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Tai Chi & Qigong



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Yang Zhenduo on:

Cultivating A Calm Mind

An interview by Marvin Smalheiser

The correct loosening of the body during T'ai Chi Ch'uan practice helps to achieve the goal of a calm mind as well as a relaxed body, according to Yang Zhenduo, fourth generation successor of the Yang style.

Interviewed on a recent trip to the U.S., Yang said that although it may appear that movement and calmness are contradictory, in T'ai Chi Ch'uan movement and calmness coexist.

“Whenever we move, we start with the mind and the mind intention first. It is the mind that leads the movement. So when you start to play T'ai Chi Ch'uan, before you move, you must get rid of unnecessary thoughts as much as you can and balance your qi (ch'i) and settle your mind before you begin.

“If you are able to loosen your muscles, tendons and joints, and let the mind be peaceful without interfering thoughts, your mind will be purified. Your mind then is concentrated on the form.”

He said that if you cannot calm your mind or be able to use it correctly to lead the movement, then the movements will likely be tense.

“You should be calm when you practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan. So some people say, 'When you practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan, you are actually resting your mind.'

“In this type of resting, you are thinking in a simpler way, much less so than during daily activities, so it is almost like resting. It is the opposite of being overly excited. So you are not thinking of this or that. You are much more focused on one thing and simplifying your mental activity.”

Part of the process, he said, is concentrating on the 10 Essentials. “If you concentrate on the main principles, then you are not thinking about anything else. There is no room to think of anything else.

“But if you don't understand the concept of where you should move and how you should concentrate, and what the principles are, then you cannot control and focus your mind.”

Yang said that sometimes when people begin, they can focus because they focus on one movement after another. They are only thinking of the movement and nothing else. “So in this case, you can begin to control



*Yang Zhenduo pushes with
Yang Jun, his grandson*

your mind. After you have practiced for a while and are very familiar with the form, you don't have to think about what parts of the body to move.”



But he said that even under the best conditions, a person may not be able to control his mind, so in practice he must learn to put his mind on his practice in the right way.

“You must remember the 10 Essentials and apply these important principles. You want to harmonize them with the specified technique. When you have something else on your mind, you can control your mind by directing it to implementing the important principles in each movement. This is one of the methods to regulate your mind.”

Yang said that if the practitioners can keep their body and mind calm and relaxed, they will become very peaceful. “Your mind opens and clears up. But if you cannot be calm and peaceful, then the mind will continue to wander and many different thoughts will come into your mind constantly.”

He said this is the reason he emphasizes the basic principles and their use in specific techniques.

“In China, we have a proverb, 'If you don't go according to the rules, you will not find the squareness and the roundness of the form.'

“If you want to practice the entire form well,” he said, “you must start from the root; start from the basics, if you are to receive the benefits of the good fundamentals and receive the benefits of practice.

“Also, it is then easier to raise the level of technical proficiency. In this process, you focus and ask yourself: Have I done all the fundamentals in each movement? Have I done the basic refinements? Only you know in your heart.

“Now, there are many people who practice and they don't even know the basic principles. There are also people who cannot coordinate the method and the purpose. When we say to loosen the body, that is a technique, a method. But it is not the purpose. Many people are just very soft. They know the method, but they don't know the purpose. The technique is to loosen the body and its joints. But that is not the purpose. The purpose is to do the form well. You cannot do the form well unless you loosen the joints and muscles.

“You can also consider that getting rid of all the stray thoughts in your brain is also the loosening of your mind. On your limbs and in your body over-all, you loosen your joints and muscles. By doing this, you create the best conditions under which the blood and qi can flow in your body. But many people think that loosening just means becoming soft.”

Yang said it is to be soft, that the practitioner loosens muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints. “You loosen so that your blood flows freely. And then you can do the form correctly. From observing all the students today (at a seminar he taught in New York), there are those who have the method and those who are just soft without the proper method. They are quite different. You can see the difference.”

He said that while a person is sitting or standing, the Chinese concept is that if the mind is calm, than the qi is harmonized. “When you settle your heart down, the main thing is to feel very calm. The minute you are very, very calm, with your heart, particularly, then the qi automatically sinks down to the dantian and stays there. When you are calm in your mind and heart, then the qi flows very easily. If you can maintain your calmness when you are moving through the form, this is according to the natural principal. This

The 10 Essentials of Yang Cheng-fu that Yang Zhenduo teaches as fundamental principles are:	
1. Straighten the head. Hold the head and neck naturally erect with the mind concentrated on the top.	5. Sink the shoulders and elbows.
2. Keep chest slightly inward to help sink the breath to the dantian. Sinking the chest also helps to round the back.	6. Use the mind instead of force.
3. Relax the waist. All movements depend on the waist. A relaxed waist makes the two feet able to form a strong base.	7. Coordinate all movements of the upper and lower parts of the body together.
4. Distinguish between solid and	8. Create a harmony between the internal and external parts.
	9. Maintain continuity. All movements are continuous in an endless circle.
	10. Tranquility in movement. Movement occurs while there is stillness inward.

empty in stances. This gives stability and flexibility in movement.

is the meaning in calming the heart, and then the qi flows very smoothly.

“If, while you are practicing, you feel your qi is sort of going against parts of yourself, this is because the qi is rising. It hasn't settled into the lower dantian. So the original qi, which is supposed to be in the abdominal cavity, or dantian area, is rising and, therefore, affects the breathing, and the breathing gets shorter. And the mental state is affected, too.

“So the minute you feel this way, you want to calm yourself down and let the heart calm again and the breathing become smooth.

“In general, to do this you have to go back to mind intention. It has to be calm. Be aware of the body. Be in a calm state as you move. First, you have to stay calm. Then ask yourself how you are coordinating the body movements. For example, your breathing has to harmonize with the movements. If you go forward, you cannot suddenly inhale. You have to go with the nature of the movement. In individual movements, it is very easy to coordinate breathing. In the entire form, it is not so easy to harmonize the movement and the breathing.

“In the Yang style, the method is very simple. You sink the qi down to the dantian and you breathe naturally. You maintain your calmness and do not think too much about any other thing.”

Being calm, he said, is one of the most important principles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. “If you cannot settle the mind, it affects everything else . . . all the other requirements. But you cannot totally concentrate on being only calm, either.

“So you just want to be natural. That is sufficient. As long as you maintain the naturalness, you feel very easy-going. The minute you focus too much, then you become uncomfortable. This applies to any aspect because it interferes with coordinating the whole. It is as if you have too much activity in your cerebral cortex. You cannot sleep. The more you think, 'I want to sleep, I want to sleep,' the less you can sleep. If you don't think about it, then fine. You fall asleep.”

Qi he described as energy going through the body. “You all know there is the existence of qi. The most obvious evidence is that if you don't have qi, then your life is gone. So generally speaking, you just realize that you are alive and you have qi.

“Qi is energy traveling throughout the body. For example, generally speaking, the qi unites and coordinates with the internal force, jin. We know that after you exercise you experience greater circulation of blood and energy. What makes circulation move? There is some force, some energy behind this circulation.”



*Snake Creeps Down,
and Fair Lady Works at Shuttles*

Part of the impetus for the flow of qi and blood, he said, is the correct structuring of the body. “If you have the right posture and your hand is in the right position, you can feel the movement of the blood flowing in it. It moves very smoothly onward and outward. The qi is moving to create the jin that you have in the body. So when you practice T'ai Chi, the method and technique is to release and loosen all the joints with the muscles extended. When your structure is extended and open and loose, the blood circulates much fuller and unobstructed. So you create this condition by practicing T'ai Chi Ch'uan.”

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, he said, the idea is to avoid having the blood stagnate because this leads to illness. “When qi circulates like running water, this prevents decay and illness.”

Yang said that Traditional Chinese Medicine feels that cancer can result from the blood stagnating. But exercise creates a good condition to keep the blood flowing freely and strengthens the immune system and physical condition.

Yang said that traditionally in China there are considered to be two major types of qi. One is the original, or prenatal qi, which a person is born with and which is inherited from parents. The other is postnatal qi, which develops from breathing, food and the environment.

He said the idea is to sink the original qi to the lower dantian and settle it there so that it is balanced.



*Parting Wild
Horse's Mane, Right*

“When you stabilize the qi in the lower dantian, then the upper respiratory system is very open, and you can breathe very freely. From T'ai Chi's point of view, you want to be very natural in your breathing.”



*Bend the Bow
and Shoot the Tiger*

He said that initially a beginner may have shortness of breath but after he practices for a while, he develops a longer breath. In practicing T'ai Chi, Yang said, the breath should not be forced, but it should not be weak. “We say you want to cultivate the qi down to the dantian so you can develop a very smooth, natural breathing. Then there can be no ill effect. After you are able to lengthen your breath, it will coordinate with the movement and benefit your major organs.”

As long as the qi is settled in the dantian and the heart is calm, then it is easier to learn and easier to practice. Then everyone who does that can practice. “As long as you loosen the entire body and coordinate all the movements of the joints and the arms and legs so that they are correctly connected by the waist, then your practice becomes easy and natural.”

Yang said that if the T'ai Chi Ch'uan form takes 25 minutes, even if you do it two or three times longer than that, after you finish, your breath will be absolutely normal. “You will not be out of breath or have a shortness of breath. You can be slightly sweaty, but you are not breathing any harder. This is a special point in this type of T'ai Chi Ch'uan exercise.”

If someone feels that their qi is short or blocked while they are practicing, this can be because the primordial qi is rising, he said. “It hasn't settled into the lower dantian. The original qi is supposed to be in the dantian area, but it is rising and, therefore, it affects the breathing and causes shortness of breath and an uncomfortable mental state.”

“The minute you feel this way, you want to calm yourself and make the heart calm. Then the breathing should be smooth again.”

You have to go back to the mind intention and try to calm it. “Be aware of the body. Be in a calm state as you move. First, you have to stay calm. Check how you are coordinating your body movement. For example, your breathing should go with the movement, according to the nature of the movement. If you are going forward, you cannot suddenly inhale. You have to go with the nature of the movement and the breathing.”

“In the Yang style, we take a simple approach. You sink the qi down to the dantian and breath naturally. You maintain your calmness and try not to think too much about any other thing.”

Yang said qi contributes to the development of jin, which he described as a type of body force or strength but is not to be confused with li, which is another kind of body force.

“When you are fighting an opponent, you must use force and technique. Generally speaking, you should have force. But jin and li are slightly different. The basic physical force is natural and you have it in your physical body. For example, when babies are born, the way they move in the crib and cry and move their arms and legs in the crib show that they are full of jin because there is a lot of physical strength behind it. Even a baby has that. From maturity to middle age, we are increasingly building up our physical strength.”

Jin, he said, is not just force, “Jin has something extra. It is strength with technique. In addition to physical strength, you have to use additional technique; then it becomes jin. The additional technique then creates the intrinsic force.”

Yang said that if an opponent has no technique and uses his fist, the force is relatively small because then it is local force. He is not moving the waist, or building up the strength in the waist and legs. So there is no physical body force in the fist. By adding technique, he said, you increase the physical strength that you already have in your body. Jin is the basic physical strength, plus use of these techniques.



*Transitioning to
Right Separation Kick*

“Through training you refine the technique. Therefore, those who practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan and those that don't practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan are two different species, under normal circumstances.

“If you practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan with no force in it and no understanding, technique or purpose in it, you

won't arrive at this jin. Even if you study for another 10 years, you will still be in the same position. So you have to practice with the right technique to develop the jin. You have to find the right method to do this.”

The method, he said, is in the 10 essentials. “You have to bend the wrist, open the shoulder and sink the shoulder and drop the elbow, etc. When you have arrived at the jin, then your mind intention is different and your spirit is raised.” The minute a person is able to loosen his joints and tendons, he said, that person's eyes become very spirited. But if he is slack, then his eyes are not spirited.

“The technique for developing jin with 10 Essentials harmonizes the qi, and harmonizes the movement with the breathing. All of these and others are techniques. It is not just one technique. The techniques include the whole body so that every time you are moving, you move your waist to lead the movement. So every day, you are developing that strength in your waist and in your legs through the form.”

Jin, intrinsic force, he said, is expressed in many different ways. He gave the example of stepping, where it is important to settle the stepping foot on the ground and grab the ground with the toes. He said if the knee is shifted forward too fast without grabbing the floor with the toes and settling the foot, then the foot is empty and there is no jin there.

“You have to settle your weight in the feet and grab the floor and then move the body forward with the feet rooted. When you have your root in your feet, then the legs, your fundamental roots and foundation, are in your feet.

“Once you develop the foundation, then the jin comes up through the legs to the waist and to the rest of the body. But you must have roots in your legs, and then the entire body can be connected to each other. If you have an empty foot as you move, then you are moving the upper body and the lower body differently and without coordination. You do not have unified force. This is why so many people can be practicing T'ai Chi Ch'uan but the result can be quite different. Different people will get different results depending on how they practice and establish the fundamentals.”

The waist he said, is like the universal joint in a car. “You use the waist to lead the movements and connect them to the feet. The movement of the waist will also engage the movement of the abdomen.”

Correct movement, he said, demands the movement of the waist. “If you are not moving the waist, then you will be doing only the hand movements.”

The body is built in such a way, he said, that the waist connects the top and the bottom. And part of the waist moves down and part moves up. You express the connection of the two parts of the body at the waist – the part of the body at the small of the back.

He said it is necessary to loosen the waist there and if the two parts can't separate, the body weight will not be balanced correctly. “Only when you separate the two parts (he placed his two fists together facing each other and separated the top knuckles) can you express the movement of the waist correctly.”

He said one of the essential requirements of practice is that when you move, everything moves. “As long as your movement starts with the waist and all the other conditions correctly create the condition for the waist to move in this way, then the waist has the ability of being the body's central pivotal force.

“If you don't coordinate the upper and the lower limbs through the waist, and the lower legs are empty, the waist is not moving. You have to use the waist to get the force to come into the arms and legs. If the structure is lifeless, then the waist doesn't have anything to do.

“But if you practice with the hand in a position where it has intrinsic force and the legs have strength and the waist is used correctly, then they can be coordinated. Then these movements are all part of the waist movement. Normally, people just locally move their arms. They are not using the waist to move the arms.”

The hips, he said, are loosened; they do not sink. “You only sink the shoulder. But the moment you loosen the hips, you also have a feeling of sinking. The you have weight in the hips. You have intrinsic force in them. So we speak of loosening, lengthening and extending the joints.



*Yang Jun in a
broadsword posture*

“When we are very loose, there is the feeling of sinking and of weight in the hips. They go hand in hand. We say the outside is like soft cotton. The inside is hard as steel. It can look very soft. The minute you are very, very loose, you get the force inside and it can be very, very strong. In the past, they said the strength is like a steel rod inside. This expresses the idea of jin.”



Left Strike Tiger

“You straighten your head so the neck soars upward. It is as if you have something held above your head. The head is lifted upward, straight.

“When your head is straight, then your neck is straight and the shoulders are in alignment. The minute you have straightened your head and neck, the blood flows freely. Therefore, the cerebral cortex gets lots of qi and blood and you have lots of spirit. You have a spiritual feeling. If a person lowers their eyelids or lowers their head, it reduces the spirit. If you look very dejected, you have little qi. It looks like you are sick.”

Yang said the strengthening of the central equilibrium, zhong ding, is essential. In any position, he said, you have to root yourself. The middle of the foot must be centered and rooted to the floor. The knee as to be right over the foot before you lift the other foot. The weight, he said, has to be in the middle of the foot.

“In the Yang style, you not only have to do the movements continuously and smoothly, but you also have to be very stable, step by step. Otherwise, you can't balance yourself properly so you can control yourself and your movement.

“In general, zhong ding requires that the entire body be aligned and balanced. And you want to be aware of your center. Then you have to differentiate between the substantial and insubstantial. With each step you have stabilize. If you cannot, you cannot go to the next move with balance.

“The basic requirements and essentials we have talked about are very important points. But it is like many things. You can know it but you sometimes cannot carry it out. You may not be able to do it. You may need a long time to train yourself, slowly, slowly accumulating experience.

“The basic method behind all of this is very, very simple. It is just to loosen the whole body. Within the loosening of the body, you have to address two issues. One is that you have to loosen your mind. The other is to loosen the body.

“But the looseness is not just soft or a limp kind of looseness. Instead it is a lengthening, extending, opening-up looseness. So you must understand all these things when you practice.”

He said that many people say, “Oh, I know all about that.” But he noted that “knowing doesn't mean you

know how to do it. Many people do not know how to practice.” He said many people who haven't been trained by him can see the difference and know what they are supposed to do. But they can't change. They can't let go of doing what they are used to doing. What they know and what they can carry out with the body hasn't come together yet. This requires time and practice.

He said that even many people who have seen his form and practiced with him will practice the form differently when they do it by themselves. Basically, he said, they study with him but the movements may be different. But it is usually not something they can help.

Yang said that there is chan ssu jin (silk reeling energy) in Yang style, but it is not as evident or as intense as in the Chen style. It is continuous in the practice of the form, since all the movements involve making circles.

“Yang style is much more open and in a larger format with larger curves. This is easier for the average person to be able to accomplish.” He said that in the development of the Yang style, a goal was to develop and synthesize the movements to accommodate the general public and to modernize the applications. His father, Yang Cheng-fu, in his late life the Yang style as it is known today. But the way that Yang Cheng-fu practiced in his middle age and in his late age was different. Yang said.

Similarly, he said the Yang style does not talk about dantian rotations internally. “The Yang style doesn't concentrate on the internal rotation of the dantian. We just sink the qi to the dantian. This is also part of the gradual development of the Yang style so it can be practiced by everybody.

“As long as you settle the qi in the dantian and your heart is calm, then your practice is natural and calm. That is enough. This is easier to learn and easier to practice for everyone. You loosen the entire body, coordinate all the movements in the joints so that your four limbs are dependent on the movement of the waist, and you use the waist like the universal joint of a car. When the waist leads the movement, the waist will engage the movement of the abdomen.

Yang said that the Yang style has been growing rapidly in China and internationally. “The atmosphere is very favorable.”

He said that since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the family has been able to teach publicly, to spread information and teaching. No one has made a census of the number of practitioners, but, he said, “It is definitely a very larger number. In China, the seniors and retired persons outnumber the general population. Most of them like to join the T'ai Chi Ch'uan activities. The condition is not quite the same outside of China, where more young people are involved.”

When told of an estimate made of 10 million T'ai Chi Ch'uan practitioners worldwide, Yang said it is “very, very possible.”

Yang, who has come to the U.S. five times and is now coming on an annual basis, also travels to Europe. He said this year he will be going to Italy, Sweden and maybe to Germany. He has been to France four times.

Last year he sponsored an international competition celebrating the 15th anniversary of the Yang Style Association in Shanxi Province. More than 240 people participated and more than 300 people were involved. This was the first time that an international competition had been privately sponsored in China.

Twelve countries and 15 organizations participated. Together with the internal organizations in China, there were 49 participating organizations, all from the traditional Yang style. His organization in China has 70 branch organizations and close to 30,000 members.

He said the foreigners who participated in the competition left a very good impression because of their level of skill.

The competition will be held again this year, but the next international competition will be on the 20th anniversary of the association.



Step Forward Seven Stars

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