

Tai Chi Chuan *A Brief Introduction*

Tai Chi Chuan (also taijiquan), which may be translated as Supreme Ultimate Fist, is a Chinese martial art that combines self defense with physical and mental fitness. It is practiced today primarily for its health benefits, stress relief, and relaxation, although interest in the martial application of the art is growing. The slow, continuous movements are designed to impart powerful physical skills and to stimulate the flow of energy within the body, with the ultimate goal of improved mind-body connection, and increased longevity. Tai Chi Chuan is excellent for health and balance while preserving its martial aspects which are learned through practice of the empty hand forms, weapon forms, push hands, fighting forms and free-form sparring.

Origin & History

Much of the history of Chinese martial arts was never recorded and many historical documents that *did* exist were lost during periods of war. The theoretical roots of Tai Chi Chuan, however, may be traced back nearly 3000 years to the introduction of the concept of yin and yang in the Yi Jing (Book of Changes) around 1122 BC¹. The evolution of Tai Chi from the time of the Yi Jing to the late 1500's AD is mainly recorded as legends and folk tales.

One popular, and widely believed, story is that legendary figure Zhang, San-Feng, a Daoist monk, combined Yi Jing theory (the dynamics of opposites yin and yang) and Daoist energy cultivation practices (qigong) with Shaolin "kung fu" and his observations of the natural fighting behavior of a crane and a snake to create Tai Chi Chuan² some time during the period 1200 to 1400 AD. The story of Zhang, San-Feng, however, is disputed by many Tai Chi practitioners, although he is credited with a "classic" writing entitled, "T'ai Chi Ch'uan Ching", that describes Ch'ang Ch'uan (interpreted as Tai Chi Chuan) principles⁵.



Many historians believe that Tai Chi Chuan was formally created in the Chen Village within the Honan Province of China, although some report that formative techniques came through others including individuals known as Jiang, Fa and Wang, Tsung Yueh. Tai Chi Chuan has been recorded in formal documents since the time of Chen, Wang-Ting (of the Chen Village) in the late 1500's to 1600's AD². Thus according to written historical records, Tai Chi Chuan was founded by the Chen family.

Chen style Tai Chi Chuan was developed to a very high level within the Chen village and was kept secret for many decades. The first recorded outsider to be taught Tai Chi Chuan was Yang, Lu-Chan (1799 - 1872)³. Yang, Lu-Chan left the Chen Village and established a variation of Tai Chi Chuan that became known as the Yang Style. One of Yang's students, Wu, Chuan-You, eventually established the Wu Style (mid 1800's), the third of the three major styles of Tai Chi Chuan.

The necessity of self preservation through deadly martial skill in ancient times motivated Tai Chi adepts to carefully guard the secrets of the art for most of its history. Tai Chi Chuan was not broadly revealed to the Chinese public until 1926 by Yang family descendent, Yang, Cheng-Fu (1883-1936). Tai Chi was introduced to the west in the 1960's by Cheng, Man-Ching¹, and, along with Chinese martial arts in general, gained popularity during the early 1970's due to the successful television series "Kung Fu". The proliferation of Tai Chi in the West continued during the 1980's and 90's,

particularly due to the recognition of the health benefits of the art. Tai Chi Chuan is now the most widely practiced martial art in the world³.

Summary of Major Tai Chi Chuan Styles

Many Tai Chi styles and variations of styles have been passed down through the generations. Three styles of Tai Chi Chuan are considered to be the "major" systems taught throughout the world, although there are many modified versions. These styles, Chen, Yang, and Wu, are named after the families that founded them ([see Origin & History](#)). Each of these styles, or systems, has characteristics that make it distinct from the others, however most of the general principles of Tai Chi Chuan are the same for all of them (principles of body structure, mind-body integration, relaxation and breathing, and others, see [Introduction to Tai Chi Chan Principles](#)).



The primary differences between the three major styles are: 1) **Chen** contains hard as well as soft techniques, some resembling regular kung fu with fast, hard power and footwork; 2) **Yang** is made up of large, graceful circles, and the techniques are easy to see and understand; 3) **Wu** uses smaller circles with more throwing and pushing techniques⁴.

There is another, less practiced, style known as **Sun** style Tai Chi (also derived from the "majors"), founded by Sun, Lu-Tang that deserves mention. Sun combined many techniques of the other Chinese "internal" martial styles Hsing-I Chuan and Bagua Chang into his Tai Chi Chuan style³.

Choosing a School

Tai Chi Chuan is taught as a series of movements, or *forms*, that comprise a *set*. The set may include a small number of forms, say 13, or a much larger number of forms, say 108, depending upon the style, school, and suitability to the practitioner. The martial aspects of Tai Chi Chuan are learned through practice of the form sets, push hands (a training technique with a partner to develop sensitivity to body momentum), and fighting sets at advanced levels. When selecting a style and school, beginning practitioners should assess their interests and choose accordingly. A partial list of considerations is as follows:

- Does the style suit my physical condition and developmental interests?
- Does the school teach a comprehensive Tai Chi Chuan system (training for health, self-cultivation, and self-defense)?
- Does the school have a program for seniors?
- Does the school emphasize spiritual growth and meditation only (suited to individual interests)?
- Does the teacher have the appropriate understanding of the art to meet my training needs?

The better the match of style and school to the interests of the student, the more likely the student will continue training. In most cases, prospective students are permitted and encouraged to visit a class and ask questions prior to making a commitment to join a school. It is recommended that prospective students do some research prior to reviewing schools in order to improve their selection.

Research and supplemental training are also recommended through books, videos/DVDs and the internet. Such research, in addition to enhancing the



learning process, will continue to stimulate the interest of the practitioner and improve the odds of staying with training. Success in learning Tai Chi Chuan only comes through perseverance and determination over time.

Introduction To Tai Chi Chuan Principles

This introduction to Tai Chi Chuan principles is intended to be very basic and easy to understand for beginning practitioners.

There are many styles and versions of styles of Tai Chi being taught throughout the world. There are, however, several basic principles that are fundamental to all Tai Chi systems. When learned and trained, these fundamental skills form the basis of a practitioner's pursuit of Tai Chi's health benefits, martial power, and self-knowledge. Although simple in concept, the embodiment of these principles and the realization of what they can ultimately manifest in the human mind and body may take a lifetime.

It should be emphasized from the beginning that Tai Chi Chuan is a **Mind-Body** endeavor. More than an exercise system for the physical development of the body, one of the fundamentals of the art is that the mind (the attention and the intention) focus and unify the body in stillness, movement, and purpose. This principle increases in importance, and significance, as the practitioner progresses through training.

Some general principles are summarized as follows:

- Tai Chi is based on the principle of softness defeating hardness. Muscular power is de-emphasized and the intrinsic strength of the bones, tendons, ligaments and musculature are developed through relaxation and proper structure. The goal is to remove all tension from the muscles and joints, using just enough muscular strength to execute the forms and maintain a spirited readiness. The key principle here is to **relax**. Martial effectiveness comes not through brute force, but through the skillful execution of technique. Incoming force is avoided, dissolved, deflected, and redirected.
- Beginning students often wonder how "**yin**" and "**yang**" apply to Tai Chi Chuan. Yin and Yang are basically opposites - opposites or contrasts of anything and everything, including **emptiness** and **fullness**. In Tai Chi, early training emphasizes distinguishing emptiness from fullness in stepping. As forms are executed, the practitioner maintains 100 percent of the body weight on one leg (fullness) or the other with brief, interim periods of "double weightedness" while in transition from step to step (double weightedness results in diminished agility). The non-weighted leg is said to be empty. Steps are taken forward by moving all weight to the supporting leg and extending the stepping foot, touching heel first before moving any weight onto that leg. Movement to the side or rear reaches and touches with the ball of the foot prior to weight transfer. The words "fullness" and "emptiness" are commonly equated to "**substantial**" and "**insubstantial**", respectively - semantics vary from school to school. The body quality in this technique is often compared with the movement of a cat. This stepping technique is usually difficult for the beginner as leg strength and balance must develop to accommodate the load.
-  Along with deep relaxation and correct stepping, the body must be allowed to "**sink**". Relaxing and sinking are a skill that must be developed in order to "**root**". A primary source of stability and power in Tai Chi Chuan is proper rooting. In short, this amounts to lowering the center of gravity of the body, thus improving balance and stability. Visualizations are of key importance in sinking/rooting - this requires using the imagination, attention and intention to see the body sinking and rooting deeply into the earth and allowing the body to physically adjust to the mental visualization. A primary goal is to sink, establish a root and maintain the rooted body quality during all Tai Chi techniques.
- Part of the "magic" of Tai Chi Chuan is apparent effortless producing incredible power. A key principle (in combination with all the others) that makes this possible is that of correct **body structure**. Correct structure is achieved by straightening the spine, relaxing all the joints

(especially elbows, shoulders, hips and knees), and lowering the center of gravity (sinking). The knees are bent, and the shoulders are sunk and adjusted forward to slightly concave the chest. The forward knee should not bend to the point where it extends beyond the toes. It should be emphasized that proper joint alignment should always be maintained to prevent injury (keep the knees aligned with the toes). The scapulae should be rounded and the elbows should be down. The body should feel as though the crown of the head is being suspended by a thread from above. The rest of the skeletal structure may be visualized as "hanging" from the suspended crown of the head. The coccyx, or tail-bone, is tucked under the body and the lumbar region of the spine straightens as a result. The combination of suspended head and tucked tail-bone straightens and elongates the spine. The spine angle is then maintained upright or slightly forward, depending upon the style and philosophy of the school. The structurally correct and rooted body, when properly integrated, is capable of amazing balance and power. The process of learning these skills improves physical health, strength, and mental focus.

- Tai Chi movement is **smooth** and **continuous**, and is directed by the legs, waist and spine. Movements are **circular**, the **waist is rotated around the axis of the spine**, and the center of gravity is maintained near a constant height above the ground (except for specific forms that require adjustments of height). The body's center of gravity is often referred to as the **dantian**, or tan t'ien, and is located approximate 2 to 3 inches below the navel and centered within the body. Tai Chi movements are integrated - the body moves as a unified entity. The extremities do not move independently of the body.

- All of the previously mentioned principles and skills require focus and the maintenance of the mind's **attention** in the "**present moment**". This is to say the mind is cleared of extraneous thoughts (a condition referred to as **wuchi**, or no extremity), and the attention is on what you are doing. The **intent** is directed to the **purpose** of what you are doing, which requires an understanding of the **martial applications** of the Tai Chi forms. If you understand what the forms were designed to do, you will be able to apply your intent (what you are intending to do with the form, for example deflecting an incoming punch) and further the development of your mind/body integration.



- Many beginning practitioners hear about **Chi**, or Qi, and wonder what it is and what it's about. At present, there is no definitive scientific process or study that can identify, quantify, or specifically describe Chi. Some believe that Chi is bioelectric energy moving through the acupuncture meridians throughout the body. Others believe it is the primordial life force or energy with which we are born. Many practitioners equate Chi with blood flow and breathing. From an experiential standpoint, Chi is a sensation that may be experienced, trained and utilized to improve the effectiveness of martial arts, and the health of the body (it is well documented that positive attitude and visualization may improve health). The sensation of Chi may be cultivated through deep relaxation and the opening (relaxation) of the body's joints. This amounts to a **heightened awareness of the body and a heightened sensitivity to the movement and intention of others** in proximity to the body. Maintaining the sensation of

Chi flowing through the body helps to maintain the correct body quality of relaxation during execution of Tai Chi Chuan techniques.

- Another key Tai Chi principle is that of correct **breathing**. Breathing should be slow, gentle and deep (meaning deep into the lungs utilizing the diaphragm versus shallow breathing in the upper lungs) through the nose. The tongue should be lightly pressed against the roof of the mouth behind the front teeth and the mouth should be lightly closed. Breathing should be **coordinated with the form movements** - generally breathing *in* when rising or moving back, and breathing *out* when sinking or moving forward (especially when striking). The breath will typically become naturally synchronized with movement as the practitioner's skills and stamina improve. Correct breathing will generally increase blood flow, and improve the capacity of the lungs.

- The **eyes** should be relaxed (relaxed eyes help relax the rest of the body) and assume a "lazy" gaze generally forward in the direction of the torso (some forms will have specific techniques for the gaze). Relaxed eyes also improve peripheral vision, thus detection of movement in the vicinity.

- The practice of Tai Chi Chuan is a pursuit of self-knowledge and self-mastery. In addition to the

many physical health benefits of the practice, the opportunity for life-changing personal growth, stress relief, and spiritual growth is profound.

The Tai Chi Symbol

The Tai Chi Symbol (also twin fish symbol and yin - yang symbol) is familiar to almost everyone, although most don't know what it is or represents. The white portion of the symbol represents yin by virtue of it's lack of color. The black portion represents yang. In general, yin and yang are considered opposites of virtually anything, and the shape of each side of the symbol and it's rotational character represent the relative proportions of yin to yang as they continuously change and cycle from one to the other and back (essentially the nature of all things). The small circular areas of white within black and black within white indicate that, even in the extreme, there is always a little yin within yang and a little yang within yin. Examples of yin may include; dark, soft, night, cold, empty, etc. Examples of yang relative to these yin examples may include; light, hard, day, hot, full, etc., respectively.



The most basic significance of this to the practitioner is the diagram's representation of the qualities of Tai Chi movement and energy - namely that one must distinguish fullness from emptiness, or substantial versus insubstantial in movement. The diagram shows the relationship of one to the other through the entire spectrum between the two opposing extremes. The discussion of correct Tai Chi stepping in the [Principles](#) section above is a good example. The full and detailed analysis of the symbol and the depth of it's significance is a study of its own, and will be left to those interested in further understanding.

Beyond the Solo Form Sets

Learning and practicing the solo form sets provides a wonderful exercise, and may fulfill the training needs of many practitioners, particularly seniors interested in improving balance, mental focus and health. For those with a deeper interest in Tai Chi Chuan, there is a vast range of techniques, skills, and applications to be learned.

Some of the areas of study beyond the solo forms may be summarized as follows:

- **Martial Applications of Each Form** - Each of the Tai Chi movements, or forms, has an application to self defense. Even many transitional movements that may seem insignificant serve some defense or attack purpose. Tai Chi, in fact, is recognized within the martial community as one of the most powerful and effective martial arts ever developed. The true heart of Tai Chi Chuan is within the applications; after all, Tai Chi Chuan is first and foremost a *martial art*.
- **Push Hands** - Push hands is a training technique practiced with a partner. There are several styles of push hands (each Tai Chi style has its own variations), including various stances and means of contacting the partner. The basic goal is to train the body's balance and root and the ability to neutralize force applied by the partner and to redirect that force to the ground and back to the partner. It is also the basic training of sensitivity, both to the practitioner's own body and to that of the partner. The idea is to learn to "listen" to the partner's force and momentum, and to then use that "understanding" to move the partner off balance. The technique is practiced slowly, using the least amount of muscular power possible to uproot the partner. Deep relaxation and proper body structure are a necessity.
- **Sticky Hands** - Sticky hands is another training technique practiced with a partner. As with push hands, there are several styles and various stances and means of contacting the partner. The body qualities of deep relaxation, body structure and rooting are also similar to push hands.



Sticky hands training differs from push hands primarily in the intent of the practitioners. The idea is for the partners to help each other to learn to follow the movement of the other and "stick" to, or maintain contact with, the partner. The technique is intended to train sensitivity to the momentum and *intent* of the partner. Typically, games are played by the practitioners where one partner moves one or both arms and the other attempts to stick and follow the movement. Another game involves one partner "hiding a hand", or trying to free-up a hand from the partner's touch in order to execute a strike. Slow-speed attempts to breach the partner's defenses enhance the training. The premise here is that the sense of touch is near the speed of light versus the relative slow reaction time of vision. If contact can be made with an attacker, the trained practitioner should immediately "know" and "understand" the intent of the attacker and make a preemptive defensive or offensive movement. Push hands and sticky hands are very similar in technique, body quality, and training objective - the development of martial skill.

- **Weapon Sets** - Tai Chi Chuan includes form sets executed with various weapons, including sword, saber, staff, spear, and others. Form sets may be learned as solo forms or form sets with a partner.
- **Fighting Sets** - Martial skill is further developed by learning and practicing fighting form sets with a partner.
- **Free-Form Sparring** - As with other martial arts training, free-form sparring may be practiced under controlled and supervised conditions. Tai Chi sparring is commonly done at slow speed, but with power. The slow motion is necessary to avoid injury to the sparring partners - Tai Chi martial techniques are notoriously dangerous and must be practiced with care.
- **Qigong, or Chi Kung** - Qigong is the practice of cultivating, moving, and applying body energy, or chi (see introduction to Chi in the [Principles](#) section). Technically, the practice of Tai Chi Chuan is also the practice of Qigong. A fundamental aspect of Tai Chi is developing the sensation of chi flow within the body. The sensation of chi flow helps the practitioner establish and maintain the proper body quality for executing Tai Chi techniques. The chi sensation may be manipulated by the mind and directed by the practitioner's intent and purpose. An example is that when executing a striking or deflecting movement in the Tai Chi set, the practitioner creates the sensation that the chi is directed and emitted from the body (through the striking or deflecting hand/arm or foot/leg) in the direction of the strike or deflection to increase the power of the technique. This practice is one of many forms of qigong. Qigong practices include many styles of both stationary and moving techniques. The common goal of these is to cultivate and circulate the chi sensation through the body for improved mental and physical health, and to enhance the effectiveness of martial techniques.

Approaching Mainstream

Virtually everyone has heard of Tai Chi and most have an opinion or perception of what it is about. A pervasive view among those not directly familiar with Tai Chi is that it is an extremely esoteric, even cult-like undertaking that is not well suited for the average American. Tai Chi has also been branded as a dance or meditative practice that includes light exercise, and is intended to be practiced by the elderly.



Although Tai Chi Chuan is the most practiced martial art in the world, the previously mentioned views have somewhat moderated its growth within mainstream America. There is some truth to those perspectives in that Tai Chi involves meditative aspects, is beautiful to watch when performed by an expert, has a mysterious history, and is well documented as an excellent form of exercise for the elderly.

But the true depth of Tai Chi as a martial art and lifelong health exercise that is capable of building tremendous strength of both body and character has still not been broadly revealed.

The good news is that there seems to be movement toward mainstream acceptance of Tai Chi as a contemporary health and self-defense alternative. Medical general practitioners, orthopedic physicians and physical therapists are recommending the practice of Tai Chi with more regularity.

Tai Chi classes are showing up in more health clubs and residential development clubhouses. The realization that, for some time, Tai Chi has been "gutted" of its martial heritage, and that there are very few true adepts, has fueled a trend toward teaching martial applications and power aspects of the art, thus drawing interest from a more diverse group of new students.

It's not clear that Tai Chi Chuan will attain the popularity of kick boxing or aerobics classes, but time and correct information combined with practical communication could draw Tai Chi Chuan further out of the shadows.

Practitioner's Perspectives

There seems to be a good deal of debate in Tai Chi circles about what the art should be and to whom. One outlook is that Tai Chi Chuan is a multifaceted pursuit with many possible courses of study and training. As diverse as people and their individual interests are, Tai Chi provides opportunity to match these interests, physical condition, and personal needs with a health-exercise program or self-defense program. The trick here is to find the right school and teacher for the individual.

There are a few clear reasons that people take interest in Tai Chi. Some are stressed to their limit by the demands of daily life and seek an intellectual distraction, or pursuit that focuses on relaxation and the centering of mind and body. Others may be looking for an exercise program that will hold their interest for the long term and not cause them injury. Still others wish to undertake martial arts training for fitness, self-discipline, and self-defense - a martial art that they can pursue well into old age without loss of effectiveness. And others may be in their senior years, in search of activity, improved health and balance, and interaction with a group of people.



The truth is that all of these reasons for taking interest in Tai Chi are valid and appropriate in-and-of themselves. Many practitioners, however, train to fulfill all of the objectives mentioned above, and seek the fullest possible understanding and experience that Tai Chi Chuan can offer. Whatever the purpose or goals each individual has in taking up the practice of Tai Chi, all should be appreciated for their role in perpetuating the art.

References

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