

# Tai Chi Chuan

Number 16 • Spring 2005



YANG LU-CHAN  
*founder*



YANG JIAN-HOU  
*2nd generation*



YANG CHENG-FU  
*3rd generation*



YANG ZHEN-DUO  
*4th generation*



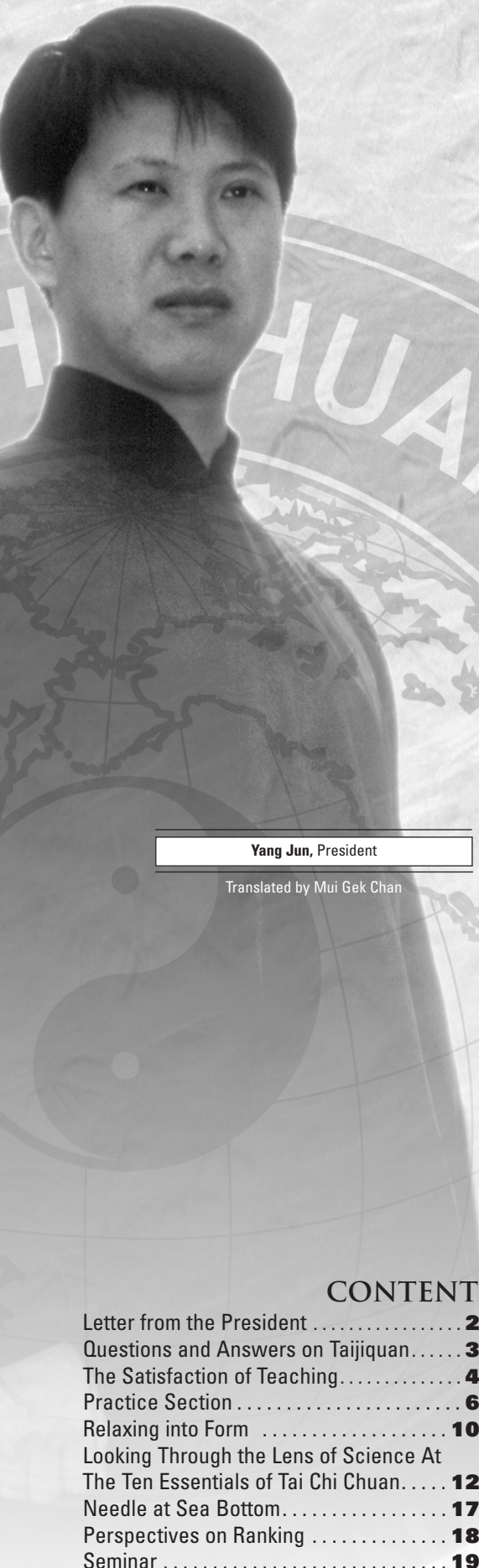
## Relaxing into Form

Looking Through the Lens of Science At  
The Ten Essentials of Tai Chi Chuan

Questions and Answers on Taijiquan

Perspectives on Ranking





# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

**Yang Jun, President**

Translated by Mui Gek Chan

**F**or the past few years, whenever I travel to the Northeast during the winter season to conduct seminars, I inadvertently bring snow with me. So, it was no exception on my recent trip to New Hampshire that it snowed heavily. In the friendly teaching and learning environment, a few taiji friends joked that the snow was brought on by me. In China, we have a saying, “Rui xue zhao feng nian” which means at the beginning of each year, a timely winter snowfall is a sign of a bountiful harvest. Therefore, since everyone seems to think I bring the snow, in the same manner, I hope I can bring all members a great year of happy family, good health, and successful undertakings.

While the organization of the celebration of my grandfather’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday is underway, I would like to share some pertinent information. In China, many taiji friends including descendents of my great grandfather’s disciples have expressed their desire to come to Taiyuan to join the birthday celebrations. A noteworthy point is that of the representatives of the five schools of taiji, my grandfather is the oldest and everyone looks up to him as the elder. The representatives of the four schools, namely, Chen style’s Chen Zhenglei, Wu/Hao style’s Wu Wenhan, Wu style’s Ma Hailong, and Sun style’s Sun Yongtian, all announced that they will be coming. This clearly indicates that we are one taiji family and I believe they will give everyone the rare opportunity to witness their skills. As more than a hundred people have already signed up to go to China, I would like to thank our international members for their support and enthusiasm for our association’s

activities and validating my grandfather’s many years of hard work and effort. Furthermore, my grandfather’s students in Malaysia are also planning to send a delegation. I am sure you can imagine the lively exchange among old friends as well as new ones.

When I announced the upcoming release of my new DVD in the previous issue of the Journal, there was an overwhelming amount of inquiries from many taiji friends regarding the exact date of the release. So, the answer is that the DVD is now available. The DVD was produced, edited, and its cover designed according to specifications. While I am sure there can be room for improvements, I believe that this video will serve as an invaluable aid for everyone learning taijiquan.

Although we plan to tour China this year, we will still maintain our schedule of summer seminars. In North America, the annual summer seminars are the main thrust of the Association’s events. They provide everyone the opportunity to learn and improve themselves. At the same time, friends have the chance to get reacquainted and be together. I invite everyone to participate in the upcoming seminars and I am confident you will be duly rewarded.

The golden rooster heralding the break of day imparts a feeling of timeliness and punctuality. The words, rooster and auspicious, “ji” in Chinese both share similar pronunciation, but have different tones. So, I would like to wish everyone an “early to rise and shine”, healthy, and auspicious Year of the Rooster!

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# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON TAIJIQUAN

By Dave Barrett

**T**'ai Chi Ch'uan Ta Wen, by Chen Weiming (*Questions and Answers on T'ai Chi Ch'uan*, translated by Benjamin Lo and Robert W. Smith, North Atlantic Books, 1985) was first published in 1929 and helped spread the teachings of the Yang Family to a much wider audience of enthusiasts in China. We would like to continue this tradition of sharing information with an ever expanding world-wide audience of Taiji players. Questions arise naturally as one progresses in Taiji studies; some have simple answers, others more complex, and then there are those special questions that have no answer save for more practice and study. If there is something that has been puzzling you, that you or your teacher have no answer for, please send it in to us and we'll be happy to try our best to help you out. I'll ask Master Yang Jun and report back on his answers in the hope that we can all learn together.

## **Question: What is the Yang Family's recommended order of instruction for learning hand form and weapons?**

As he began to answer this question, Master Yang Jun said he would have to deal with this topic from two perspectives: first the "old school" methods practiced by his family up through Yang Chengfu's time and secondly, the more modern progressive era of Taiji instruction. The main distinction between these two eras is that in the old time students had no choice but to follow the teachers every command where as now, teachers must be much more responsive to the needs of the student.

The training regimens of the early generations of the Yang Family were extraordinarily severe. "Eat, sleep and practice". Yang Laoshi tells me that both of Yang Luchan's sons tried to escape by running away and were almost driven to suicide to escape the rigors of training. He describes the curriculum as follows:

**Foundation training:** horse stance, bow stance and empty stance standing positions held for up to and beyond an hour at a time.

**Single motion training:** Taking one sequence and practicing it over and over until proficient on both sides. Standard number of repetitions = 500.

Forms were practiced with either fixed or moving steps, sometimes just one movement, one weight shift, one strike, over and over. The complete set of forms was practiced as well but the main emphasis at this time was to develop explosive force through repetition drills. "Shivering Staff" training was introduced at this point to further refine energy focus and extension. When I asked the Master if he had been trained in this manner he said very quietly, "Yes I was, all of my family has been trained using this way."

Push Hands was practiced before the weapons were introduced. Each of the techniques and specialized energies required had to be mastered and shown clearly in the hand form set. Once the Push Hands energies and skill sets were understood then the sword form was taught, again using single motion repetition, so that each technique and its specialized energy were understood. The qualities of Push Hands energies, especially "sticking, adhering and extending energies" needed to be amplified and projected through the weapon. The Saber was taught using the same methods. This regimen was practiced endlessly to develop special energies augmenting the offensive and defensive techniques of the forms. "At no time could you say that this training is finished."

In the modern era the training is much more dependant on the requirements of the individual student. The achievement of health and well being has replaced the strict martial requirements; indeed many students have no interest in such rigorous procedures. Improving balance and coordination, promoting circulation, providing mental training and longevity skills are the goals of many Taiji enthusiasts. For these students Yang Laoshi recommends the following:

**Hand Form Training:** An initial period of one and a half to two years to learn the Long Form. After this period the student enters into a review and correction class so that the principles and applications of the hand form techniques can be systematically refined. This refinement process continues and is eternally ongoing.

**Weapons Training:** Begin with the Sword Form and then learn the Saber. Yang Laoshi points out that the weapons forms and the hand form set "can help each other" with the process of learning to extend the energy throughout the forms.

**Push Hands:** is difficult to learn without a skilled partner and for this reason may be considered as a separate study process from the hand form and weapons sets.

This is a basic summary of the modern teaching methods of the Yang Family. More detailed training depends on the student's desire to acquire specialized skill sets. The wide spread popularity of Yang Style Taijiquan can be attributed to its welcoming and open teaching methods which can be practiced by all ages with positive results for the quality of life of the student.

In conclusion I asked Master Yang if there was one thing that he wished all students could learn from the Yang Family practice traditions, "In my experience too many students only practice in class. If they could create their own practice schedule, a fixed time to practice daily, almost like a mealtime. My grandfather often says,

**'Everyday you have to eat, everyday you have to practice!'** ☺



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**All Tai Chi Chuan enthusiasts are invited to submit articles, letters, and pictures for publication.**

**Both critical and complimentary letters concerning the form and content of this newsletter are welcome. Please send correspondence in electronic format to: [editor@yangfamilytaichi.com](mailto:editor@yangfamilytaichi.com) or mail to:**

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Left to right: Roberta, Mary, Cecilia, Laura

# THE SATISFACTION OF TEACHING

By Roberta Lazzeri

**S**eeing the improvements of one's pupils is the best satisfaction for a teacher. In fact only the progress of your students can give you the measure of the quality of your teaching. How frustrating when you explain and nobody understands or can practice the way you want them to. And what a joy, when you see that even just one can perform the movement the way you described. Therefore you can imagine how I felt last summer, when I came back from my long vacation and I found out that four of my "aged ones" had been training themselves all summer and were able to remember and perform the 13 Form in a most acceptable way. I cannot describe my happiness! And you should not say that 4 people out of the 50 aged students I had last year are a small percentage! They are four individuals who have committed themselves, have studied and succeeded! This does not mean only that I was able to convey the form, but also to communicate my love for Taijiquan. Only this passion can allow you to learn a difficult discipline! You can imagine how they were happy when they showed me their improvements!

I absolutely had to give them a

prize. They started to say that one euro for one class, the symbolic gift established as a reward for my teaching and their commitment was too small and wanted "to pay more". But I did not feel like this was a prize; therefore I proposed to them, "How about learning the Long Form?" At this point they became like pupils in elementary school, with bright eyes, shouts and laughter, hugs, so many hugs that I would have felt embarrassed, if I had not been as happy as they were!

It was the end of Summer, a season for reflection, when we started to study the Long Form with these, let's say, advanced students, and now, at the end of the Winter, we have finished practising the first section, thanks to the skill previously acquired by them in the 13 Movement Form and their good will, stimulated by the Winter season. Their enthusiasm has not lessened, instead it has increased; if possible, it has still increased instead; so much so, that they go on meeting for the practice even without me, and two of them, the most skilled ones, have offered to take care of the beginners by helping them for one hour a week.

By training the beginners and helping them to face the same difficulties they had previously met and partially overcome, they are able to improve the various positions and understand their meaning. This allows me to solve quite easily the difficulties of posture and balance one can expect with students in their 70's, especially in the more difficult motions of the second section. I am also counting on their renewed energies supported by the beginning of the Springtime.

The enthusiasm of this advanced group is a balm for all at the Centre for Old People and I find new ones who want to start studying Taijiquan each time.

The Centre has increased their general registrations, thanks to new people who want to learn the new activity offered (TJQ) and after class engage socially with the other students. These people are often the ones who have lost their partner, or have their children far away and in this way they get out of their isolation, meet new acquaintances and enjoy their life more.





Teaching Taijiquan to these old people has been a wonderful experience for me, quite different from teaching to the usual customers, who give a different feedback. An old person, as such, is embodying a deep knowledge, since they have lived and experienced more, have gone through the various stages of life and because of this reason, can give more as regards to knowledge and life experience, if only they are correctly valued. You only need to be able to listen. Behind every old person there is a lived life and actually at this moment there is more time to convey the acquired values. This is particularly true for women: if they are correctly stimulated and appreciated, instead of being left to themselves and their neurotic loneliness, they prove to be able to give value to their second life by reproducing ideas, after reproducing bodies during the first one.

The new ferment at the Centre for Old People, besides joy for the results and increase of the number of practitioners, has brought also a new Chinese student, who has more time now to dedicate herself again to studying Chinese calligraphy. She offered to help me to learn this wonderful art. After the TJQ class we sit down, take our brushes, ink pot, dry ink, and while preparing the ink, we discuss the similarities between the TJQ positions and the location of the Chinese characters in their reference square, or between the harmony of the movements and brush strokes, or between the difficulty of performing the positions correctly and writing in an harmonious and correct way. When I find it difficult to draw a character or she finds it difficult to perform a movement, we remind each other the similarities between the two arts and we encourage each other to be patient and perseverant.

All of this has changed my way of teaching to the usual students. While teaching to the old people I had to focus on each movement, in order to explain it clearly and give any indication on the possibility to execute it. This is not always necessary with young and flexible practitioners. For instance I had to segment the foot work of Turn Body and Chop with Fist, indicating at each point where to concentrate the body weight and where to move it, because going from a bow stance facing west to a bow stance facing east, for legs that have been walking a lot and now have some rust is not easy at all. But what a satisfaction when they become proficient in it!

#### THE ITALIAN WEBSITE

After reading that there was the Portuguese translation of the International Journal, we thought that having the Italian translation too would be beautiful, in order to facilitate our Italian associates. During the seminar in Alviano in December 2003 we talked about this with Giuseppe and Claudio. They immediately agreed to the proposal of doing the translation, which they had thought about already, but they had no time to do it.

We observed that Vera and I have both retired from our main jobs, therefore Claudio spoke with Master Yang Jun and immediately: the decision was made to start the Italian translation and to attach it on line on the Italian website. We have been in charge of the translation.

We started from number 1, then number 2; when the number 12 was issued we translated it too, and so on; when a new number is issued, we translate it and then we start again with the previous numbers, until we join the old with the new. Up until now there are the Italian translations of the 1 to 6 numbers

and of 12 to 14, in electronic format .PDF. It does not exactly reproduce the Journal, but it does include the translation of all the articles, without images, and the practice department is supported by translations and images. The scanned images of the practice department are assembled in a way that allows reading page by page. The translated review can be read on our website <http://taichi.firenze.it/>, because e-mailing big files is impossible and also, since we personally manage the website, updating and upgrading it is easy and immediate for us.

We hope that, in this way, also the new Italian associates can know the history from the very beginning, so that all of us can see the evolution of the International Association. We wish to contribute in this way to popularizing the Yang style Taijiquan more and more, not only in Italy, but in the world: many Italian people live abroad and perhaps they will like to read about their favourite style in their native language.

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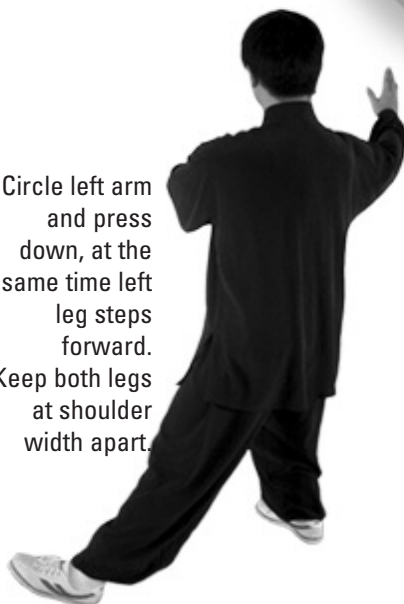


Sink onto right leg while right arm makes a big circle toward the front, left arm rotates inward and sit left palm.

Bring left palm in front of body with palm facing down, curve left arm. Sink right elbow, sit right palm with side of palm facing out

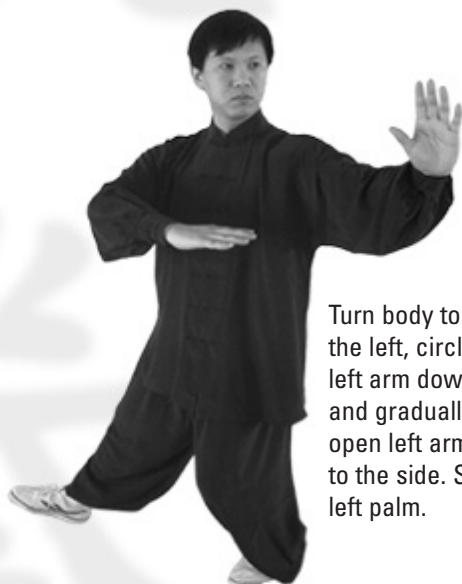


Circle left arm and press down, at the same time left leg steps forward. Keep both legs at shoulder width apart.



Turn body to the right, circle right arm downward and gradually open right arm to the side. Sit right palm.

Shift weight forward, with left foot rooting, at the same time sweep left arm forward from right to left, and gradually curve downward to form grab shape, bend right arm and sit right palm in front of body.



Turn body to the left, circle left arm down and gradually open left arm to the side. Sit left palm.

Circle right arm and press down, at the same time right leg steps forward. Keep both legs at shoulder width apart.



Form bow stance with right hand sitting by the side of right knee, at the same time, left hand strikes forward.

Shift weight forward, with right foot rooting, at the same time sweep right arm forward from left to right, and gradually curve downward to form grab shape, bend in left arm and sit left palm in front of body.



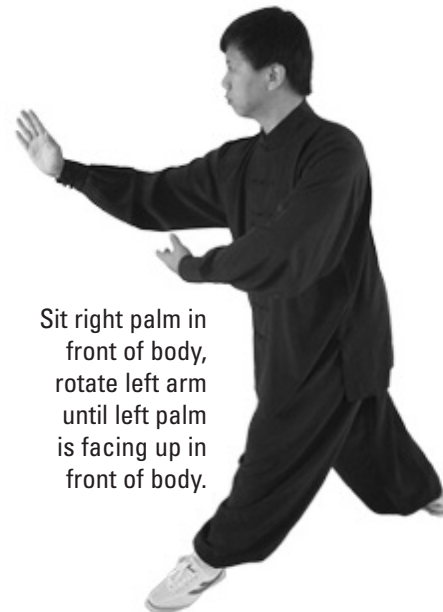
Keep left arm at the shoulder level.

At the end of this step, body should be square to the front with upper body slightly leaning forward, suspend your head and look straight forward.

Form bow stance with left hand sitting by the side of left knee, at the same time, right hand strikes forward. Keep right arm at the shoulder level.



Turn body to the left, left foot follows waist turning and opens to the left at 45°.



Shift weight slightly backward, raise left arm slightly.

Sit right palm in front of body, rotate left arm until left palm is facing up in front of body.

At the end of this step, body should be square to the front with upper body slightly leaning forward, suspend your head and look straight forward.

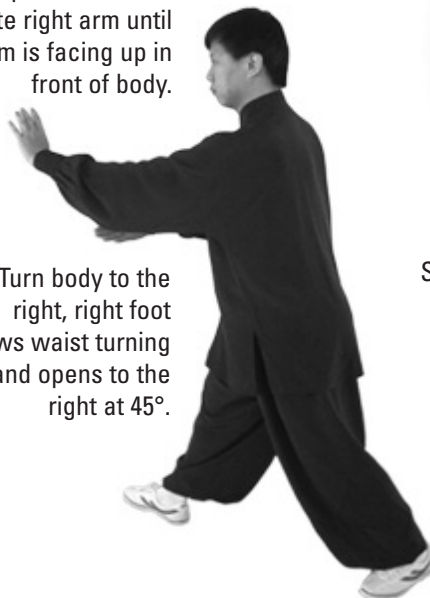
Curve left arm in front of body, left palm facing down. Look toward the direction beyond your left arm.



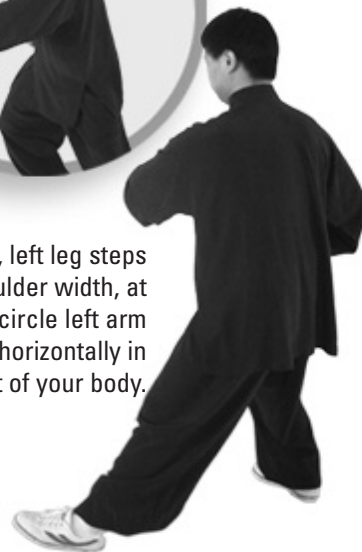
Sit left palm in front of body, rotate right arm until right palm is facing up in front of body.



Turn body to the right, right foot follows waist turning and opens to the right at 45°.



Shifting forward, left leg steps forward at shoulder width, at the same time circle left arm to the right horizontally in front of your body.



Shift weight slightly backward, raise right arm slightly.

Bring in right arm and sit right arm by the side of your right hip, right hand gradually forms fist with right elbow pointing backward.



Sit left palm in front of body, sit right fist. Look downwards beyond your left arm.



Look downwards beyond your right fist.

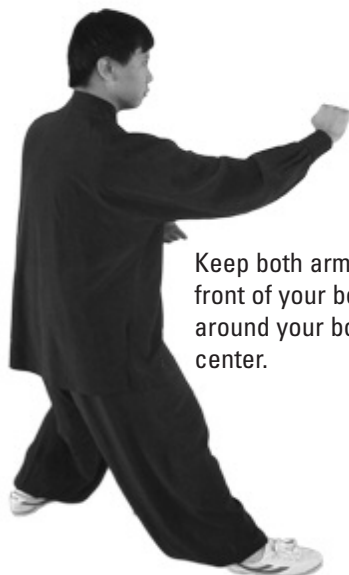
Turn body to form bow stance, sit left palm by the side of left knee, right fist punches down.



Shift weight forward, circle left arm forward from right to left and form grab shape. Rotate right arm and sit right fist.

At the end of this step, body should be square to the front with upper body slightly leaning forward, pay attention to push with right leg and support with left foot.

Shift weight backwards, turn body to the right, raise left arm, gradually rotate right arm until right fist is facing down.



Keep both arms in front of your body around your body center.



Shift weight backwards, turn body to the right, raise left arm, gradually rotate right arm until right fist is facing down.

Support all your weight with your left leg, at the same time bring in left arm and move right fist forward.

Shift weight backwards, draw in right leg, and at the same time circle both arms downwards.

Right leg steps forward, open right toes to the side at 45°.





Keep both arms rounded.



Curve right arm, sit left palm, and sink in your chest.

Turn body square to the front and form bow stance, bring in right arm to side of hip, at the same time left hand strikes forward.

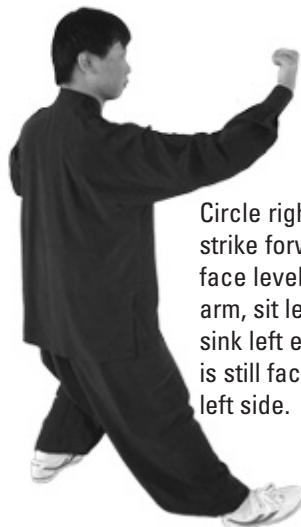


Circle left arm upwards above your forehead, and sit right arm in front of body with right fist facing down.

Turn in left toes by 135°.

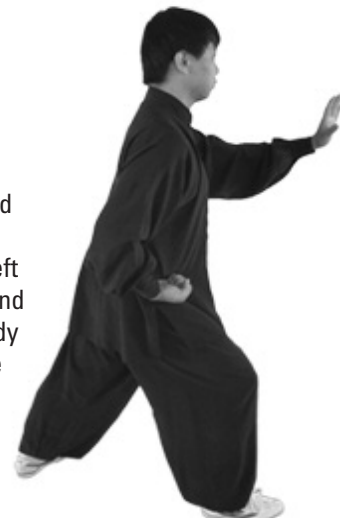


Shift weight backwards until body weight is supported mainly by your left leg.



Circle right arm and strike forwards at face level, lower left arm, sit left palm and sink left elbow, body is still facing to the left side.

At the same time right leg steps forward with right toes pointing to the front, keep both legs at shoulder width.

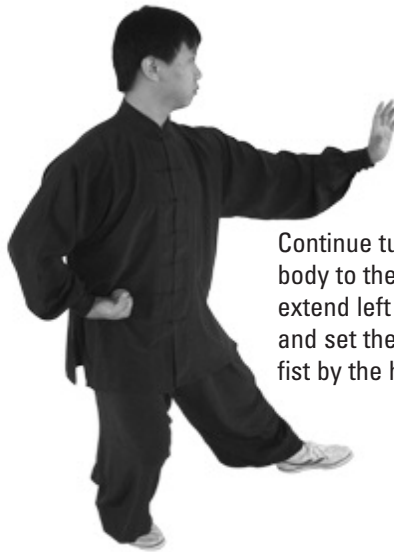


Circle both arms downwards to the left, right fist gradually changes to form the back fist.



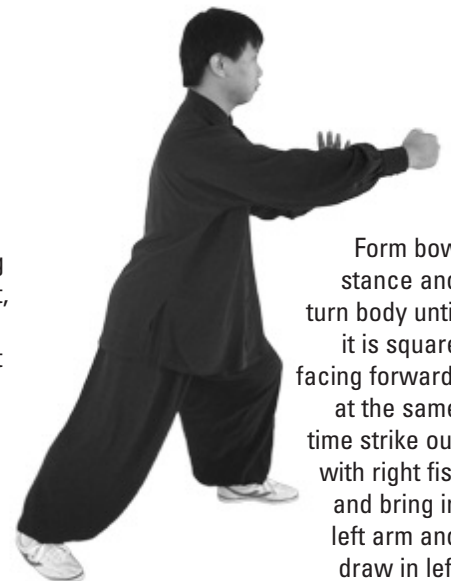
Make sure both arms are moving straight forward.

Shift weight forward with body weight on right leg. Follow body turning, circle both arms from back to front and from left to right. Turn right fist and parry forward.



Continue turning body to the right, extend left arm and set the right fist by the hip.

Keep left palm at shoulder level, at the same time the left leg steps forward.



Form bow stance and turn body until it is square facing forward, at the same time strike out with right fist and bring in left arm and draw in left palm by the side of right forearm.

# Relaxing into



By Serena Newhall

**T**ai Chi has a unique emphasis on resilient relaxation that cultivates internal strength. We are told, "Relax but do not be limp," but it can be hard to understand what this means without first feeling it. If we practice listening to the body, we can gain a greater understanding of relaxation without limpness. In this article, I explore some of the differences between stiff strength and internal strength with the aim of increasing understanding of the role relaxation plays in the development of internal strength.

In Master Yang Zhenduo's book *Yang Style Taijiquan*, he talks about relaxation with regard to "using the mind instead of force," in number six of the Ten Essentials:

*In practicing taijiquan, the whole body is relaxed, and there is not an iota of stiff or clumsy strength in the veins or joints to hinder the movement of the body.* People may ask: How can one increase his strength without exercising force? According to traditional Chinese medicine, there is in the human body a system of pathways called *jingluo* (or meridian) which link the viscera with different

parts of the body, making the human body an integrated whole. If the *jingluo* is not impeded, then the vital energy will circulate in the body unobstructed. But if the *jingluo* is filled with stiff strength, the vital energy will not be able to circulate and consequently the body cannot move with ease. One should therefore use the mind instead of force, so that vital energy will follow in the wake of the mind or consciousness and circulate all over the body. Through persistent practice one will be able to have genuine internal force.





# Form

We are all familiar with the stiff strength referred to above. Even if you are not entirely sure what is meant, you have certainly experienced stiff strength. This is the kind of strength typically used in arm-wrestling matches, lifting luggage, or carrying something heavy. Stiff strength is wooden in nature, neither nimble nor fluid, which is why people often get hurt when using this kind of strength. It's the kind of strength we use when our muscles contract suddenly and are held flexed for a period of time. It's hard for the blood and chi to circulate when this is the case. You will have experienced this constriction if you have ever had blood drawn. When the hematologist asks you to hold a tight fist, the blood cannot return to your heart and pools in the veins. The chi is likewise constricted in the meridians when the body is tense.

Muscle tension and stiff strength are related. Knots of tension in the muscles are a kind of stiff strength operating on autopilot. When you massage someone's shoulders, you can feel how hard the muscles are when tense. When we are tense we waste a lot of energy maintaining muscle tension. It's like driving around with the emergency brake on all the time<sup>2</sup>. In order to make the car go, you have to make the engine apply more force because the car is fighting itself. A car with the emergency brake on is balky and unresponsive. It moves in fits and starts. It is the same with muscle tension. The more we are able to relax, the smoother our movements become.

Once we have found the feeling of relaxation, it gets easier and easier to maintain. However, in the beginning it can be immensely difficult to allow tension to release

# Relaxing in Form

itself. Many of us are accustomed to forcing our bodies to work harder, to do more. In this modern world it is commonly considered a virtue to push ourselves beyond the limits of our bodies, pushing hard to get the job done. When we do this, we drive ourselves into exhaustion while ignoring the physical discomfort that comes from stress and tension.

*Serena Newhall has been studying Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan for 11 years. She began her tai chi studies in a Reed College PE class, with Dave Barrett, Portland Center Director. She has been studying with Master Yang Jun since 1999. She wishes to thank her teacher, Master Yang Jun and his wife Fang Hong, with the greatest respect and gratitude, for their patience and the gift of their clear teaching. She wishes to stress that any errors in this article are purely her own. She also wishes to thank her former teacher, Dave Barrett and fellow students, for their discussion and invaluable assistance in reviewing the manuscript.*

One stumbling block that people run into when learning to relax is that the concept of relaxation seems absolute: black and white. Either you are relaxed, or you are not. Actually, it helps if we can think about relaxation as a continuum. The seeds of your relaxation are contained within your tension, just like the yin-yang symbol. Seeds cannot be expected to burst into fruit without passing through all the stages of growth in between.

Learning to relax is like learning the form. When we start learning the form, we learn it in pieces: first the footwork, then the arms. We

receive many corrections, each seemingly unrelated to the last: hands like so, knees like this. We then spend months and years concentrating on the myriad details of the form. It begins to come together slowly. Eventually, we learn how to move the limbs with the waist. We learn to link the limbs together so that the pieces of each movement become part of a single application. Later we learn how all the applications flow together to make up the form. Eventually, even the form recedes and there is only

Tai Chi, the eternal cycle of yin and yang. High-level practitioners talk of relaxing into the form so completely that they do not experience themselves as separate from the universe for the duration of their practice.

Most of us, however, still have some fragmentation and tension in our form. It's the presence of this stiff strength that keeps us from being able to experience the resiliency of vital energy and internal force. But the seed of internal strength is there, and relaxation is where it grows. It actually makes sense to learn the feeling of relaxed wholeness the same way you learn the form: that is, in pieces, part by part. It's important to remember when practicing that eventually you will need to link together all the relaxed portions of your body so that you can be "one unit, linked together," as Master Yang Jun advises us<sup>3</sup>. Not only will the body be unified, but relaxation itself becomes a unified state of being.

There are many opportunities to improve your form and relaxation by simply tuning in and really listening to your body. Your body will tell you where the tension is. It will even tell you how to let go of it so you can relax.

When we begin to practice Tai Chi, we notice all sorts of new aches. A new student might think, "I thought Tai Chi was supposed to help me relax and feel less stress, but now I'm more stressed out and my shoulders hurt." The truth is, we are not always aware of the tension we carry. There are places in our bodies that have been screaming so loudly for release that we have learned to turn down the volume out of self-preservation<sup>4</sup>. Often the initial experience of discomfort when holding the postures comes

from paying attention to your body for the first time in a long time.

Listening to your body is one piece of getting to know yourself and is an essential part of becoming a competent martial artist. Master Yang Jun says: "Practice the form to know yourself. Practice push hands to know your opponent." We learn how to listen to our bodies in order to relax and access the full range of our capability. When we are relaxed our movements become smooth and effortless.

Your body will actually teach you about correct and proper alignment as you learn to relax. When you feel aches in your joints and muscles it means your body is improperly aligned or not sufficiently relaxed. We learn to let the pain guide us until it recedes. Eventually, your sense of your body will improve and you'll be able to adjust your form on the basis of what feels right.

There is a good reason why each posture is so precisely delineated. Each position is bio-mechanically designed to allow for the most natural and optimum chi flow for each application. This means that the closer we come to standardizing our positions, the more aware of "correct" and "not correct" we become because we can listen to the internal feeling of increased or blocked chi flow. The more we relax, the more the form teaches us about its nature and our own. We learn what we are capable of being and doing. The form is a container and the more we relax, the more it supports and holds us. We come to fill the form, becoming the thing that we do, with no separation between self, intent, and action. Mind, body, and spirit unite.

We must take care, however, not to relax so completely that we collapse to the ground. This kind of formless relaxation may be good for



sleeping, but in Tai Chi, we want our relaxation to be resilient and pliable, capable of springing back after some force has been applied. If we can maintain the idea of the form in the mind, then this will help the body keep its outward structure while relaxing on the inside. This helps us avoid the drooping fingers and limbs that come from being too relaxed. This is the limpness we are advised to avoid. The error here is in seeking relaxation without proper attention to form. We must pay attention to the particulars of structure in order to relax within a form and not collapse into limpness.

It's true that getting to a balanced and unified state of relaxed awareness can take a long time. Take heart though: remember that we can begin with something small and manageable. It's quite difficult to start the relaxation process with something that's been tense for decades, so I suggest starting smaller. Most of us have been carrying our tension around for years. It's a familiar annoyance, like the bulge of a wallet, or a too-tight waistband. We just don't really notice anymore. So I suggest that you don't start trying to relax with a part that has been tense for years. The tension may be so entrenched that starting there will only be frustrating and create more tension.

In Yang style Tai Chi, we start with the form, the shape of things, and learn how to relax on the inside so that the inside gradually comes to support the outside and not vice versa. The more we relax the body, the more the chi, or vital energy, will circulate naturally, expanding and filling your body. The chi will begin to circulate more smoothly to your extremities, strengthening them, and allowing us to develop internal strength.

What is internal strength? Everyone has a certain capacity for internal strength but it is often impeded by being bound or blocked within our muscular tension. As we relax more and more, the energy we release from maintaining tension will fill us from within. The resulting energy has a buoyant and expansive quality. This is one aspect of internal strength. Cultivating the postnatal chi through regular practice of the form can also augment internal strength. The more we relax during the form, the better our bodies will be able to incorporate fresh postnatal chi from the outside, whether through eating, sleeping, or breathing.

Internal strength can also be likened to the air within a tire. Imagine that the air is chi, and the tire is the body. When we are tense, it is as though the tire were filled with rocks. This throws off the spin of the wheel, and interferes with its function. When this rocky tension is dissolved, the air circulates freely and maintains strength in the tire that supports it from the inside. The surface of a tire is soft in that that when it is deflated you can press on it with your hand and it will yield. But when filled with air, a tire is quite hard. It's the pressure of air inside which creates hardness, but the air itself is soft and formless, expanding to fill its container. During push hands, someone using this kind of energy will feel hard without feeling stiff or jerky.

Genuine internal strength means that the chi circulates freely, guided by the mind, and like air, it can fill a vacuum almost instantaneously. This allows for a very rapid response time when we are relaxed because there is space for the energy to move unhindered. But when we are empty of tension, this does not imply vacuity because the resulting emptiness gets filled with internal strength. This is why being

relaxed allows us to arrive first when we strike second—because when we stick with our opponents our energy is already there, faster than conscious thought.

As we practice more, we discover that relaxing one part of the body can have a domino effect, relaxing other parts in turn. When one part relaxes, it releases the chi that was bound there and the resulting shockwave radiates outward until it hits other areas of tension. Depending on the nature of the tension, the wave either ricochets off of areas that are not ready to relax yet, or shakes loose some other area holding tension, thus allowing for its release. We want to be very soft on the inside so that the energy we unleash doesn't damage our internal organs. This is one reason to practice slowly and expect gradual improvement.

I hope you'll find some of these ideas helpful. Although I have asked you to begin by paying attention to very small areas of tension, it's important to remember that eventually we must dispense with a limited focus on individual elements of tension. We are striving for a unified sensation of relaxation that dispenses with all distinction in order to allow the "vital energy [to] circulate in the body unobstructed." From the part, we seek the whole. Understanding the particulars of our tension can lead us into a balanced understanding of relaxation and internal strength that retains form without dissolution, and resiliency without limpness. ☯

1 Yang Zhenduo. *Yang Style Taijiquan*. Morning Glory Publishers, Beijing: 1996. ISBN: 7505404814.

2 Chuckrow, Robert. *The Tai Chi Book: Refining and Enjoying a Lifetime of Practice*. YMAA Books. ISBN: 1-886969-64-7. He used the parking brake analogy in his book and I suspect this is where I picked up the idea.

3 Yang Jun. Personal communication. Phrases in quotation marks are repeated often in classes and seminars.

4 Lowenthal, Wolfe. *There Are No Secrets: Professor Chen Man-ch'ing and his Tai Chi Chuan*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA: 1991. ISBN: 1-55643-112-0. Wolfe Lowenthal expressed a somewhat similar sentiment in his book and I wish to acknowledge this with gratitude. I have no doubt his book has influenced much of this article, although it had been many months since I read it.



# LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF SCIENCE AT THE TEN ESSENTIALS OF TAI CHI CHUAN

Written and illustrated by **Holly Sweeney**

**Y**ang Chengfu's Ten Essentials insured that the practice of Tai Chi Chuan would improve people's health. It is impossible to overstate the importance of these Ten Essentials in identifying the elements that make Tai Chi Chuan a healthful practice. Without the Ten Essentials, it is doubtful that Tai Chi Chuan would be recognized all over the world as a unique exercise system that offers special benefits to those who practice it.

## **PART I**

**Looking at: "Practice continuously and without interruption"**

Smooth continuous movement is probably the most recognizable characteristic of traditional Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan. Anyone who has ever witnessed Yang style Tai Chi players remembers this distinctive quality of their practice.

What is the benefit of "*practice continuously and without interruption*" from a scientific viewpoint? There are unique results that occur as a result of applying this principle from the Ten Essentials. Slow, smooth, continuous movement produces at least two special conditioning effects for nerves, muscles, and tendons. To understand the conditioning that occurs, we first have to learn about the functional properties of nerves, muscles, and tendons.

**FUNCTIONALLY, a "muscle" represents a group of "motor units".**

A motor unit is one nerve cell, or neuron, and all the muscle fibers which it activates. (Figure 1) This is not the same as muscle structures that we see in anatomy books and that have familiar names like "biceps, triceps, quadriceps." We cannot see a motor unit. However,

any movement, large or small, weak or powerful, happens because motor units are called into action. When a motor unit activates, it is called "recruitment."

**"RECRUITMENT" means the excitement of a nerve and all the muscle fibers it activates.**

Motor units vary according to the ratio of muscle fibers to each nerve cell. If there are just a few muscle fibers activated by one nerve cell, that kind of motor unit will be found in an area of the body where precise and controlled tasks are performed, like our hands. For instance, a motor unit in our hands could have one nerve that activates 12 muscle fibers, (a low ratio of 1/12) because our hands have to perform intricate tasks. With so few fibers to each nerve cell, there will be many motor units in our hands compared to say, our thighs. In our

*This is the first of a series of articles examining the Ten Essentials from the viewpoint of biomechanical studies. Holly Sweeney, director of the Montclair, New Jersey, Center has been teaching movement arts for 20 years. She has a BA in Dance, a Master's Degree in Orthopedic Biomechanics from New York University, and is a certified teacher of the F.M. Alexander Technique. Holly has been a student of Masters Yang Zhenduo and Yang Jun since 1995. Her first adventure in movement arts was horseback riding; she reluctantly gave that up when she decided to pursue a career in dance. Dance led her to study Alexander Technique and Alexander Technique developed her interest in the science of biomechanics. Although her professional career has shifted away from dance and toward Tai Chi Chuan, she still enjoys social dancing. She recently revived her horseback riding when she met Patches, the Irish wonder horse, in December '04.*



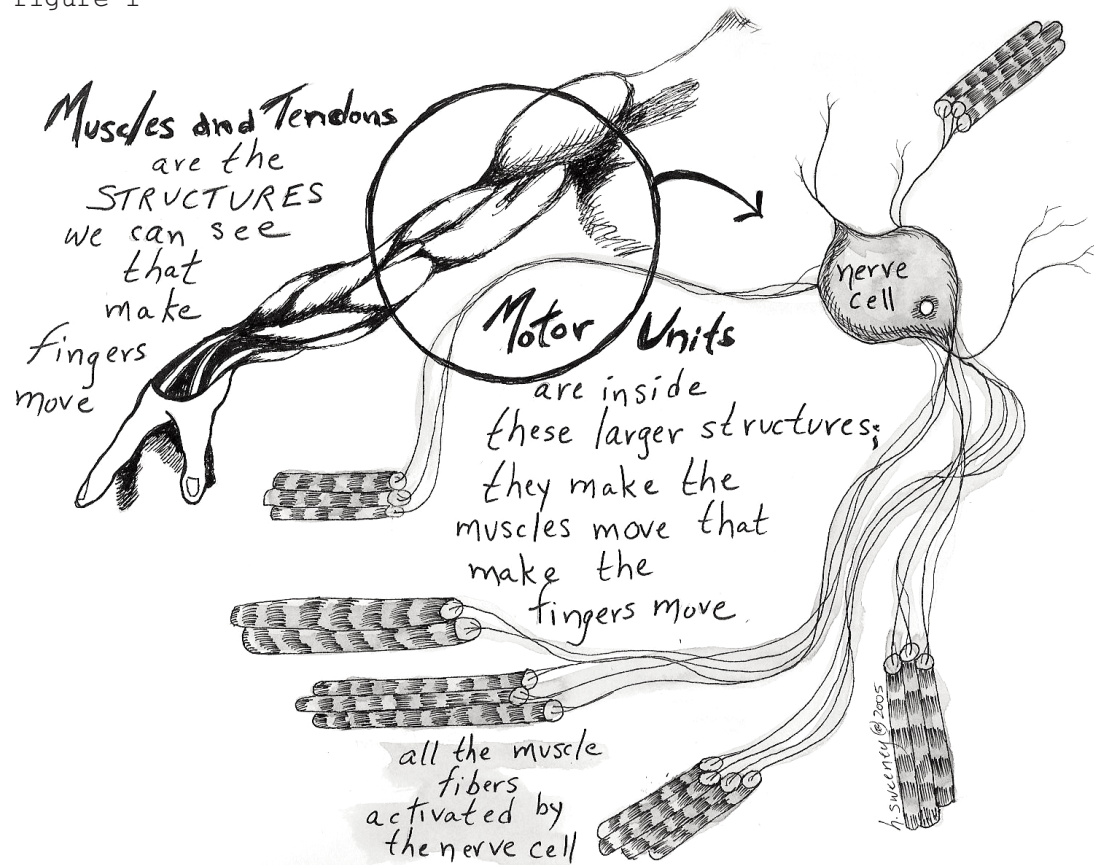
figure 1

thighs, we could have a motor unit with one nerve activating 2,000 muscle fibers, (a high ratio of 1/2,000), because power rather than precision is the main job for that part of our bodies. Generally, the ratio of nerve to muscle fibers in a motor unit varies according to the demands that are placed on the area of the body where that motor unit exists. For instance, a tap dancer will have more motor units in his feet and legs than the average person because he places more demand for precision on that part of his body than the average person.

The tap dancer's increased number of motor units is an example of the way our bodies adapt to the demands we place on them. These adaptations will occur throughout our lives. *In scientific language, this adaptation to demand is named "conditioning" or "training effect".*

Being able to move smoothly with as little or as much force as we wish to apply is quite a feat given the fact that muscle fibers are "all or nothing". This means that when a motor unit is recruited, the muscle fibers in that unit contract, all the way, as hard as they can. So, how do we ever manage to control the way we move? There are two ways this is accomplished.

One way is that our brain can adjust the rate at which impulses arrive to stimulate our motor units. To sustain a movement, like we do when we hold a posture, a steady stream of nerve pulses must arrive to our motor units to keep the muscle fibers from relaxing between impulses. This works until the muscle fibers fatigue. Imagine a symphony conductor who is directing a whole orchestra of motor units. The conductor is tapping his baton in the air to indicate a continuous pulse in a particular section of the orchestra. The sound coming from this section would seem to be continuous until



the motor units began to fatigue, then the sound would become shaky and disconnected. All of us have probably experienced this effect when we have held a Tai Chi posture for a long time and we feel a part of our body start to shake.

The other way we can make controlled continuous movement is by changing the number of motor units that are active at any one time. Muscle activity can be made smooth by making motor units recruit at different times. In this case, the symphony conductor would point his baton at one area of the orchestra and then another and then another in such a way that the sound would seem continuous and uninterrupted. While one section plays the other section rests for a moment but the sound is continuous. Sequential activation of motor units is an elegant solution for the problem of making smooth continuous movement because it prevents fatigue since some motor units can rest while other units work.

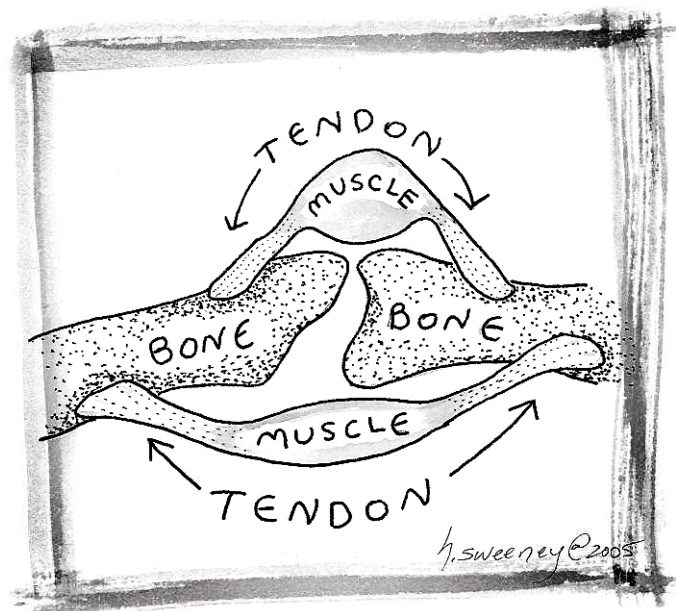
***The practice of smooth, continuous, controlled movement demands that our bodies activate and maintain more motor units than quick or interrupted movement!*** This means that someone practicing Tai Chi is consistently activating more motor units per minute than a person playing, for example, tennis. This is a significant conditioning benefit, particularly when the normal process of aging is factored into the picture.

As we age, cells die and may not be replaced in our bodies. Nerve cells are part of this normal die-off. However, when a motor unit nerve cell dies, all the muscle fibers connected to it are rendered useless and will quickly atrophy unless those fibers are incorporated into another motor unit. Whether or not a new motor unit will be formed is largely dependant on demand. "Use it or lose it" is a wise axiom. If there is no demand for a motor unit, it will not be replaced. Our bodies are interested in efficiency; nothing is maintained unless it is needed for something.

Losing muscle mass and balance capabilities are well documented parts of the aging process. However, it is now understood that loss of motor units is a significant factor in both these age-related physical changes. *It is now recognized that the most effective way to increase strength and balance in older adults is to practice activities that increase motor unit recruitment, which means that more motor units will be created and maintained.* This is one of the reasons that Tai Chi has been proven to be so helpful in improving balance and strength in older populations. Tai Chi practice, with its emphasis on smooth continuous movement, demands the participation of many motor units throughout the body for prolonged periods of time. This requires that the body not only actively maintain existing motor units but create new ones to fulfill the demand! This is one of the most beneficial conditioning effects to be gained from practicing the Ten Essentials. What else does the principle “*practice continuously and without interruption*” do for us?

*The other training benefit that we receive from practicing movements slowly and continuously has to do with our tendons.* In order to make a movement, our muscles have to be attached to something. Tendons attach our muscles to our bones so that

figure 2




movement can occur at our joints. While muscles are “excitable” elastic tissues, meaning they actively change shape when stimulated by a nerve, tendons are “passive” elastic tissues, meaning they change shape when a pulling force acts on them.(Figure 2)

Tendons exhibit some of the most amazing biomechanical properties of any tissue in our bodies. For example, tendons have incredible tensile strength. “Tensile strength” means the ability to resist being pulled apart. A tendon can resist a pull of about 15,000 pounds. A muscle can resist only about a 30 pound pull before it tears apart. Also, tendons display different viscoelastic properties depending on how they are pulled. If the pull is even and continuous, tendons will “creep”, meaning slowly elongate. If the pull is sudden and abrupt, tendons will stiffen. This property of tendons is important to understand when we do stretching exercises. If we bounce our body weight into the stretch, our tendons will stiffen, exerting more pulling force on our muscles which can cause tears if the force is too great. If we do stretching exercises in a slow and gentle way, the tendons will elongate and our muscles will be protected from injury.

Another interesting property of tendons is their ability to store energy. Tendons can store about

ten times more energy than steel and they are also very energy efficient – about 93% of the energy they store can be returned and used. In fact, the short term energy storage achieved by our tendons when we move around accounts for at least 50% of our bodies overall energy efficiency.

***Tendons make the action of our muscles more powerful by storing the force of our muscle contractions. The slower the contraction, the more energy is transferred to the tendon.*** Therefore, the essential principle of continuous, uninterrupted movement performed at a slow rate of speed creates ideal conditions for maximum energy storage in our tendons which contributes greatly to our overall endurance and strength.

In summary, practicing Tai Chi Chuan with slow, smooth, flowing, uninterrupted movement provides a strong training effect for our bodies by stimulating our nervous systems to create and maintain high numbers of motor units and by exercising our tendons in a way that promotes elasticity and efficiency. 

**RESOURCES FOR THIS ARTICLE:**

Basic Biomechanics of the Musculoskeletal System, Margareta Nordin and Victor Frankel  
Functional Movement Development Across the Life Span, Donna Cech and Suzanne Martin  
Prime Mover, A Natural History of Muscle, Steven Vogel  
The Physiology of Excitable Cells, David Aidley  
Animal Physiology, Knut Schmidt-Nielsen

## EUROPEAN SEMINAR ANNOUNCEMENT

June 1 to 5, 2005

Theresa Mei Mei Teo,  
disciple of Master Yang Zhenduo,  
will present a Seminar in Italy,  
outside of Rome.

For more information please contact her:  
mei mei @yangfamilytaichi.com



# NEEDLE AT SEA BOTTOM

By Sara Olsen

**N**eedle at Sea Bottom is not just the name of a posture in the Yang Form. It is an example of how myth and fact have blended throughout China's long history to become accepted as history. Accounts of events and figures from the earliest Neolithic years were not recorded in writing until much later. The exploits of great mythical and historical figures preserved for centuries in spoken tales made their way into written records in many different versions. One of the earliest myths, the story of Great Yu concerns events over 4,000 years old.

The story of Yu is bound up with the history of the Yellow River, which watered the cradle of Chinese civilization. Sometimes called "China's Sorrow", the life-giving river also took lives, repeatedly bursting its banks in floods and changing course 26 times over 2000 years. "Whoever controls the Yellow River controls China", said Yu. He is described as an engineer, a man of great virtue dedicated to serving the people and he is credited with the first "taming" of the river. The basis of his moral teachings were deciphered from a scroll of writing on the back of a "divine tortoise" which had presented itself to him while he was engaged in drawing off the floods. Because of his actions, he was made Emperor and is credited with founding the Xia Dynasty (2205-1767 BC).

Another version of Yu's life relates that he and his father Gun were superhuman beings who attempted to help the ancient earth, which was covered by floods. Gun stole from heaven the magic "ever-swelling soil" to construct dams. When he failed and died, Yu took over and constructed channels for the water to drain to the sea. He fashioned the land into nine islands or provinces, which he gave to the humans.

In a much later story, Great Yu tamed floods with the help of Ying Dragon and a great iron chain. Ying Dragon's tail would split in two blockages on the river, and Great Yu would leave a great iron chain to hang down to the river bottom. After taming the floods, Great Yu or Wondrous Yu chained up the dragon

to prevent trouble. In both these versions, Great Yu accomplishes his work by not fighting the waters. Dams failed because earth cannot control water. Channeling the water worked after iron was used to stabilize the flow by making the water heavy.

Finally, Yu the Great is honored by inclusion in the well-known 16<sup>th</sup> century literary work *Journey to the West*. In Volume I Chapter 3 of this epic, Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, called a meeting on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. His followers had all trained diligently on weapons taken from the palace of the Prince of Aolai, but the Monkey King lacked a suitable weapon for himself. His advisers stated that a Divine Sage should not have to use an earthly weapon and urged the Monkey King to travel underwater to the Dragon palace of the Eastern Sea and ask for whatever weapon he would like. The Monkey King journeyed under the sea and was announced as an Exalted Immortal to Ao Guang, the Old Dragon King. The Monkey King made known his need and desire for a weapon. An increasingly anxious Ao Guang, the Old Dragon King offered him first a large sword, then a nine-pronged spear and last a patterned heavenly halberd. The Monkey King tried and rejected them all as "too light, far too light", despite the Old Dragon King, Ao Guang's cry that each weapon weighed thousands of pounds.

Seeing the Old Dragon King, Ao Guang's terror, his Dragon wife and daughters spoke of a piece of iron shining with a rosy glow. "That piece of miraculous iron is one of the nails that Yu the Great used to fix the depth of rivers and seas when he brought the waters under control", said the Dragon King. "What use could it be?" However, Ao Guang described the iron nail to The Monkey King who was eager to try it out. He found it to be an iron pillar 20 feet long and very thick. He voiced the wish that it be shorter and thinner, whereupon it immediately shrank. Tossing it into the air, he wished for it to be thinner still, and so it was. Examining it closely, he saw two gold bands around the black iron middle part with the line of writing

"As -You -Will -Gold -Banded -Cudgel: Weight 13,500 pounds." Delighted with his new weapon, the Monkey King, the Heaven Born King, frightened the Old Dragon King into calling forth his brothers the Dragon Kings of Southern, Northern, and Western Seas so that he could obtain clothes worthy of his new weapon, the iron cudgel. The Dragon Kings vowed among themselves to file a protest with heaven about the Monkey King's behavior. But fearing the powers of the Monkey King and his weapon, the Dragon Kings gifted him with lotus-root cloud-walking shoes, a suit of golden chain mail, and a phoenix-winged purple gold helmet.

The Monkey returned to his Mountain and awed his followers with his iron weapon and his glorious appearance. By chanting "shrink, shrink, shrink" the Monkey King's great iron pillar could shrink to needle size and be hidden in his ear. Then when he chanted, "grow, grow, grow" the needle could grow back to twenty feet long and be as thick as a peck of grain. The Monkey King exclaimed to his followers that everything has its rightful owner. The iron piece had been lying in the sea treasury for thousand of years but it just started shining this year. None of the Dragon King's men could move it, so he fetched it himself. And so he, the Monkey King, Heaven Born Sage, claimed the iron pillar as his personal weapon.

Engineer, ruler, superhuman being, and literary allusion are all fitting names for the Great Yu. There are other versions of his story not listed here, including one recorded in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. that seems to emphasize Confucian qualities of diligence and piety. And even though his name does not appear in its title, Great Yu's story in all of its versions is the story of "Needle at Sea Bottom".

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Lang-xian "Censor Xue Finds Immortality in the Guise of a Fish"



# PERSPECTIVES ON RANKING

By Bill Walsh

**W**hen I wrote the article, "What is this Thing called Ranking?" I asked for readers to respond to my ideas. The feedback I got from the article came from three categories: people I ran into who read the article, those who emailed me, and eight individuals who had just been ranked.

The group I met in person liked the article and thought ranking was a good incentive to improve. The thought of performing before judges was an incentive to work harder and attend more classes. They arranged more practice sessions with others and were more interested in feedback on their forms. The performing aspect scared some and the idea of being able to be judged in a small group of two to four was comforting. Some were completely frightened of the performance aspect and maybe, in time, will warm up to the idea. Others felt they would never be able to perform publicly. This group of responders was mostly over fifty years old. I encouraged them by saying that the pressure of performing is only a glimpse at the pressure of responding to a situation where your life is threatened. One responded by saying that when he goes to a funeral, he would rather be the person in the casket than the person who gives the eulogy! (Seinfeld)

Another interesting idea proposed by this first group was to have a separate and more lenient ranking for seniors. They hoped it could be based on the thirteen form set with gradations in levels based on also being able to do sections of the long form. As they were able to do the long form they wished for generous marks for balance problems.

The group that emailed me was comprised of veterans of the martial arts and had ambivalent feelings about what ranking means. They were mainly under fifty years old and mostly in their thirties. They wrestled with a question: should a rank designate a fighting ability? Shouldn't a rank give you information about the person's ability to handle themselves? They thought that being able to achieve a rank by service is akin to being able to buy it. In all martial arts environments, service to the organization is a positive contribution and only a consideration towards the attainment of a rank. They argue this makes the fighting aspect less pure. However, clearly evaluating fighting ability is not always easy anyway. For them, push hands and applications are the most attractive aspects of Tai Chi Chuan. Then again, push hands is not fighting but an opportunity to train the waist and improve balance and so the discussions continues.



About ten years ago, Mario Napoli and I went to Boston to attend a push hands contest. Sergio Arione was there too. Mario and Sergio were champions. Points were won by pushing the other contestant out of the circle or uprooting them. A person, who was very strong and in extraordinary shape, yet was a beginner in Tai Chi Chuan, won the push hand contest! Don Miller was his teacher and admitted, "His form is not very good". If a professional wrestler enters a push hands contest, I put my money on him. So I question if push hands contests are accurate evaluators of an internal art. One of the down sides of competing in push hands contests is that you spend a lot of time practicing push hands in a competitive manner. The result is that contests often resort to horns-locked pushing and it is very hard to endure that type of physical strain without tightening and losing some flexibility in the shoulders. If you are a competitor, you have to be thinking of winning at every moment and the sages advise, "Invest in Loss"; don't be afraid to be pushed and learn from being pushed. To advance in Tai Chi, it is very important to be very flexible and open in the shoulders, so excessive external push hands can be a hindrance to development. However, it is an invaluable experience to push with very strong individuals or students of other martial arts. It answers the question "Will you show me what you can do?" It is a clear indicator of the sum total of your internal and external energy. You can learn a lot about your own good and bad habits.

Perhaps Tai Chi is best evaluated as an exercise modality by observing the changes in a student over time rather than comparing different students. Individuals who have made great gains considering their starting point may have more to offer new students than individuals who take to new movements with ease and are less interested in development.

The last group I spoke with had just attained the rank of four and their feelings and fears were fresh. In recent journals, Pat Rice, Virginia's Center Director, had spoken of the preparation she provided this group before the ranking test. Robb Wagg, one of the individuals tested, wrote of his personal experience. Both articles are insightful about the length of preparation and intensity of the experience. In our debriefing session, they shared that they all experienced being nervous during the process of testing, and were all very elated to be finished. They were glad they took the challenge. They felt closer to each other for having endured the process. They developed a supportive bond. In response to the question: "Why be ranked?" they made two points that I thought were significant. A few talked about the ability to be certified as a teacher that came with the rank of four. This appeared to be the strongest reason I had heard. With a rank of four, an individual can apply to be certified by the International Yang Style Association as a Certified Instructor. The other point made for enduring the ranking process was that his Tai Chi teacher thought it was a good idea and firmly supported the process, so his trust in her motivated him to try whatever she thought was good for him.

As more and more individuals take the plunge and prepare to be ranked, new perspectives will arise. Ranking of levels 1-3 can be done at a local Yang Cheng Fu Center and only the Continental and International Ranking Committees can do ranking of levels 4-6. The International Ranking Committee members include Masters Yang Zhenduo and Yang Jun, Han Hoong Wang, Pat Rice, Mei Mei Teo and Bill Walsh. Others, who have at least the rank of those being judged, can be invited by the committee to

assist them in the judging. Adding a judge is usually done if there are not enough committee members present. As more people achieve the rank of six, the Continental Ranking Committees will be created. This summer all levels of ranking will be available at the New York seminar in August. See [www.nycyangfamilytaichi.com](http://www.nycyangfamilytaichi.com) for more details.

In the future ranking levels 7-9 will also be available. Level 1-3 are beginners, levels 4-6 intermediate, and levels 7-9 advanced. Only the International Ranking Committee can judge the advanced levels.

My personal opinion is that ranking should signify an individual's understanding of the Yang Family teachings. The higher the rank the better the person should emulate the standard characteristics of the forms. The theory test certifies that there is an understanding of the history and the theory of Tai Chi. The process of attaining ranks gives the participant realistic goals to shoot for. Short range goals help us achieve long range objectives. Ranking is one step in a process that encourages personal development. Whether you have an interest in ranking or not, the study of Traditional Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan offers the opportunity to improve our health through the development of a stronger and more flexible body, establish great friends from all round the world, visit cities in China that will recognize you by your Tai Chi movements and welcome you, and the opportunity to study with well respected and generous Chinese Masters. We will soon enjoy a trip to China and while we celebrate Master Yang Zhenduo's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday we will have the chance to meet hundreds of local practitioners. What a wonderful way to enrich our understanding! ☯

# 2005 SEMINAR



# 2006

**KÖLN GERMANY****May 27-29 Hand Form**

Contact: Frank Grothstueck  
Ph: 49 221-625629  
frank@yangfamilytaichi.com

**PARIS FRANCE****June 4-7 Hand Form**  
**June 8-10 Sword Form**

Contact: Nguyen Minh DUC  
duc@yangfamilytaichi.com

**LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY USA****June 17-20 Hand Form**

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**NEW YORK CITY, NY USA****Aug 13-15 Hand Form**  
**Aug 16-18 Sword Form**

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**SEATTLE, WA USA****Aug 27-29 Hand Form**

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nancylucero@yangfamilytaichi.com  
or fanghong@yangfamilytaichi.com

**STOCKTON, CA USA****Jan 14-15 Hand Form**  
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Contact: Dr. Raymond Tom  
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**EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ USA****Feb 18-19 49 Hand Form**

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