

# T'ai Chi

## Foundations and Internal Energies

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### Introduction

The originations of the internal art T'ai Chi go back thousands of years and are rooted in ancient Taoist beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices have ever since permeated Chinese culture over millennia, blending with and influencing everything from society, politics and culture, to war, peace and spiritual endeavor.

Taoism is often said to originate with a book, the Tao Te Jing, (literally translated as the *Way Tao*, Power *Te*, Classic - or referential tome - *Jing*), written by Lao Tzu (Laozi) as far back as 2000 BC. The Laozi name is an honorific and some believe he is a mythical creation, but most scholars agree Laozi was a real person who was a well-educated contemporary of Confucius and an archivist in the imperial court in the Chu dynasty during the "Warring States" period (535–286 BC). The oldest text of the Tao Te Jing so far recovered was part of the Guodian Chu Slips. It was written on bamboo slips, and dates to the late 4th century BC.

Many Taoists, especially those few remaining true lineage disciples directly taught in an oral tradition by lineage masters, believe the roots of Taoism go back even further.

The Tao Te Jing, along with the *I Ching* or "Book of Changes" written initially in the Western Zhou period (1000–750 BC), stand as pillars of Taoist thought and guidance. The Tao Te Jing is said to be one of the most translated books after the bible and an important guide book for governance, political management and human engagement. On one level, designed to be helpful to common citizens and leaders, this is true. But Taoists trained in the oral tradition understand the Tao Te Jing to be a deeper guide towards human development and enlightenment, ultimately assisting in connecting humans with a Universal Continuum – the Tao.

- 1) Ref. *Relaxing Into Your Being: The Taoist Meditation Tradition of Lao Tse*, Volume 1. Bruce Kumar Frantzis, 2001 Energy Arts Publications. 2) See the authors work "Understanding Yang style Postures and Names".

Like most long-surviving spiritual practices, Taoism has many branches and traditions that vary widely in their approaches. But unlike most other structured religions or belief systems, Taoism generally does not build itself upon an external personality system, such as does Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism. To ancient Taoists there were no specific “Gods” or deities to worship, making the path of Taoism somewhat agnostic to, and in many ways, complimentary with other belief systems. As the Taoists might say “All roads lead to the Tao”. As long as you are on the right path. Following “The Mind of the Tao”, and not the “Mind of Man”.

Taoists believe, as the first line of the Tao Te Jing says (in one translation) “*The Tao called the Tao is not the constant (true) Tao*”. It is, in Taoist opinion, simply beyond naming. Like a transform in modern physics that tries to look at say energy and time at the same point, there is a “smearing” of the true aspects of each of those domains – you can’t see one clearly while looking at both.

Many spiritual practices try to cross over, or transcend, our worldly domain so we can clearly and directly experience an un-namable universal truth. The ancient Taoists understood this challenge, leading to highly structured practices and processes than can get one from here to there. T’ai Chi, Chi Gung, breathing exercises and Taoist meditation are just a few pieces of many in the process.

A primary goal of Taoist practices is to unify our energies and release and resolve bound blockages, all to progressively transcend our normal patterns and limitations to reach what Taoists call the seventh body, the “*Energy of Individuality*” and ultimately an eighth body, the “*Body of the Tao*”. Taoists believe, that with increasing commitment, specific practices, and through resolving our karma, this could happen tomorrow, or in another ten thousand years, across many incorporations though out time, space and dimensions, on earth in human form, or in faraway galaxies in corporeal or non-corporeal form. A Taoist joke asks, “Are you on the 10,000 year program, or on the 1,000 year program?”

It’s not an easy lift and most people are not ready to go through the often very difficult deeper levels of meditation, dissolving and resolving required to reach the *Energy of Individuality* or further to the *Body of the Tao*, or what the Taoists

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call *Wuji* , sometimes also called the “Great Undifferentiated”. The original source of everything.

Still, it is a defined and doable path that can provide benefits to humans at many points, including at the initial stages. A journey of 1000 miles starts with a single step and in even the most fundamental Taoist practices, like Ta’I Chi, can provide many helpful outcomes to human wellbeing along the journey.

### **The Eight Energy Bodies**

Taoists and other spiritual practices, even modern science, believe that *everything* that exists is energy, just operating at different vibratory levels, wavelengths, pulses or frequencies. So does modern quantum physics. At some point in time, especially regarding the physics theory of a “Unified Field”, spirituality and physics may finally truly meet.

Ancient Taoists lacked our modern understanding of physics, but they did carefully observe the way things worked. Especially how the human form operates in a heavy gravitational field provided by the earth. Original Taoists, in the tradition of Laozi and others, believed that being on earth gives humans a unique opportunity to explore and work with universal energy that non-corporeal entities do not.

A core tenant of Laozi’s Taoism is to understand and systematically work through our energy systems towards the Tao by learning to *feel* what is going on inside our bodies and use this awareness to dissolve blocked energies on increasingly deeper levels. This process is the basis of the “water” tradition meditation methodology of Laozi, passed down directly through hundreds, or perhaps thousands of generations, via the oral teaching of master to disciple and is rarely known or practiced in the west.

This water tradition is distinctly different from “fire” traditions, seen in Neo-Taoism, Yoga and Buddhism, where a highly focused active mind is used to powerfully create something or build an awareness in the body, particularly in the Ch’i reservoirs (*Tan Tien’s*) and main energy channels (meridians) of the body. Most forms of Chi Gung, Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine recognize and use these energetic elements, as does Laozi’s methods.

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But the water method is about feeling something, rather than visualizations created in the mind. In this regard, Laozi's system is an excellent counter to our over-stimulated, highly technological, virtual and always on society.

The water method of Laozi recognizes eight distinct energy bodies in humans:

- 1) The physical body (our mechanical physical structure)
- 2) The energetic body (internal Ch'i and the etheric body or aura)
- 3) The emotional body (mind and body feelings)
- 4) The intellectual body (intellect, the ability to think)
- 5) The psychic body (intuition, past lives, etc.)
- 6) The causal body (karma in this life and others)
- 7) The body of individual energy (your true self)
- 8) The body of the Tao (everything without form)

These eight energetic states are distinct, yet connected to each other, as above and so below, and in total to each other. A particular energy body can influence the one above it and the one beneath it, but influence diminishes the farther away you work from a specific body. Working with these energies is a main part of the Taoist 12 part *Nei Gong* (internal work) system. (note 1)

It is beyond this writing to explain this system in detail, but suffice it to say Ta'i Chi is a part of the 12 part *Nei Gong* system. As such, one can use Ta'i Chi to begin to work with and resolve the first three or four energy bodies, becoming more and more aware of feeling the internal energy aspects of the postures and flow of the form. With more willing students, the allied practices of standing (*Zhan Zhuang*), push hands (*Tui Shou*), and Taoist meditation help one to progress.

The outcome of such practices include a common goal that many people desire: to feel better. Most students of Ta'i Chi begin to feel better physically, energetically and even emotionally after spending some extended time performing the Ta'i Chi forms. This is, in part, why Ta'i Chi is considered a "moving meditation".

Going beyond the first three or four energy bodies requires a much greater commitment to time and practice. And a qualified teacher.

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Not all people can, or will, choose to go through the deeper hard work required to dissolve the higher energetic bodies – it's a critical juncture and a personal choice - but feeling better is a good thing, and as it has been said, "Give people what they want and they just may be able to discover what they need."

### **The Energies of Tai Ch'i – Discovering and Resolving Yin and Yang**

In Taoist cosmology, the Tao, or *Wuji*, is the Universal Continuum of formless emptiness from which everything under heaven and earth, in all times, dimensions and realms, comes into being. As stated in the Tao Te Jing, as the origination of everything, *Wuji* is nameless.

Yet, all things come from *Wuji* and as the mother of all things, becomes nameable. This mother is called *Taiji*, often translated as the "grand ultimate".

Recognizing Yin and Yang, is the first step, followed by managing and resolving what every form Yin and Yang may take, in all manifestations.

One main practice of Tai Ch'i is to resolve Yin and Yang, opposites if you will, in varying degrees, back to *Taiji*; to recognize and resolve such opposing energies into a balanced, or neutral whole. Or, to continue along the way and use the Yin or Yang energies your opponent presents in an opportunistic way to reach a conclusion as in a martial arts application.

Taoists, perhaps ancient China's scientists, were very interested in how things manifest.

They believe that *Wuji* begets *Taiji*.

Which in turn begets Yin and Yang (*Liangyi* or "two poles").

Which differentiate into *Sixiang* (practically read as "Four Corners" – literally "Four Images")

Which differentiate into the *Baugua* or "Eight Trigrams"

And eventually become *Wanwu*, the "ten thousand things" – all recognizable manifestations.

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Taoists believe that *all* manifestations are impermanent, coming and then going, sometimes very quickly, other times less so. But all things change. Learning to recognize and accept change is fundamental to managing the 10,000 things, in life and throughout time and space.

The *I Ching* has been used for millennia to predict such changes, through identifying combinations of symbols that depict Yin and Yang combinations (trigrams and hexagrams).

Derived from the trigrams of the *I Ching*, Tai Ch'i, through exercises such as the long form, help in developing recognition of constant change at a deeper level *in all things*, by continually resolving the intrinsic Yin/Yang qualities of external and internal energies. This is one of the most important aspects engineered into the work.

Once change is recognized as simply impermanent comings and goings of Yin and Yang, one can begin to harmonize and resolve many situations and start to relax into the idea of *Wusouwei* "it doesn't matter" and *Wu Wei* "doing without doing". Or, to perhaps not sweat the small stuff, or avoid adding to problems by not piling on more polarization. Or, by simply avoiding intervening in someone else's karma, which is a big "no-no" in Taoism.

This doesn't mean that nothing matters. Life does matter and Taoists believe deeply in respecting all life. It's simply the choices one makes whether to say *Wusouwei* and then let it go, or to engage and say *Yousouwei* "it does matter". Taoists make these choices very carefully, and take the resulting karma seriously, but lean heavily towards *Wusouwei* - it doesn't matter.

### **Energies (*jin*) in Ta'i Chi Postures**

In performing the forms of all Ta'i Chi styles, each posture has Yin and Yang elements. Some postures are intrinsically Yin, others fully Yang. Combinations of Yin and Yang are also present, containing either some Yin or some Yang, either Yin and Yang, or neither Yin and Yang. **In each and every posture, one is always striving to resolve a Yin/Yang combination of some sort back to *Taiji*.**

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In the art of Ta'i Chi one gradually learns to recognize and feel these attributes internally, developed through concentration, relaxation (*song*), slowness and softness when moving, minimizing the use of muscle strength (*li*) and using the mind (*yi*) to create the movements.

Each time around the circle of practice adds new awareness, stability and progress towards the Tao. And to an even higher level with push hands and free fighting, where it's clear that there are dynamic energies in play from a partner that you can work with and manage, rather than just from yourself.

Let's look at the four basic energies (*jin*) present in *Peng*, *Lu*, *Ji* and *An*. In the Yang, Wu and other Ta'i Chi styles, these energies form the basis of *Shang Bu Peng Lu Ji An* - the "Grasp Birds Tail" posture. These energies also appear in many other postures. (2)

*Peng*, is an outward expanding Yang energy. The associated trigram from the *I Ching* is 3 *solid* lines, stacked upon each other.



*Lu* is an absorbing or storing Yin energy. The associated trigram from the *I Ching* is 3 *broken* lines, stacked upon each other.



*Peng* and *Lu* energies are distinctly polar opposites. They flow into and follow each other naturally, as do day and night.

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*Ji* is a pressing Yin energy with some Yang energy. The associated trigram is 2 *broken* lines, above and below a *solid* line.



*An* is a downward pushing Yang energy with some Yin energy. The associated trigram is 2 *solid* lines, above and below a *broken* line.



*Ji* energy is heavenly energy hidden within earthly softness. *An* energy is earth energy wrapped in heavenly strength.

**Commencement (*Qishi*) also contains the four energies in sequence:**

- 1) When you raise your hands, the energy is *Peng*.
- 2) When your hands reach your chest height, the fingers express outward slightly with *Ji* energy.
- 3) When you draw the hands back, the energy is *Lu*.
- 4) When you push the hands downward it is *An* energy.

The four energies teach and utilize the pure polarization of Yin and Yang opposites and also the subtle blending of some of each opposite.

Many times a posture will include both Yin and Yang elements simultaneously in the movements. For example, the initial ward off (*Peng*) movement after commencement includes a simultaneous *An* energy with the lower hand. Cloud Hands (*Yun Sao*) also reveals this complimentary double action (*Lin sil di dar*).

It is from recognizing these primary energies in practice that one can begin to *feel*, differentiate, understand and ultimately, blend and resolve the gross and more subtle attributes of *Wanwu*, the 10,000 things - *everything* manifest - that is born from *Taiji* and ultimately returns to *Taiji*.

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As you begin to discover and become more aware of, *and feel*, the four primary energies while resolving Yin/Yang pairings of *Liangyi* - the two primary poles in play - your internal awareness and strength in the Tao, and in life, will grow.

These steps will take you a long way on your path.

“Seek and ye shall find”. Or, as a modern Taoist in Laozi’s tradition might say “Feel and you shall reveal”.

### **About the author**

Steve Olszewski has over 45 years of experience, training and teaching in multiple martial arts styles and systems. He has trained to the senior instructor level in Wing Chun Do under *Sijo*, James W. Demille, (one of Bruce Lee’s original students) and earned a black belt in Kenpo Karate under *Sifu* Rob Robertson (disciple of Ed Parker). He has studied under *Sigung* Bob Anderson (Kajukenbo / Jujitsu) and with Master David-Dorian Ross (Yang style T’ai Chi / Taiji Fit), as well as trained with such luminaries as Bill “Super Foot” Wallace, Sgt. John La Tourette, and Benny “The Jet” Urquidez. Steve is a certified Taiji Fit™ instructor and currently studies Tung family style T’ai Chi Ch’uan under Linda Henderson. He lives in northwestern Washington State.

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