting with one of my early experiences as intense tai chi practitioner, when I learned from a respected master of a rather profound transformation I could obtain from practice, namely, I could use a vow to achieve an instant sex change.

¹ Gender identity is “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms” (*Yogyakarta Principles: Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*, 2007, footnote 2, http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.htm).

My Body, Renunciation and Enlightenment

Once, during my days as tai chi student, I went to a Taiwanese grandmaster, wishing to resolve a big question on my mind. I desired enlightenment, no less, and fast too. In fact, immediately would not be soon enough. I knew this required dissolving one's ego, ceasing to identify with one's body and mind, and letting go of all desire, every single last one of them. I had a few rather strong ones, of course, particularly surrounding the expression and acknowledgement of my own bodily and gender identity.

Behind me, after all, lay a long and painful road towards achieving a body and a social identity I could at last feel reasonably comfortable with. A few years earlier I had started [taking testosterone](#) to transform my 'female' body into a more 'masculine'² one, and it was but a year or so since I managed to obtain mastectomies and a 'masculine' [chest reconstruction](#). I had not had any genital surgery (i.e. a [phalloplasty](#) or [metoidioplasty](#)), but then male genitals had not been something I felt a great need or desire for. True, if I had a magical wand, there were a few remaining aspects of my body I wouldn't have minded changing (e.g. shoulders a bit broader, butt somewhat smaller, voice a little deeper, erase some surgery scars, and so on), but for the most part I was feeling a lot more at home with my own body. Only some unhappiness and frustration remained with respect to acquaintances who were struggling to adapt to my gender transition, continuing to use feminine pronouns for me and failing to address me by my new name.

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my need for a specific bodily
appearance and gender identity.*

However, I assumed that in my quest for enlightenment, I would have to let go of all my physical, emotional and psychological desires, including those related to my bodily appearance and social identity. About this I was apprehensive, as it could very well result in a reversal of much of what I had attained in my gender transition. For instance, if I were to renounce (stop taking) my regular testosterone injections, periods might return – god forbid! And if I were to let go of my wish that others acknowledge my gender identity, they would settle back in their comfort zone of regarding me as a woman. With such reversals I would lose my newly found self-contentment and be plunged right back into a state of emotional turmoil. I wasn't sure I could face that kind of torture, not unless it would translate into imminent enlightenment. A spiritual path that potentially entailed a drawn-out period of suffering that may last years, or even lifetimes – for that I had not the strength.

² I often place terms like 'masculine' and 'feminine' in inverted commas because I think they are relatively arbitrary social and cultural constructions which force us to think in two categories only, severely limiting the expression of human diversity. It would be good if we could altogether leave behind such gender dichotomies in favour of a wide range of individualised human identities. Often however, I reluctantly and provisionally use some of the binary gender terms since they provide people's minds with something familiar to latch onto when introduced to new issues.

Can Tai Chi Change Your Sex (Plus Give You Enlightenment)?

Naturally, the main aim of our tai chi practice was to break through mind – letting go of both subject and object, attachment and detachment, ultimately transcending this world of duality. It was about acceptance, yielding, and not triggering any emotion.

What perplexed me, however, was that we had also been learning of the many worldly benefits of practice – not only in terms of health, fitness and mental equilibrium, but also in bringing about other exceptional abilities, like absorbing another person's force and directing it back at them if they attacked you; breaking through time and space to instantly sense the perfect compromise for ending an argument between many different minds; using meditation to perceive the cause of one's depression and thereby permanently lifting its shadow from your mind; suddenly finding yourself able to fluently speak a new language, and so on.

A double message seemed at work here: Not only could the practice bring us enlightenment, but also meet all our worldly desires for health, happiness and more. I was worried we might be tricking ourselves in not maintaining a single-minded focus on the one and only true goal. But I also couldn't help secretly wishing we could really have it *all* – both worldly and spiritual. Hence my question to the master.

I asked whether it is advisable to learn how to manipulate energy, especially if one still had many strong emotions and desires. I had been experiencing some interesting effects due to intense practice, enough to feel both curious and apprehensive about what it could lead to. I told him obviously I would like to use this energy to bring about all kinds of transformations in myself, including physical, if possible. But then, for the sake of reaching enlightenment, weren't we actually supposed to be avoiding getting caught up in fulfilling never-ending desires?

*For the sake of enlightenment,
weren't we supposed to avoid
getting caught up in the fulfilment
of never-ending desires?*

His answer came in the form of a few cryptic phrases in broken English, interspersed with lengthy pauses and pronounced in a strong Chinese accent. As with previous visits, I had to strain to make out the meaning. I wondered again at the fact that even enlightened masters seemed not exempt from the big barriers language pose in communication. However much I desired it, direct intuitive master-disciple transmission had so far been evading me in his presence. Not infrequently had I been forced to test his kindness and patience with requests to repeat a word, sometimes up to four times, or until he hit on a synonym he could pronounce more clearly. My own heavy Afrikaans accent wasn't making things any easier either.

He was telling me I'm asking an "all-surrounding question" – by which I guess he meant a circular question, or a question that can't be answered because it encompassed everything, or something like that anyway. He also said that if I believed in reincarnation, then it – i.e. whether or not I should be using energy for certain purposes – depended on my activities in previous lives. He added a few more things (none of which completely allayed my concern about getting distracted from enlightenment), but what I remember most clearly was him unexpectedly revealing a method by which I could transform my body.

He already knew about my gender transition. Some months previously, during my first visit to him for an acupuncture treatment, he had enquired about my chest scars and I had filled him in on the details. His response had been kind, perceptive, non-judgemental, affirming.

Now he was telling me, without me specifically having requested it, that it is possible to take a strong vow, and then, once your action completely corresponds to the vow, a woman's body would instantly change to a man's body, or vice versa.

*A person can make a strong vow.
When the vow and action
completely correspond, then that
moment a woman's body changes
to a man's.*

I felt a little in awe, wondering if he was revealing very special esoteric knowledge. In some way he was providing me a much-needed endorsement of my wish for a particular bodily appearance and gender identity. In any event, he was not in the least signalling to me to just accept it was my karma to have been born with a female body and to just live with it, but instead telling me the means to transform myself, to make my own destiny.

It was a tempting prospect. As mentioned before, there were still some aspects of my body I was not particularly in love with, and besides, I didn't like being dependent on repeated testosterone injections, doctors and the medical system. Nor did I feel inclined to go for an invasive op like a hysterectomy. In my spiritual questing I had already become critical of allopathic medicine, and had been reducing my testosterone dosage to a minimum because I feared external substances would slow down the progress of my meditation and tai chi practice. The only reason I had not yet completely ceased was for fear of a loss of 'male' bodily characteristics and a return of some 'female' ones.

But now the option presented itself to magically change my body by means of spiritual practice. It would make my childhood dreams come true. As a small child I had fervently believed in a fairy tale that told of little girls instantaneously changing into little boys (and vice versa) when they happened to pass underneath a rainbow.

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So I literally went chasing rainbows – too bad they always kept their distance. Little did I know then that as an adult, medical technology would bring me much of the transformation the evasive rainbows always denied me. The medical sphere had its limits, though, and so I nonetheless ended up chasing rainbows again – the equally magical, and equally unattainable, rainbows promised by Eastern spiritual traditions.

The master didn't say what kind of a vow one is supposed to take, so I was somewhat at a loss. Was I supposed to make a kind of trade-off with the universe? For instance, was I to imprint on it that my body must be transformed once I, say, become completely compassionate and friendly in word, thought, feeling and deed towards all beings? Both in my conscious mind and throughout the deepest recesses of my subconscious mind?

In subsequent months I gave the idea of a vow intermittent thought, but it did not strongly appeal to me. A vow was something incredibly difficult to fulfil, that much I knew. Intuitively I could feel what an impractical and impossible thing it would be to strive for. Besides, there was something rigid, decontextualised, even violent, about vows. Very unlike the yielding philosophy we had been taught.

There had to be another way, about that I was sure, and I already had an idea what it could be: The right shifts and transformations (both physically and mentally) would happen spontaneously through sustained meditation and tai chi practice. If a vow held the power to

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give one a sex change, well then, the same must apply in even greater measure to the flow of chi through one's being. After all, had it not been impressed on us in nearly every lesson that our internal energy contained tremendous transformative potential – much more powerful than any kind of medicine? And have I not had repeated experiences of relaxing into a state where a tremendous surge of energy wanted to send me spinning like a top or spontaneously threw me into difficult tai chi or yoga poses? I sensed something immense there – it would transform me some way or the other; no need to impose

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extraneous vows. I guessed the master told me what he did merely as a signal that the impossible is possible, not necessarily to get me to take a vow myself.

But the information he imparted started exercising my mind in another way. I was now feeling a little more reassured that it was okay to pursue my worldly wish for bodily transformation as part of a journey towards greater internal balance and finally enlightenment.

But now that the perfect body was theoretically within reach, a new problem arose: I wasn't quite sure exactly what I wanted to look like. Because if something as major as your sex could magically change within the blink of an eye, then surely the possibilities were endless? I oscillated between various ideal appearances (from a slender elf-like look to a swimmer's build), but failed to come up with the perfect picture of me. Did I want to remain short or change to medium height, have short or long hair, and what shade of brown? Did I want a pronounced V-shape, or only a fairly moderate one? Did I want male genitals, or no genitals? At least I knew I wanted hazel eyes and a finer nose, but failed to visualise it – alas, visual imagination had never been a strong point of mine.

Then it struck me that perhaps there were absolutely no limits to the kind of instant transformation – whether of body or personality – one could undergo by practice of tai chi, yoga and meditation. Hey, I could even change my ethnicity and language, and erase and reinvent my personal my personal history! In an instant I could be a beautiful and advanced Himalayan yogi from a great lineage, meditating my way to enlightenment! I could have it all – perfection in both body and spirit.

*In an instant I could be a
beautiful and advanced
Himalayan yogi, meditating my
way to enlightenment!*

Being on a spiritual path had transported me into an enchanted realm of magical possibilities. Ideas like these became the fire behind my dedicated practice and eventually carried me off to India after another guru. But not surprisingly, neither the Himalayas, nor a perfect body, nor instant sainthood ever materialised. Instead, at some point reality burst the magical bubble quite cruelly, but that is a tale for another day.

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