

Kai Ming Association Newsletter

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Cats and Dogs. Observe and Learn

Dogs and cats can teach us a great deal about martial skill and interpersonal relations if we take the time to observe.

I like animals and always make an effort to interact with them.

Let's say I meet a strange cat and reach out to pet it. Being a little cautious, the cat may allow me to come close, but as my hand gets near to its body, it will gently and easily move just the one place I am about to touch, out of the way. It will only allow me so close but tease me into thinking it wants to be petted by not moving its whole body away.

A shy dog, on the other hand, might not even let me get near. It will move away and keep a certain distance. The cat's skill is very high to allow me to get so close and then move just the slightest bit to keep me from touching it.

When playing push hands, think about the cat, not the dog.

Do not run away, but stay close and only move away the part of the body that is under attack.

Michael Gilman



William CC Chen Shares Crucial Points of Mental Focus to Improve Health and Unleash the Body's Energy

We have all experienced moments of "pure Tai Chi." This happens during the course of our daily life when we accomplish a task, correct a problem or catch a falling object, using only the movement required, no more, no less. Top athletes use this psychophysical state of unity to achieve victory and even surpass the goals set by previous champions. This too is the state of Tai Chi: "calm and focused," "relaxed and connected," keyed into the moment, able to listen and respond correctly, quickly and efficiently.

Long-term and correct Tai Chi practice enhances brain function and builds up a reservoir of qi (chi) that powers this perfect human reaction. However, this concept is not exclusive to Tai Chi; it applies to all human endeavors. The internal art of Tai Chi stands apart because it seeks specifically to first internalize, and then externalize, qi as the driving force in everything we do. According to William CC Chen, "The great master Yang Cheng-Fu created the most unique slow form of Yang style Tai Chi Chuan (taijiquan). It gives us a very practical form of martial arts as well as physical fitness. It is easy and suitable for all human beings. As long as anyone could walk, he or she will be able to do Tai Chi and enjoy its priceless benefits." Chen's approach is to make Tai Chi Chuan simple, easier, natural, enjoyable and productive. While just in his teens, William CC Chen became the youngest disciple of the great Tai Chi master Professor Cheng Man-Ching.

The Steps from External to Internal Transforming into Spiritual

The basics are a time-consuming stage in traditional martial arts training, where we have to "create" and "forge" the tools

and weapons before beginning to learn how to use them. We do this by isolating and training the individual components, such as punching with just the arm. Later on, add the waist and the footwork, and then learn to coordinate everything. By contrast, new students can quickly master a "defensive tactics" course because they are taught immediately how to use the tools and weapons they already possess or, more accurately, their own version of the tool or weapon that the teacher prescribes. In Tai Chi, we learn "form," or correct posture, by internalizing our self-awareness. We meet general standards: body relaxed during movement (often hardest to maintain), elbows coordinated with knees, shoulders aligned and coordinated with hips, head and spine aligned, back straight, hips released, with no isolated movement - all body parts connect and move together. Control your breathing, making it slow and steady. Keep the mind clear, with mental awareness "sunken" into the dantien, feet "rooted" into the ground, and so forth. The above just briefly covers some of the requirements. Each different posture has its own standards. In essence, a student must move with proper body mechanics.

Once the student ingrains the Tai Chi postures through repeated practice, he or she can progress to training the internal side, which has both health benefits and combat application. As we learn to deeply relax the muscles, our skill increases, and it takes less effort to perform. The average person uses more strength than necessary in every activity. That's why people break things and hurt themselves. The more tense you are, the less sensitivity you have, making it harder to "listen" to what level of strength is required. To respond is to listen. To react is not listening. Many people develop poor posture and movement habits due to inefficient body mechanics from habitual tension and stress. In this

“normal” tense state, our spine is often misaligned from slouching, with the vertebrae and torso compressed, restricting general circulation and qi flow. According to C Chen, “Optimal health depends on the constant qi flow, balanced, free, and uninterrupted throughout the entire body.

The Feeling of the Heart

Watch consummate professionals. Whenever they are working, it seems they are barely trying. It appears to take little or no effort and seems almost like magic. What is the secret? They think it, they feel it, they will it, and it happens, Presto! This is the primary objective of Tai Chi Chuan. The human body, like the earth, is filled with different types of potential energy that can be transformed. In physics, the “law of conservation of energy” states that energy is never created or destroyed. The only thing that changes is the form of energy. Qi is another form of energy in the metaphysical realm.

Chen maps the process: “Feeling (*yi*) begins from thinking of the mind. The intensity of thinking stimulates the emotion in the heart. The emotion from the heart is motivated by the *qi* flow. Without thinking, there would be no feeling, no qi flow and no physical motion. ‘Feeling in the heart’ is our primary objective.” Chen explains the connection of the mind and heart: “The merger of the heart with the mind is like the electric wire. Feeling (emotion) of the heart is the positive wire. Thinking of the mind is a negative wire. This dual polarity must be unified to produce the electricity. Feeling and thinking generate the powerful qi flow. Together it is like the ‘soul energy qi’ (also called *shin*). The feeling *yi* is triggering and pressurizing the *qi* (emotion from the heart following *yi*). *Yi* pressurizes *qi* to generate the powerful force of *shin* that is like the power of the soul.”

In essence, upon mastery, yes: we think it (*yi*), we feel it (*yi* and *qi*), we will it (*shin*, the combination of all three), and it happens! These three essential elements are the central emphasis in Chinese martial arts.

The Fingers Direct the Qi

“The fingers are the proper instruments for Tai Chi players,” according to Chen. “The slow motion of Tai Chi Chuan activates qi flow in the fingers. When the

qi flow gradually increases, the energized fingers gently move away from the palms in an outgoing motion. This contributes to forming a Tai Chi posture.”

Finger biomechanics are actually very intricate. The five fingers are controlled by two different nerve systems. The median nerve located at the base of the spinal cord activates the index finger, the middle finger and the thumb. The pinky finger and the ring finger are connected to the ulnar nerve, which comes from the neck and runs down the arm and through the elbow. Chen explains the kinetic science and how it relates to qi flow: “The median nerve triggers the index finger (the most active finger): the middle finger and the thumb to boost the qi flow for an action. The ulnar nerve activates the pinky finger and the ring finger to defuse the qi and set up for action. The pinky finger is more active than the ring finger. I call the pinky and ring the pre-action fingers.”

“When we turn or rotate the pinky and ring finger, the body relaxes, the feet flatten and the inner thigh muscles are released. This state is the pre-action or setting up for an action. When we spin or twist the index finger, the middle finger and the thumb, the feet fasten or press on to the floor while the body becomes substantial and the inner thigh muscles are contracted. All this is the body in action.”

To control the human stress reaction and become a complete Tai Chi player, Chen advocates various exercises, combat drills and sparring with boxing gloves. Any martial arts student must overcome their fear of being hit or of being thrown in order to respond in proper fashion. The bottom line is, one must be able to relax under pressure. This is all part of a very complex process that in perfect application is actually quite simple and effortless. Again, you think it. You feel it. You will it. It happens!

Chen never clenches his fist when he throws a punch. It is like “iron wrapped in cotton.” In reality, it is not necessary to clench the fingers when you punch. The bones in the hand and wrist can properly align with the bones in the arm. When this happens, you have the skeletal structure behind the knuckles, which propel outwards like a speeding rock thrown from a sling. Chen adds, “I

am still able to maintain fast punches. I can deliver the two knuckle punches without clenching my fist and retain my body and arm muscles loose with no friction.” To teach this concept of punching with a relaxed open fist, Chen has his students practice punching the bag while holding a banana in each hand. This tactile methodology of holding a piece of fruit gives direct feedback. Squish the banana, then you are tightening your fist. Banana intact and bag moving means correct form. Chen notes, “All professional boxers punch this way because having boxing gloves on prevents you from closing your hand so you must focus on shooting the knuckles out with an open fist.”

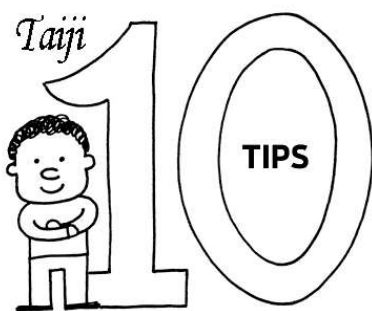
Expanding the Ribcage and Floating the Armpits

The goal of all martial artists should be to strengthen their weaknesses and fortify their strengths. Fortifying general health requires that same mindset. Take proactive steps to keep your body strong and healthy by building a reserve in every part. Building a reserve means giving yourself extra: eating healthier, exercising your mind and body, improving your conduct and manners, speaking positive words, continually learning something new - challenging the psychophysical ... always striving towards a constant state of improvement. The average person is often content to lazily “maintain” themselves with pleasure and excess, avoiding the bitter. Good health requires hard work!

Chen helps students to enhance qi circulation by “opening” the ribcage. “Releasing the ribcage will lower the diaphragm, suspend the head and float the arms, thereby increasing the dimension of the inner torso of the body. It gives more space in between the organs, enhances qi circulation and optimizes the respiratory system.” This holistic posture is something we do naturally whenever we are giving another a “loving embrace” with “the feeling from the heart.”

Chen sums it up very simply: “When we practice the movements, we should direct our feeling from the heart. Feeling creates emotion in the heart and it converts that emotion into the movement of the fingers and toes. In the slow movements of Tai Chi Chuan, the hands never move by

themselves without the pressurized qi. The classics state that, “In the movements of Tai Chi Chuan the hands do not move independently. If they do, the movements are not considered as Tai Chi Chuan. Every movement must be created by the pressurized qi flow.” Chen adds, “At 81, I still benefit from the slow motion of Tai Chi Chuan, which alleviates stress and floats energy (qi) throughout my body. This keeps my body going like when I was in my 60s. I am able to run, jump, squat and spar in my Sanshou classes and do my punching drills like a professional fighter. This priceless art of Tai Chi Chuan is maintaining my body and mind in balance and in health.”



Ten everyday activities to apply your tai chi Tai Chi:

1. Standing: Yes, the simple act of standing and noticing the feeling of good alignment. You can pay attention to how you experience gravity through your whole body, and the natural state of compression it creates. It is fundamental to basic Tai Chi principles.
2. Walking: Maybe you've practiced in class so it seems obvious. However, in all honesty, how often do you actually pay attention to your walking? Every step you take is an opportunity to notice how you connect to the ground. It is an opportunity to relax into balance and maintain a 'grounded' state. Be mindful and notice what you notice. Imagine how you would describe/explain it to someone that hasn't tried tai chi
3. Doors: You may open and close doors many times every day, but how often do you pay attention to the experience? A heavy door offers more potential to focus on the connection from the door to the ground through

the joints and soft tissue that make up your body. A light door offers the same potential but is far more challenging. It is so easy to just push or pull it, rather than doing it with a 'Tai Chi' mind

4. Opening a jar: Any jar or container will do. They can be bloomin' tight, as you may have noticed. You may have also noticed simple strength isn't the answer – how you stand, sink your weight, and use your body to generate the necessary torque are all critical to achieving the required outcome. Plus, keep it close to your centre of course...
5. Drinking tea: It's not just about tea, any drink will do. Anything that you pick up in one hand in fact. Again, this is an opportunity to connect the cup (or whatever) correctly through your body to the ground.
6. Vacuuming: My favourite activity! But how do you push that vacuum cleaner around? It doesn't do it on its own (unless you have one of those posh robotic machines). Do you move properly to direct it where you want it; or do you just reach out, lean, and twist to get the job done with your mind drifting to the cup of tea you're looking forward to?
7. Mowing the lawn: Similar to vacuuming, but generally physically more demanding. Have you noticed how people lean when they are pushing their mower? If you were playing the Form like that, you'd expect to be corrected. If we were pushing hands in that way, you'd expect to be quickly off balance. Mow the lawn mindfully and improve your tai chi too.
8. Driving: Usually we hear talk of being physically relaxed at the wheel; but there is much more to it than that. The driving position of most cars may not be ideal but they are laid out in a certain way for good ergonomic reasons. Our arm alignment, from shoulder to fingers, is important to achieve a good structure when playing the Form. It's also important if we are to maintain good control over the car [More on this in a future article]

9. Shopping: I'm thinking specifically about pushing shopping trolleys here. You may notice how most shoppers pull and shove their trolleys, twisting their bodies to get them around corners – and then complaining of an aching back later that day. They don't help themselves by loading their trolleys badly. We, as Tai Chi practitioners, should know how to use our weight and compression to push or pull the trolley; but we should also be developing our sense of balance by becoming more aware of what's called 'Centre of Gravity (more correctly called 'Centre of Mass')'. Our heightened sensitivity means we 'feel' the dynamics of the trolley and place heavy items at the rear (closest to us), allowing us to turn the trolley with ease around the combined centre. Don't twist!
10. Communicating with other people: More on this next time; but, for the time being, I'll leave you to think about how our Tai Chi practice relates to our communication skills

But, of course, it's not just about the above list - the list is to emphasise the point that Tai Chi isn't only something to be practiced once a week in class; it is really about taking what we discover in class and integrating it into all aspects of life. Such practice helps us to be better centered and grounded in a, sometimes, turbulent world.

Nigel Ryan

Instructor Hopwood Class



In my previous article in June 2015, I wrote about the importance of the axle and the wheel in Tai Chi. In essence, for the wheel to turn smoothly the axle must be straight. This is all very well but for these things to happen correctly you must have a solid and correct base.

As we practice our tai chi, we notice our movements flow without interruption, we become aware of our posture alignment,

stepping mindfully where our feet are supposed to be, and we relax. Imagine a Ferris wheel. A large square or rectangular base is needed to support it. Only when this is anchored in place can the wheel be erected on top. We need this square and circle to experience our tai chi.

Correct stances make us more stable, balanced and help us to breathe correctly. We become more relaxed allowing us to sink down and roll the dantien efficiently so we can generate internal power. All of this opens up the vertebrae so that we can turn freely from the waist.

Locking the knees and narrow stances restrict the vertebrae and stiffen us up, we become unstable which could lead to unnecessary tension. We then lose the flowing movements of tai chi.

Once the stances are correct, sinking and rooting are happening nicely. We can then explore the circles and spirals of the form.

Tai chi takes advantage of the laws of physics; the circular movements generate momentum or a slingshot effect.

If you pick up a brick and throw it with your arm, it would not travel as far as tying a length of string around it, whizzing it around a few times and then letting go. In our ward off position, which is also the basic stance for push hands, you create the circle with your arm, then as you ward off, this circle has the peng resilience that can bounce objects away. An inflated gym or beach ball has the same effect, walk onto or hit it you would simply bounce off. Ward offs are the same - bouncy, springy, resilient yet relaxed it becomes effortless. On the other hand, balls also rotate - turn the waist and spin any incoming force off the rim of the wheel.

So, remember for all of this to happen your structure and base must be sound. We can relax more and move an incoming force effortlessly. Any tension hinders our tai chi skills and restricts free flowing movement.

To conclude it all starts with our structure. If your stances are, or do not feel, quite right, you will not maintain relaxation and balance. You must be sunk, grounded and stable. Once the base is established it then becomes all about the circles, movement, body alignment and strategy. Steve Taylor
Instructor Bromsgrove Class



The Taijiquan Process.

The philosophy of taiji as embodied in the famous taiji diagram, sometimes known as the yin-yang symbol, expresses the idea that everything in this world is composed of two opposing, yet complementary forces, and the constant flow and interchange between them. Before this world came into being a state of emptiness or wuji existed.

When we stand still at the beginning of the form we are acting out this state of wuji, which then transforms into taiji. I say "acting out" because we ourselves as physical beings already manifest the taiji in our bodies.

In practicing taijiquan, an art based on the way that the world works as understood in Daoist philosophy, we are seeking to embody this Dao (Way) and make use of the power thus harnessed in the context of martial arts. At the same time, for those of us whose interests turn in this direction, we can come to a better understanding of the way things are, the Dao.

In order to understand the Dao we must use the tools we have at our disposal, namely Mind, Body and Spirit. These three aspects of our being are trained at three levels that Cheng Man Ching Laoshi described as Man, Earth and Heaven, and which in classical Daoism are referred to as the three components of our being (Three Treasures), Vitality, Energy and Spirit (Jing, Qi and Shen).

At Stage 1, the level of vitality, we learn how to make the best use of our body so that we distinguish yin from yang clearly. As we become aware of the feelings internal to the body, such as tension and relaxation, we also become aware of how our body functions in the space it occupies. At the same time, we begin to explore the breath, which links the external world with the internal one. At this stage, we are very much focused on ourselves.

At Stage 2, the level of energy, we explore the flow and interchange between yin and yang and how this is powered by the breath and the subtle energy carried on it. Now we begin to really learn to embody the taiji. Now is the time that we begin to explore this flow with a partner or partners as well as in the environment.

At Stage 3, the level of spirit, we focus on how our understanding of yin and yang in the body, and of our place in the environment as revealed by our sensory perception, manifests in a greater and deeper awareness of all that we are conscious of. This is where we explore the subtle skills related to harmonising our interaction with all that we encounter and perceive.

All three of these stages have specific practices related to the level being worked on, and all fall within the tripod on which our art is based: Empty Hand Work, Sword Work and Breath/Energy Work. As we work through these levels, we conduct a practical exploration of the way that the Dao functions and how we can embody the Dao in our practice and eventually our life. As we train to become a living embodiment of the Dao, our own unique role or character, our true nature, reveals itself.

This is the Dao of taijiquan, as I understand it from what my teachers have taught and are teaching me.

Nigel Sutton Laoshi

PLEASE NOTE:

Please send your Newsletter contributions for future issues to markpeters@kaiming.co.uk

Advanced Sunday training sessions 2018
Below are the dates for 2018. Sessions run 9.30 to 12.30 and are £30

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure about attending or call Mark on 0121 251 6172

March 18th
April 15th
May 13th
June 3rd
August 4th & 5th – camp
Sept 9th
Oct 14th
Nov 11th
Dec 9th – grading day