

Newsletter October 2008

Core Principles of the Form

Philosophy embodied

Taijiquan as an art is the physical embodiment of the taiji, the constant interaction of yin and yang. As a universal philosophy the taiji describes everything that exists in terms of being either predominantly yin or yang but also as containing the opposite. This philosophy also describes how when Yang reaches its peak it gives birth to Yin and vice-versa. The famous taiji diagram shows that this is a constant process and it is this constant process that the taijiquan form translates into physical movement.

Research: Find out all you can about Daoist philosophy. Read the Daodejing (Tao Te Ching) as well as related works like the Sunzibingfa (Sun Tzu's Art of War). Read the taijiquan classics.

Finding the master within

If we understand that the taiji describes the way things are then we must also see that mastery of taijiquan is becoming what we already are. It is not a process of chasing after something that is out there, of perfecting movements or training skills, rather it is the process of discovering what we already truly are. According to the teachings of Daoist philosophy, at birth we are all in the totally natural state but our responses to the environment around us and the training we receive takes us away from this state. Taijiquan may then be seen as the process of returning to this state.

Task: Try to imagine how you think you will feel, think act and behave when you have achieved mastery of taijiquan. Now try to feel this attitude when you are practicing and even at other times.

Taijiquan is a verb not a noun

By now you will have noted that I keep referring to the process, and it is vitally important that you understand what this means in terms of the art. As a process taijiquan, like so many aspects of Asian thought is centred on the verb not the noun. That means that rather than being about relaxation, taiji is about "relaxationing"; rather than being about stability, the art is about "stabilitying"; rather than being about graceful, taijiquan is about "gracefuling" and so on. I have chosen to invent new words to emphasise the way that taijiquan is all about taking any noun that can describe the art and making it into a verb.

Task: Each time you practice the form take one state/quality/skill that you associate with the art and practice "...ing" it.

Physical requirements:

- Hold the head as if suspended from above
- Sink the chest and raise the back
- Relax the waist
- Sink the shoulders and elbows

Mental and Physical Requirements:

- Distinguishing solid and empty
- Coordinate your upper and lower body
- Unify your internal and external

- Continuity (no stopping)

Mental Requirements:

- Use the intent and not brute force
- Seek serenity in activity

The above are Yang Cheng Fu's Ten Important points and they are explored in more detail below:

1. Hold The Head Straight With Ease

The head should be erect in order for the spirit to rise. If force is used, the back of the neck will be stiff, and the circulation of blood and chi will be impeded. There should be a natural, light and sensitive feeling. If not, the spirit will be unable to rise up.

2. Sink the Chest and Raise the Back

There should be a slight drawing in of the chest which allows the chi to sink to the "Dan Tian". Avoid protruding the chest as this will cause the chi to rise which will lead to top heaviness, and the soles of the feet to float.

Raising the back means that the chi adheres to the back. If you can sink your chest, your back will naturally rise. If you can raise your back, your power will come from your spine enabling you to overcome any opponent.

3. Relax the Waist

The waist is the commander of the body. If the waist is relaxed and loosened, the foundation, that is, your legs will be stable, enabling you to issue power. Changes in solid and empty derive from the moving of the waist. It is said that "the waist is the well spring of your vital energy". If you lack power in your movements, look for the weakness in your waist and legs.

4. Distinguishing Solid and Empty

Distinguishing solid and empty is a fundamental principle of Tai Chi. If your body centre rests in your right leg, then your right is solid, and your left leg is empty. If your body centre rests in your left leg, then your left leg is solid, and your right leg is empty. When you can clearly make this distinction, your movements will be light, agile, and effortless. If not, your steps will be heavy and clumsy, and you are easily unbalanced due to the instability of your stance.

5. Sink the Shoulders and Elbows

The shoulders should relax and hang downwards. If the shoulders are raised, then the chi rises, and the whole body cannot summon up its power.

The elbows must relax and point downwards. If the elbows are raised, the shoulders will become tense, inhibiting your ability to discharge your opponent to any great distance. Raising the elbows or shoulders is similar to breaking the jin which occurs in the external martial art systems.

6. Use the Mind and not Brute Force

According to the Tai Chi Classics, you use the mind and not brute force. In practice, your whole body is relaxed; not even using an ounce of brute force. If you employ brute force, you restrict the flow of energy through your sinews, bones, and blood vessels. This will inhibit your freedom of movement, preventing you from achieving agility, sensitivity, aliveness, circularity, and naturalness.

"How can you have power without using brute force?" By making us of the meridians in the body. (Meridians are a network of pathways which transport chi throughout the body. They connect the superficial, interior, upper and lower portions of the human body, making the body an organic whole). The meridians are similar to the rivers and streams of the earth. If the rivers are open, then the water flows freely. If the meridians are open, then the chi flows. If the meridians are blocked as a result of using

stiff force, then the circulation of chi and blood become sluggish. Hence, your movements will not be nimble, and even if a hair is pulled, your whole body will be in a state of disorder.

When you are able to use your mind and not brute force, then wherever your mind goes, your chi follows. After a long period of practice and chi circulating freely everyday, you develop jin (an internal power which is different from hard force). This is what the Tai Chi Classics means by "from true softness comes true hardness". The arms of one who has Tai Chi kung fu will feel extremely heavy; like steel wrapped in cotton. People who practise external martial art systems look strong when they exert hard force. However, when they are not bringing their hard force into use, they are light and floating. You can see that this merely a superficial kind of strength. Instead of using the mind, they use brute force, which makes them easy to manipulate. Hence not worthy of praise.

7. Coordinate your Upper and Lower Body

According to the Tai Chi Classics, "the root is in the feet; issued through the legs; controlled by the waist; and expressed through the fingers. From the feet through the legs to the waist forms one harmonious chi." When the hands, waist, and feet move, your gaze needs to follow in unison. This is what is meant by harmony of the upper and lower body. If one part of the body is not in concordance with the rest, it will result in chaos.

8. Unify your Internal and External

Tai Chi trains the spirit. It is said that "the spirit is the leader and the body follows its command". If you can lift your spirit, then your movements will naturally be agile and alive. Postures are nothing more than solid and empty, opening and closing. Opening does not just involve the hands and feet, but they must work in concordance with the opening of the heart/mind. Closing does not just concern the hands and feet, but they should coordinate with the closing of the heart/mind as well. When the internal and external are unified as one harmonious chi, then there are no gaps anywhere.

9. Continuity - No Stopping

The external martial art systems employ brute force which is stiff and unnatural. This force stops and starts; moves in a jerky fashion. When the old force is finished before the new one has begun, this is the time when one is most vulnerable to attacks. In Tai Chi, you use the mind and not brute force. From the beginning to the end, the movements are continuous without stopping; like an endless circle. This is what the Classics means by "a great river flowing continuously never ending", or "moving the jin like reeling silk from a cocoon". The above conveys the idea of stringing the movements together into one harmonious chi.

10. Seek Serenity in Activity

The external martial art systems consider leaping and crouching to be of value. They exhaust their energy and after practice, they are out of breath. Tai Chi uses serenity to counter activity. Even when you are moving, you remain tranquil. When practising the postures, the slower you move, the better the result. Slowness enables your breath to become deep and long with the chi sinking to the Dan Tian. This will naturally prevent the pulse rate from elevating. Students of Tai Chi should think deeply on the above in order to grasp its meaning.

The Purpose of the Form

In order to attempt to identify the core principles of the form we must first make an attempt to identify what the purpose of the form is. If as described above, we see taijiquan as the embodiment of the philosophy of taiji, the ideal natural state where yin and yang are in balance and fully complement each other, then we must conclude that the form is a tool for training body, mind and spirit (all that constitutes the individual) to express this taiji.. This then leads us to a chicken/egg type examination of whether the body influences the mind or vice versa. The only conclusion that is of any use to us is that, like Yin and Yang

in the taiji diagram itself, they body and the mind are inextricably linked. Therefore the form must train both. What then of spirit.? By spirit here I refer to the emotions, what the Chinese call the xin or heart mind. Once again in the context of taijiquan the xin is both body and mind and therefore subject to influence and training in relation to both, as well as influencing and training both. Furthermore as we have also explored above, taijiquan is about returning to an ideal state that is, naturally, the essence of what we are. It is also a process not a fixed object or state. In the light of all of the above we can state that:

The taijiquan form is a process to train body, mind and spirit to return to the ideal state of taiji

When we start learning taijiquan we may have all sorts of ideas about what our purpose is in learning the art, which we then allow to shape our understanding of what the purpose of the form is. We might be learning the art as a form of meditation, for relaxation, to enhance our health or as a fighting art. Whatever the reason there is no doubt that the art will go some way to meeting these goals. But if we get to the understanding of the taijiquan form described above whether it meets these goals or not will no longer be relevant to us.

Using the above statement as a guide we can see that our form must conform to:

- a) physical requirements
- b) mental requirements
- c) spiritual/emotional requirements

Your task now is to discover as many of the taiji teachings as you can relating to the form and categorise them according to the above three requirements. Then find ways to practice them AND test whether you are conforming to them.

Have fun!

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