

The Five Animals of Tai Chi, Hsing-I, and Bagua

By Hal Mosher

Animals are an integral part of our lives as they serve as reminders of our deep connection to nature. The animal mind has not been tainted by societal conventions, and more importantly neither has their instincts. In martial arts, we try to cultivate the sense of ourselves we had before our societal conditioning, a self enriched by instinctual knowledge. Cultures and religions around the world have revered animals for hundreds of years for their insight into worlds we cannot see or feel. Shamans of tribal cultures use the power of the animal they invoke to enter these realms. The shamans would often dress like the animal they wish to invoke and imitate animal movements and sounds when they entered the animal world. It was also believed that the warriors of the village would invoke an animal like a tiger before going into battle as a way of finding hidden strength within them. The Shamans would often become appointed as the protectors of the villages with their animal totems giving them guidance. As time passed others in the village became more adept in this harnessing of animal energies which then became synthesized into animal martial arts forms which still exist today, especially in China. This type of behavior has been documented in cultures all over the world by religious historians like Joseph Cambell and Mircea Eliade. For this discussion we will be looking primarily at Chinese folklore and Tibetan Buddhism as a way to analyze how animals made their way from the Buddhist Martial Art of Shaolin into the Taoist arts of Tai Chi, Hsing-I and Bagua.

Throughout Chinese history Taoism invoked animal spirits in its ritual and writings. Taoism is a religion about being closer to nature, and what could be closer to nature than the animals? There are ritual bronze vessels dating back at least 4,000 years with animals inscribed on the surface which historians think were used in Shamanic rituals by Taoist priests. Being the oldest religion in China, Taoism, adopted much of the folklore that still exists today. A clear example of this is the use of animals for astrological purposes, where each year is given an animal name on a twelve-year cycle. The twelve animals of Chinese astrology are the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey,

rooster, dog and pig. According to Derek Walters' book Chinese Astrology, each animal has its opposing animal and corresponding season some are harmonious with one another and others are not. The four seasons are divided also into four animals, or palaces: spring dragon, bird of summer, fall tiger, winter turtle, and bear representing the center. Each day of the cycle of one moon is also attributed to a particular animal as well. This kind of detailed attention given to animals on a daily basis for guidance indicates the importance of animals in every day society in China. The animals in this context would give the villagers clues of when to plant and harvest crops. They would also look to the celestial constellations that were often animals for guidance. Lastly, they would look to the animals around them for cues on when to build buildings, harvest hatcheries, and when to wage wars.

Each animal in the Chinese Astrological system is associated with a particular element depending on which season you were born under. The five elements are metal, water, wood, fire and earth. For example, depending on when you were born, you could be a water dragon or a wood pig. In the Hsing-I system of Chinese boxing each element is in accordance with a particular movement in the same order: splitting, drilling, crushing, pounding and crossing. This system of boxing has animals that correspond with each of these five fists. Splitting is related to eagle, drilling is related bear, crushing is related to chicken, pounding is related to tiger, and crossing related to dragon. These five animals are repeated as organ systems in the body that can have their full or empty aspect in each organ that are called tiger or dragon aspects of the organ. Splitting fist is the element metal (or air) that corresponds to the organ of the lungs. Drilling fist is related to the element water that corresponds to the kidneys. Crushing fist is the element wood that corresponds to the liver. Pounding fist is the element fire that corresponds to the heart. Crossing fist relates to the element earth and is related to the spleen. The five elements are also related to the five colors white, blue, yellow, red and green. These elements and organs go through cycles of generation and degeneration depending on the element being created or destroyed at any given moment. Among advanced practitioners these cycles produce a change in the organs themselves, a "physiological alchemy" as Joseph Needham calls it in his monumental work Science and Civilization in China.

The Buddhist religion, and in particular the tantric tradition has many correlations to the Taoist tradition of the five elements.

In Buddhist philosophy they call these elements five Buddha families: Vairochana, Akshobya, Ratnasambava, Amitabha, and Amagosiddhi. Each Buddha has a color which correspond directly with the colors of the five elements, in the same order the colors for both are : white, blue, yellow, red and green which relate to the elements, air, water, wood, fire and earth. According to Dasguptas' book on Tantric Buddhism the animals that correspond to the elements are dragon, elephant, tiger, bird, and garuda. Each Buddha family also has its own posture, sense organ and aggregate. The aggregates are the basis to be purified by your practice of the postures and the meditations. The aggregates to be purified in the same order are, form, feeling, concepts, compositional factors, and consciousness. Although Chan Buddhism influenced most of China, early Taoist practices mirrored Tantric Buddhism, especially in their understanding of inner alchemy to attain higher states of mind and body. The aggregates are one of the ways that these two systems parallel each other. Although they label them differently at times the end results are the same. Practitioners of different martial arts systems find the same to be true. Although Buddhist and Taoist martial arts look different on the outside they both talk about the same results of practice. This is probably why these two religious traditions worked well together in China for centuries.

These orientations of the elements and animals are all from the Taoist tradition in China that began around 1000 BCE. This production and destruction was related to the yin and yang symbol and was then merged with the philosophy of acupuncture, geomancy and Tai Chi Chuan. Wise men of the time became very sensitive to the change of yin and yang in the universe and started to create breathing exercises to amplify this sensitivity.

In 141 CE Hua To promoted physical training to strengthen the body and ward off illness. He created a popular series of exercises that became know as the

“ five animal frolics” according to Vitality, Energy and Spirit, by Thomas Cleary. He goes on to say that other exercises like “eight pieces of brocade” were added to the five animal frolics that created many systems of exercise. Chang San Feng was then later credited with the creation of Tai Chi, but its creation was also founded upon these two ancient exercises. Chang was more influential in creating Tai Chi's internal and external physiological alchemy. Taoism at this time was becoming strongly

influenced by Buddhism and the exercises created by Bodhidharma.

The Buddhist influence to the martial arts scene really began in the Shaolin temple with advent of the Indian monk Tamos' training techniques, (from the Shaolin history web page):

The Shaolin order dates to about 540 A.D., when an Indian Buddhist priest named Bodhidharma (Tamo in Chinese), traveled to China to see the Emperor. At that time, the Emperor had started local Buddhist monks translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Chinese. The intent was to allow the general populace the ability to practice this religion.

This was a noble project, but when the Emperor believed this to be his path to Nirvana, Tamo disagreed. Tamo's view on Buddhism was that you could not achieve your goal just through good actions performed by others in your name. At this point the Emperor and Tamo parted ways and Tamo traveled to the nearby Buddhist temple to meet with the monks who were translating these Buddhist texts.

The temple had been built years before in the remains of a forest that had been cleared or burned down. At the time of the building of the temple, the emperor's gardeners had also planted new trees. Thus the temple was named "young (or new) forest", (Shaolin in Mandarin, Sil Lum in Cantonese).

When Tamo arrived at the temple, he was refused admittance, probably being thought of as an upstart or foreign meddler by the head abbot (Fang Chang). Rejected by the monks, Tamo went to a nearby cave and meditated until the monks recognized his religious prowess and admitted him. Legend has it that he bored a hole through one side of the cave with his constant gaze; in fact, the accomplishment that earned his recognition is lost to history.

When Tamo joined the monks, he observed that they were not in good physical condition. Most of their routine paralleled that of the Irish monks of the Middle Ages, who spent hours each day hunched over tables where they transcribed handwritten texts. Consequently, the Shaolin monks lacked the physical and mental stamina needed to perform even the most basic of Buddhist meditation practices. Tamo countered this weakness by teaching them moving exercises, designed to both enhance chi flow and build strength. These sets, modified from Indian yogas (mainly hatha, and raja) were based on the movements of the 18 main animals in Indo-Chinese iconography (e.g., tiger, deer, leopard, cobra, snake, dragon, etc.), were the beginnings of Shaolin Kung Fu.

It is hard to say just when the exercises became "martial arts". The Shaolin temple was in a secluded area where bandits would have traveled and wild animals were an occasional problem, so the martial side of the temple probably started out to fulfill self-defense needs. After a while, these movements were codified into a system of self-defense.

As time went on, this Buddhist sect became more and more distinct because of the martial arts being studied. This is not to say that Tamo "invented" martial arts. Martial arts had existed in China for centuries. But within confines of the temple, it was possible to develop and codify these martial arts into the new and different styles that would become distinctly Shaolin. One of the problems faced by many western historians is the supposed contraindication of Buddhist principles of non-violence coupled with Shaolin's legendary martial skills. In fact, the Shaolin practitioner is

never an attacker, nor does he or she dispatch the most devastating defenses in any situation. Rather, the study of kung fu leads to better understanding of violence, and consequently **how to avoid conflict**. Failing that, a Buddhist who refuses to accept an offering of violence (i.e., and attack) merely returns it to the sender. Initially, the kung fu expert may choose to parry an attack, but if an assailant is both skilled and determined to cause harm, a more definitive and concluding solution may be required, from a joint-lock hold to a knockout, to death. The more sophisticated and violent an assault, the more devastating the return of the attack to the attacker. Buddhists are not, therefore, hurting anyone; they merely refuse delivery of intended harm.

The Shaolin [philosophy](#) is one that started from Buddhism and later adopted many Taoist principles to become a new sect. Thus even though a temple may have been Taoist or Buddhist at first, once it became Shaolin, it was a member of a new order, an amalgamation of the prevailing Chinese philosophies of the time.

Shaolin first became famous because the [Tang Dynasty \(618–907\)](#) saw fit to favor the monastery with its patronage as thanks for the role its monks played in the [Battle of Hulao](#). The sudden renown of the Shaolin martial arts attracted pilgrims who came specifically to study its fighting methods. However, the more people that sought training at the temple, the smaller the proportion of them that had the time or the inclination to truly dedicate to them. The Shaolin temple became the home of many martial arts systems as the years rolled by spreading martial arts throughout China and eventually Japan. Andy James' in his book [Spiritual Legacy of the Shaolin Temple](#) records the history of martial arts starting with India and moving eastward into Japan. The two traditions of Buddhism and Taoism were interfacing again during this period creating an amalgam of the breathing techniques of the Taoists with the martial arts of the Shaolin Buddhist monastery. The result was the creation of the three internal arts of China, Hsing-I, Bagua and Tai Chi.

Hsing-I has animals built into its system with twelve animal forms and the five fists as mentioned above. Baguas' animals are primarily snake, dragon, tiger, swallow, monkey, bear, hawk, pheonix, and lion, which are all reminiscent of its Shaolin roots. Tai chi has the animals dragon, tiger, monkey, bear and eagle. My teacher Mr. Liu created a form that synthesized the elements from Shaolin, Hsing-I and Bagua into a Tai Chi form with these five animals and circle walking at the end of the form. The first animal, dragon, is represented by ward- off and roll- back (yang style). The characteristic of dragon is circular and has a wrapping application, like winding rope tightly around a pole. The second animal is Tiger which is related to a tiger jumping out of its lair with claws bared. Tiger is represented by Push. The next animal

is monkey which has the characteristic of climbing or descending trees with quick footwork. Monkey is done with both fair ladies works at shuttles and repulse monkey. Bear is characteristic of round shoulders and hips with large movements of the waist, like a bear moving through the forest. In the form, bear is wave hands like clouds. The last of the five animals is eagle which soars above its prey and then descends. Eagle is represented by brush knee twist step.

By emulating these animals we not only get a glimpse of their power but also an understanding of the vast store of energy they invoke. Animals are very efficient in their use of energy and power which can make these movements seem subtle on the outside while inside they are very active. This union of internal and external movements are characteristic of Chinese martial arts, and in particular the internal martial arts. The internal martial arts are alchemical in nature, they transform our normal awareness and body into something more alive, flexible and strong. However, because this change happens from the inside out this change is often not seen, only felt. A bear for example doesn't look like it can move at all, but if you are chased by a bear you find the horrible truth that they can out run most of us. These Chinese martial arts are shamanistic as well. Practitioners harness the power of the animals they practice in order to heal their five elements and protect themselves. Finding a balance between these elemental forces in our body is done by being more relaxed and aware in your body. Animals use this relaxed energy to keep their bodies from burning out. We often go strong all day long, combined with overriding stress which burns out our bodies and minds and leaves us empty. The internal arts use relaxation as a tool for better and more efficient movement, much in the same way animals do. When the surface muscles relax, the tendons in your body become strong, which support the bones. Strengthening the tendons creates also strong bones and at the same time washes the bone marrow of impurities. These animal movements are therefore called "bone marrow cleansing exercises".

Animal movements are important in our modern society as we move more and more towards mechanization, if for no other reason than to feel closer to nature. It would be even better if these animal movements changed the way we think of ourselves, by making us feel more connected to all life on this earth at a time when so much life is being threatened. So watch your cat and dog

with new insights into their world. This may open up new possibilities in your awareness that you are just one of the life forms on this planet, and not the only one with power and wisdom.