

# T'ai Chi Classics



# 太極



Single Whip

I A discussion on the practice of T'ai Chi Chuan  
*(Traditional. Sometimes attributed to Chang San-Feng, 13th  
century)*

In each movement the entire body must be light and it is especially important that all parts of the body string together flexibly.

\* \* \*

The spirit should withdraw and gather (remain in calm concentration).

\* \* \*

Do not allow gaps, do not allow unevenness'; do not allow discontinuities.

\* \* \*

Your feet are the root, the energy passes thru your legs, control is in the waist and form emerges in your hands and fingers. Advance and retreat in accord with opportunity and conditions of strength.

\* \* \*

When opportunity and conditions of strength are not grasped, the body is scattered and in disorder; then the fault must be sought in the waist and in the legs. Up or down, forward or backward, left or right, in all movements this fault is to be guarded against.

\* \* \*

All of these comments describe the essential idea, and not merely the externals.

\* \* \*

When there is up, there must be down; when there is forward, there must be backward; when there is left, there must be right. If the idea is toward moving upward, hold at the same time the idea of a downward return. For if upon lifting an opposing force you add the idea of pushing it down, then the root of your opposition is broken, and without doubt you will overcome it quickly.

\* \* \*

The empty and the solid should be clearly distinguished. Each physical situation by nature has an empty side and a solid side. This is true of every physical situation.

\* \* \*

The entire body is strung together, let there not be the slightest break.

\* \* \* \* \*

## II The Treatise on T'ai Chi Chuan

(Attributed to the foremost pupil of Chang San-Feng, named Wang Chung-Yueg, who lived during the era 1368 to 1644 AD)

*Note: For the references in this and the succeeding paper to "the other" and to "combat" it might be well to consider the concept of "chuan" which does not simply mean a physical fight, but may also apply in a wider context.*

\* \* \*

T'ai Chi as the ultimate form arises out of Wu Chi, the formless. It is the origin of movement and quietude, and the mother of yin and yang. In movement it opens, in quietude it closes. Without ever exceeding or falling short, T'ai Chi moves in bending and stretching. When I yield to a hard force this is called "moving away". When I take on a hard force this is called "sticking" with it.

\* \* \*

When the other's movement comes quickly, I respond quickly. When the other's movement comes slowly, I follow slowly. In a myriad of changing situations, the principle is the same.

\* \* \*

From familiarity with the exercise there comes a gradual realization and understanding of force; from the understanding of force there comes a spiritual illumination. But it is only after long diligent practice that this sudden seeing-thru will be achieved. Empty, alert, still, and quiet. The breath sinks toward the solar plexus. Not inclined, not leaning. Suddenly concealing, suddenly manifesting. When an intruding weight

comes to my left, my left is empty; when an intruding weight comes to my right, then my right disappears.

\* \* \*

Looking up, the other feels my height; looking down the other feels my depth; advancing he feels the distance lengthening; retreating he is more crowded. A small bird cannot take off; a simple fly cannot land. Others do not know me, but I alone know others.

\* \* \*

When great heroes are without match, it is because of all these factors.

\* \* \*

There are many other techniques (of combat). Whatever their differences they all nevertheless rely upon the strong to overcome the weak, and the slow to give in to the fast. But as far as the strong beating the weak, the slow giving in to the fast, such things derive from natural abilities and do not have to be studied. When "four ounces move a thousand pounds" it is obviously not a matter of strength. When an old man can withstand many young men, how can it be thru an accomplishment of speed?

\* \* \*

Stand as a poised scale. In action be as a wheel.

\* \* \*

With your center of gravity displaced to one side you can be fluid. If you are "double heavy" (weight evenly distributed on both feet), you become stagnant.

\* \* \*

Often one encounters someone who even with many years of study has not achieved proper development and is still subdued by others; this is because he has not realized the fault of "double heaviness". To avoid this fault, one must know yin and yang: to "stick" is also to move away, to move away is also to "stick". Yin does not leave yang, and yang does not leave yin. Yin and

yang always complement each other – to understand this is necessary in order to understand force.

\* \* \*

When one understands force, the more one practices the more wonderful will be his development. One comprehends in silence and experiences in feeling until gradually one may act at will.

\* \* \*

There is the traditional advice, "sacrifice self, follow the other"; but many have misunderstood this to mean abandoning the near in order to seek the far. A mistake of inches but an error of a thousand leagues! Therefore the student should pay careful heed to what is said.

### III An exposition on the practice of the 13 movement forms

*(Attributed to the same authorship as the preceding. See II)*

Note: The 13 movement forms are:

stepping forward,  
stepping backward,  
turning left,  
turning right,  
standing centered,  
expanding,  
drawing,  
crowding,  
pressing,  
gathering,  
twisting,  
elbowing,  
leaning.

In the order listed above these are the five positions and the eight dynamic applications of force which are incorporated in t'ai chi.

\* \* \*

The "will" (heart) moves the breath, must order it to sink in, then it can be gathered into the bones.

The breath moves the body, must make it pliable, then it can easily follow the will.

If your energies are picked up, then there is no worry about being sluggish and heavy: to accomplish this your head must feel suspended; but in idea and in breath you must be able to change with alacrity in order to achieve roundness and smoothness of movement; this is accomplished by the interchange of empty and solid.

To deliver force we sink our center of gravity, maintain looseness and quietude, and concentrate in a single direction.

To stand still we remain centrally poised, calm and expanded, and can thus protect ourselves from all eight sides.

To move the breath as fine pearls (an image expressing smallness, roundness and smoothness) there is no place that it does not reach.

To use force as hardened steel. there is no hardness it cannot destroy.

The form is as a hawk catching a rabbit; the spirit, as a cat watching a mouse.

In quietude as the mountain. In movement as the river.

To store force: as if drawing the bow. To issue force: as if releasing the arrow.

Thru the curve seek the straight.

First store, then issue.

Strength issues from the back.

Steps follow changes in the body.

To withdraw is to release. To release is to withdraw. To break is to continue.

Back and forth must have folds (no straight path in either case), advancing and retreating must have turns and changes.

Thru what is greatly soft one achieves what is greatly hard.

If one is able to inhale and exhale, then one can be light and lively.

Breathing must be nourished without impediment (no holding of the breath and no forcing it), then no harm will come.

Force must be bent (like a bow) and stored, then there is enough to spare.

The "will" orders, the breath goes forth as a banner, the waist takes the command.

First seek to stretch and expand; afterwards seek to tighten and collect; then one attains integrated development.

It is said: first in the "will", afterwards in the body. The stomach stays loose. The breath is gathered into the bones. The spirit remains calm.

The body quiet. At every movement remain collected.

It must be remembered; as one part moves, all parts move; if one part is still, all parts are still.

Moving back and forth, the breath goes to the back, gathered toward the spine, making firm the vitality within, but manifesting leisurely calm without.

Step as a cat walks. Use force as if drawing on silk.

Throughout the body the idea rests upon the vitality and not upon the breath; to rest upon the breath causes stagnancy (to guide it, that is, as distinguished from moving the breath, which is to allow it free passage however it may choose to come or go).

To be with breath (holding the breath) is to be without strength.

To be without breath (moving the breath, explained above, is likewise called without breath) one can be really strong.

The breath is as a wheel. The waist is as the wheel hub.

\* \* \*

It is said: If the other is not moving, the self does not move. If the other moves slightly, then the self moves sooner than he. Seemingly loose, but not loose. About to stretch, but not yet stretched. The force sometimes stops but the idea continues (what in western terms is known as the "follow-thru").

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