

Essentials of T'ai Chi

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Bow Hill Martial Arts

Softness Overcoming Hardness

T'ai Chi is a wonderfully unique example of soft power. It stands nearly alone in the martial arts world and in western fitness routines in prescribing the use of softness to overcome hardness in achieving one's goals. This instruction to "be softer" is based on two essential beliefs. First, is that using force against force in life's pursuits is unnatural – trees do not fight the wind and nature moves along in harmony with the flow of nature. This goal of softness overcoming hardness is often expressed in the Chinese phrase "Use 2 ounces to overcome 1000 *Katies*" (pounds). In practice, it is usually much easier to go around an obstacle than fight against it.

A second belief is more moral to the human condition in that the philosophers who created T'ai Chi believed that simply using strength against strength begat a painful existence of gross brutality where only the strong survive. These Taoists were naturalists observing the natural world where even the tiniest plant pursued and found life through the tiniest crack in a rock.

Learning to let go and be softer is not an easy thing to do in our conflicted and busy world, but it is necessary to achieve the health and martial goals of T'ai Chi. Wang Dsung-Yueh advises that "**All of this (brute force) is natural born ability. It is not related to the power that has to be learned**" ¹.

In regard to easily seeing the benefits of avoiding using strength against strength in practicing T'ai Chi, you can experience softness being more useful than hardness, by simply using just two fingers to move an opponent's outstretched arm laterally as opposed to pressing directly opposite against the opponent's hand.

A Philosophical Art

The fundamental order underlying the art of T'ai Chi originates from ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy and the Yi Ching, or book of changes, as predicted and demonstrated through the interpretation of the *Ba Kua* (8 trigrams - or translated more literally, 8 symbols). Early Taoist adepts understood that that change could be understood and predicted using the Yi Ching, and the eight primary energies of T'ai Chi (Peng, Lu, Ji, An, Lie, Cai, Zhou and Kao) are directly related to associated trigrams of the Ba Kua. Certainly Buddhist and Confucian beliefs contributed over the millennia of T'ai Chi's existence and development, but Taoist teachings and the Yi Ching remain of deepest influence.

The Yi Ching allows that oneness (*Wu Ji*) breaks into duality, or Yin and Yang, and the dynamic interplay of this duality leads to the "1000 things" which includes everything in existence and all possibilities. It is the activities of opposites moving into harmony that defines T'ai Chi, whether opening or closing, storing or releasing, or coming and going. Pursuing a balance between the opposites of Yin and Yang in a deeply explored connection with how the universe works via change is what the originators believed lead to the greatest understanding of the powerful internal and spiritual aspects of T'ai Chi. When a true master expresses these deeper philosophical principals in martial application, the results can be most

impressive, even somewhat magical. This is why T'ai Chi is often translated as "Grand Ultimate". T'ai Chi master Yang Luchan, sometimes called "Yang the Unbeatable", appears to have had a deep understanding of - and martial access to - the powerful intrinsic energies and underlying philosophies of T'ai Chi. Unfortunately few masters today have retained such arcane and abstruse skills, even in China.

Common Essential Elements Define T'ai Chi in All its Styles

T'ai Chi has numerous styles with the Yang, Wu and Sun styles being most the most common and these styles are all derived somewhat from the Chen family style, which remains in use in central China, although not offered much in the west. Of these, the Yang style - developed via the lineage of Yang Luchan and spread widely in China by his grandson Yang Chen Fu - is by far the most popular style worldwide.

No matter the style, all of T'ai Chi is based on a common set of essential principals and concepts.

So what are the essential requirements of T'ai Chi? Since T'ai Chi is such a profound art, there are myriad things to ponder and sometimes the core concepts of T'ai Chi are difficult to parse and understand. But fortunately, many past masters and certain contemporary masters of T'ai Chi have contemplated and ultimately expressed common T'ai Chi guidelines through works broadly known as the T'ai Chi "Classics" and other documentation. Each poem, song or narrative of these writings expresses the unique insights of the author, but all share, in some form, similar essential concepts. It is these concepts, or rules if you will, that make T'ai Chi T'ai Chi, and different from any other martial art. If such widely accepted concepts are not adhered to, then in the minds of the masters, the art devolves into a deficiency in nature and cannot be considered T'ai Chi.

The instructions, admonishments and concepts in the T'ai Chi Classics and other allied literature are not always immediately obvious. Many of these missives have somewhat different interpretations, especially outside of native Chinese speakers due to cultural differences and translation difficulties. Even among those who fully understand classic Chinese or Mandarin, translations and interpretations differ.

In addition, the song-like or poetic nature of the writings becomes difficult to logically arrange and present cogently in English translation. The songs and poetic verses of the authors are often elegant and rich in cultural imagery not familiar to westerners and were effective training elements in earlier times because many T'ai Chi adherents were illiterate. Since most traditional instruction was passed along orally from master to student, songs and poems became essential information one could memorize through rote practice.

Even in differing and sometimes wonky translation, the various masters' advice comes through powerfully and the Classics are impressive works for all T'ai Chi students to continually read and ponder.

Within such a large body of information, key attributes appear regularly. These core instructions and imagery make a great basis for understanding and ultimately mastering T'ai Chi. Studying and contemplating the masters' concepts, while consistently employing them in your practice, will greatly enhance the outcomes of your T'ai Chi efforts, whether your goal is simply better health, or to be a world-class martial artist.

Of the many traditional instructions, here are eight short, yet essential and important concepts to consider in practicing the art of T'ai Chi. These by no means represent the entire classic litany of T'ai Chi and are shared here simply to encourage curious students on their own path of research, discovery and practice.

Traditionally, the order taught and importance of these concepts varied based on a given master's training, interpretation, experience, beliefs and focus, but all lineage masters touch on these subjects at some point, no matter the order given, or the style being taught.

The choices of information and order offered below does not necessarily represent an order of importance – each point has its value. The reader should thoughtfully allow for their own interpretations and filter the information through their own set of changing experiences.

Note: The commentaries beyond the bold main subject lines are reasonably researched, based on the author's experience, and are, hopefully, thoughtful and helpful.

- 1- **Substantial and insubstantial must be clearly distinguished (*fen qing xu shi*)**². This must be recognized in yourself as well as in your opponent. This concept is easily experienced in the weighting of the legs in shifting the body (obviously, the leg with the most weight is usually "substantial" and the leg with less weight is "insubstantial" or even "empty"). Yet a deeper subtlety of this concept is found everywhere in the body. An insubstantial leg - such as the unweighted front leg in a false or empty stance - becomes substantial when kicking. When Pushing (*An*), the front of the hand is substantial, the back of the hand is insubstantial. In Ward-off (*Peng*) not only is the expanding arm substantial, but the open area the curved arm creates inside is insubstantial.

When connecting with an opponent, dissolving to absorb, or "swallow" their force into your insubstantial not only reduces their physical and mechanical advantage, but allows one to "store" the energy for expressed (*Fa*) return. In order to do all this effectively, your entire body and mind must be relaxed, working as a single unit from feet, to legs, to waist to the fingers. Students, even long term ones, who do not follow these instructions may have movement that appears wooden or sluggishly "double weighted". Push Hands (*tui shou*) practice with a partner dynamically and effectively trains the student to flow from substantial to insubstantial, or vice versa, freely.

- 2- **An intangible and lively energy lifts the crown of the head (*xu ling ding jin*)**³.

"*Xu*" means to be vacuous and receptive.

"*Ling*" means knowing freely, spontaneously and without attachment⁴.

"*Xu*" can also mean "insubstantial", "empty", "void" or "shapeless".

"*Ling*" can also mean "neck", "collar", "to lead" or "to guide".

Yang Chen Fu, the developer of modern Yang-style T'ai Chi, used a different interpretation of "*Ling*" (pronounced with the second tone). Using it to mean "spirit", "wonderful", "mysterious", "clever" or "nimble".

"*Ding*" means the crown of the head.

"*Jin*" is a word most T'ai Chi practitioners should be familiar with which means "Intrinsic Energy".

Xu ling ding jin is obviously one of the deeper and more complex T'ai Chi concepts with a number of interpretations. Yet, Douglas Wile translates this to simply mean "open the energy at

the crown of the head”, which is consistent with moving the Ch’i upward to the *Ba Hui* acupuncture point at the top of the head (and beyond as utilized in Iron Shirt Chi Kung and other internal energy practices).

More completely, this sensitive, soft and light leading of the energy to the top of the head raises the “*spirit of vitality*” while complimenting sinking of the Ch’i to the lower *Tan Dian* (elixir field) and on down to a connection with the earth at the *Yong Quan* (bubbling well) acupuncture point in the soles of the feet, softly stretching and elongating the spine, much like being suspended from the crown of the head “*like a stone chime in Wudang mountain*”, or a series of coins hanging on string, all while connecting heaven to earth through the body.

The key is to not bring added tension into the neck region, which can cause stiffness and headaches if pushed. This leads to.....

3- **Use mind not muscles (*yong yi, bu yong li*).**

“*Yi*” means the mind, or mind intent.

“*Li*” is physical (mechanical) strength as produced by the muscles, bones and tendons. “*Li*” is consider a gross element of body movement and a least important attribute in T’ai Chi.

Your mind must actively lead your movements at all times and your body must be relaxed and as free of tension as possible to follow. This allows the mind to direct and lead the Ch’i, as “*where the mind goes, Ch’i follows*”.

Minimizing muscle use in movement also allows one to be more sensitive to touch and to respond to an opponent’s energy, as well as to allow for ones “quick twitch” muscles to fire in technique application without isometric interference, or co-contraction of opposing muscles. This empowers the immediate and unrestricted release of expressed intrinsic or internally stored energy (*Fa Jin*) in application.

4- **Sink the shoulders, drop the elbows (*chen jian, chui zhou*)**⁵. Sinking the shoulders (*chen jian*) helps lower the Ch’i into the body and greatly reduces tension. Westerners in particular carry an enormous amount of tension in their shoulders and modern activities like using a computer and driving exacerbate this tension. By consciously letting the shoulders drop easily (by releasing tension to gravity - especially in the shoulder notch near the neck- not by forcing them down) one can connect better with the lower body and prevent the Ch’i from rising up or “floating” which breaks ones connection of the feet with the earth (root).

Sinking the shoulders enables the elbows (*zhou*) to droop lower and be more relaxed while protecting the rib area better. Dropping the elbows also allows for the forearm to move forward and raise slightly which puts the wrists in a better position to be “seated” (*zue wan shen zhi*) allowing energy to reach the relaxed fingers more easily.

5- **Relax the waist and relax the coccyx (*song yao, song kua*).** The *yao* refers to the small of back area (near the lumbar- thoracic spine intersection). The *kua* is the lower part of the hip bone complex, near the coccyx and importantly where the hips join the upper femur (*kua gen*). Whether you’re a T’ai Chi practitioner, or a skier, keeping these areas loose, open and relaxed helps connect the lower body to the upper body and facilitate waist axis movement (sometimes called the T’ai Chi Axis). Initiating movement from the *kua gen* is prevalent in many of the posture transitions⁶ (Brush Knee With a Twist Step is an example).

Song (pronounced Soong or sometimes Shoong) is often simply translated as “relax”, but the character for *song* (*fang song*) 放松 implies a deeper meaning; you just don’t relax and let it all go, but actively open, elongate, and enliven the areas as well as relax body tension to create

a dynamic relaxation process. One can think of *song* as a form of active, or expansive relaxation. When considering relaxing the entire body the term *fang song* is commonly used. An example of *fang song* when performing the Yang long form is after the posture Cross Hands, which appears as a transition between “sections” of the form, settling and preparing one for the next section. The practice of *song* should be considered constantly, no matter where physical or mental tension exists; in relationships, emotionally, mentally, or anywhere physically in the body.

6- **Draw in the tail gateway (*wei lu shou zhu*).**

The *wei lu* is the tailbone.

By drawing the tailbone down and in (forward) slightly, without contracting the buttocks, you tilt the hips and counter-act the excessive curvature pressure of gravity on the lower spine which helps create a more aligned and stable structure and a straighter path for Ch’i to flow upward from the perineum (the diaphragmatic element that surrounds the anus). This is important to allow the Ch’i to “adhere to the spine” from where it can, through subtle sequential activation of the back muscles, move to the wrists and fingers for expression of energy.

In certain Chi Kung practices, an accompanying backward thrust of the T-11 thoracic vertebrae is often done (along with a similar thrust of the C-7 cervical vertebrae). You can experience this alignment initially by placing your back and neck as flat as comfortable against a flat wall and then sinking downward slightly from the knees, but do not use a wall as a crutch against creating a properly aligned free-standing stance.

An accompanying postural alignment is to subtly “hollow the chest and raise the back” (*han xiong ba bei*) which assists in keeping the back rounded out and helps in sinking the shoulders to eliminate pinching the shoulder blades together. Do not over emphasize raising the back, or hunch.

7- **The internal and external should be mutually joined together with natural breathing (*Nei wai xiang he. Hu xizi ran*)** ⁷. Simply put, what goes on inside of your mind and body usually will be reflected on the external body (and vice versa) and the mind and body (and spirit) should be completely integrated on all levels.

Breathing should be relaxed, deep into the belly (but not too deep) and naturally follow the flow of your movements.

Your thoughts must be focused wholly on leading the body’s movements without distraction.

This begins a unification of mind and body leading to a meditative state that allows one to discover “stillness” in the motion of doing the form, or in two person work like *tui shou*.

You can readily feel this unification in group practice by doing the same movements together. Ideally, all T’ai Chi movements should “flow like the Yellow River”, moving seamlessly, effortlessly and softly powerfully like water.

8- **Express the spirit in the eyes to concentrate the gaze (*yan shen zhu shi*)** ⁸. The eyes are “*the sprouts of the heart*” and a very important expression of one’s internal spirit. Concentrate the gaze means to focus the eyes and move the head and waist in perfect unison as if the eyes were in the navel. This helps with total body movement as a single unit and keeps the eyes actively engaged.

Connected to this is the vision and gaze of the eyes during a specific technique, which varies by posture. In general, the vision, in conjunction with the body’s movement, follows the active movement of the hands, and looks evenly forward otherwise. The active nature of the vision

may include a specific target, but usually also maintains a gaze that is encompassing of the total picture.

A T'ai Chi practitioners vision is decidedly active, but not random, in keeping with developing an ongoing process of looking both left and right (*zou gu you pan*) to maintain a complete and dynamic, multi-dimensional visual picture of the moment at hand.

The Classics and the writings of T'ai Chi masters over time have - along with recent translations into English and other languages – given student's unprecedented information and access to an art that was traditionally held very close and not shared outside of a family. Nonetheless, a competent and knowledgeable instructor is still required to learn the subtle details that can only be learned through direct engagement of someone who has learned the art directly from a lineage master.

References:

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