

**CLASSICAL TAI CHI
FORUM 12
March, 2005**

Hopefully, as spring is coming, you are all blooming with your practice of classical tai chi! Please continue to ask questions and share your thoughts and ideas by visiting the Classical Tai Chi discussion board at Yahoo Groups. Of course, you can still send them to me, but the opportunity exists to share your thoughts with each other and sometimes one can learn a lot from other students, as well.

In July 2005, Master Hwa has been invited to give lectures and intensive workshops in Kent, England at the Seeker's Trust in association with the Feng Shui Institute. Additional information will be available toward the end of May at www.classicaltaichi.com and www.feng-shui-institute.org

April 14th, 2005 Master Hwa will give a lecture/demonstration, free and open to the public at the University of Buffalo, Philosophy Department, 141 Park Hall, Amherst, NY (North Campus) at 12:30 pm on the application of classical Chinese philosophy in tai chi. www.philosophy.buffalo.edu/ARCHIVE/fa04sp05su05/calendar/colloq_s05.htm

Best wishes to all of you! E. Marie



**Grandmaster Yang Wabu, 101st Birthday and New Year
February, 2005**

Master Hwa with some of his Classical Tai Chi students

www.classicaltaichi.com

James L writes:

...I understand the health benefits of tai chi you have talked about. I can feel that at my lower back and abdomen even though I have start learning from your video recently. Since the world of tai chi involves many aspects besides the tai chi form such as tui shou, san shou or free sparring etc. **What are the health benefits of these activities? Can one also learn internal movements from these activities?**

Master Hwa's reply:

Tai Chi's health benefits derive primarily from the Form practice. Silk reeling exercises (chan ssu jing) which are equivalent to practice a very short segment of the Form repeatedly and continuously (see also discussion in forum4), and similar to motion-induced qi gong exercise, are also beneficial to health. Tui shou (push hand), when it is carried out with sensitivity and uninterrupted rhythm, it is like a two-person-silk-reeling exercise and has the same health benefits. San shou or sparring practice, because of its unpredictable and abrupt nature is entirely for martial art application contributing little to health benefits. In fact, the explosive fa jing move (in contrast to deliver jing gradually), very popular in tai chi martial art application, shocks not just the opponent but also the deliverer of the jing. The accumulated effect on the heart and other internal organs cannot be ignored. One should devote certain amount of Form practice to sooth and tune the body to counteract such undesirable effect.

It is certainly possible to learn specific internal movements from silk reeling exercise, push hand, and sparring exercise. After all, in any sports, the top athletes in these sports most likely have learned to master internal power through repetition and years of practice of that few power moves. The difference is that Classical Tai Chi Form teaches the basic principle of internal discipline so that it is applicable to any power move. I do see some of the tai chi teaching programs that are weak in the teaching of Forms, trying to use other means such as sparring exercise to compensate. The students may develop internal power that way but will loose out on the health benefits inherent in the Form practice.

During a period in late1930 and 1940s, there were spirited discussions among Chinese martial arts circle, whether or not Tai Chi was good for the health. The questions were raised apparently because several high profile Tai Chi masters died early, Yang Pan-hou, 55 years old; Yang Cheng-fu, 53 years old. Many of the topics regarding tai chi and health were debated. One certainly cannot ignore common healthy living habits even one is doing Tai Chi diligently. Yang Cheng-fu is known for his huge overweight and great girth in his later years. It is said that the girth affected his Tai Chi posture also.

One should also guard against the following situation: After the person has mastered the Form practice, he or she now knows how to marshal the internal energy for delivery. It is easy at this point to concentrate on martial art practice only, because one could see the rapid advance through such practice. But, in so doing, one neglects the beneficial effect of Form practice. In other words, in order to reap the health benefits of Tai Chi, one has to regularly practice the Form and not be content with the sense that one has mastered the Form.

Jim D. writes:

Would you please share with me the kind of training schedule you adhered to when initially studying Classical Taiji? How much time did you devote to it? What did you do? I am finding that as I become more involved in the process of learning the forms to include warm up, meditative postures, Tai Chi Walk, stretching, practicing quarter body internal discipline, and then practicing the first four-forms (this process takes about 45 minutes), more time will be required as I build on these foundations and fundamentals. I know in the overview it was suggested that we do not have to master each set, and that sometimes moving into the next group can sometimes help to learn the old forms "if we continue to practice them." However, it seems as I build on and continue to practice what I am attempting to learn, more time will be required. I am not complaining about the time. I really enjoy practicing Taiji and want to continue. **I am just concerned that eventually I will not have enough time (45-60 minutes per day is about what I can afford in a busy schedule....weekends provide more time) to proficiently learn the 108 Forms. What would you suggest?**

I also want to share with you that I participated in a training entitled Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) recently and found that the study of "ward off" helped. I could see my growth from studying Yang Style Large Frame, and now Classical Tai Chi.

Master Hwa's reply:

The amount of dedicated time you spend on the tai chi training is good. That was the kind of time I spend during my beginning years. Certainly, this is no comparison to those early masters who, according to the writings about them, devoted full time to the practice in their learning years. The difference is that they set sight on a much more demanding goal of becoming an excellent martial artist in a relative short time.

The kind of learning time most working people can devote to now a day is appropriate for learning the Form and reaping the health benefits come with it. When you learn more lessons, you can shift the emphasis and at the same time try to incorporate some of the moves you learn from earlier lessons to your every day life, or, utilize every opportunity to sneak a move or two through out the day. The more tai chi becoming a part of your life, you will enjoy more its health benefits and also gain from subconscious learning. You describe the application of tai chi such as "ward off" in your work is exactly what I am talking about here.

Posts from the Classicaltaichi Yahoo Group:

SQUARE FORM & LEFT HAND FORM

Paul P writes:

I have now commenced learning the form on the opposite side. This is quite difficult to co-ordinate. Is there an instruction tape available for this?

William C. wrote:

I have just started to learn the square form and find it so interesting and yes invigorating on some level that I have put a lot of time into it recently. I found that counting the number of movement elements in each lesson and then counting my own in separate practice is a great help. I also find myself asking about my round form and see that I need to do a review of it as well. Some moves in the square form have me asking "is there a similar sequence in the round form?" "Do I really know the round form?"

Do those of you practicing the square form experience it as invigorating? Maybe it comes through the clear separation of yin and yang moves even without an internal discipline component in the square form.

Troy W. writes:

I have been working on the square form as well. My first attempt was to use learning the square form and the left handed form at the same time. To do this I just moved the blue ribbon from my right to my left side. This quickly became too much, and I found it impossible to do my normal form practice without becoming confused.

Since then I have tried to just learn the square form. My first experience was that I would catch myself grinning like a fool. It was amazing how much more I was learning about my Taijiquan form simply by doing these sequenced movements. In both self defense application and body mechanics, it was amazing.

I had not thought of the counting technique. I might try that. How many moves have you counted in the kicking lesson? I think it is 8 or 10.

All that being said, I have yet to get past the first couple of lessons in the square form without referring to the DVD as a reference. Even a couple of days of not practicing the square form leaves me referring the DVD to be sure I am doing the movements in the correct sequence. Getting the sequence correct is essential to understanding the body mechanics and the self defense applications. At least that is my impression.

I do have a question for those on the forum or Master Hwa. **Is there a key to remembering the sequence of the movements? For instance, do you start with the upper or lower body when the lower body moves? Do you move the right or the left side first when the upper body moves?** It just seems like so much to learn from a video. Especially without some voice over instruction.

Master Hwa's reply:

I am glad to read William and Troy's posts that they enjoy the square form so much. For practitioners who have the temperament to enjoy square form, it is really best to start with the square form as it is intended to be.

I myself also continually learn to appreciate the square form more and more. Square form isolates and concentrates the lower body internal movements and leaves the upper body internal movements, especially the quarter body movements, to be practiced in the round form. This approach to select and isolate the easier part to learn first is logical. In fact, there are more subtle reasons for this. Some of the isolated moves in square form are ideal preparatory exercise for difficult to learn moves in the round form.

I do not know any other good way to remember the sequence in the form except practice.

Certainly William's counting method should be able to check whether any move is missing. This method also encourages one to examine the movements very carefully, not missing any details. This is a big plus, since there are some very subtle and hard to see moves in the form.

To learn the opposite side, the left side, in addition to Troy's method to put the ribbon from right side of the body to the left, is to follow the front view of the video. In this case, you move the same side of the arms and legs as the video. This works for south facing moves.

Starting on the left is quite difficult. Some of my students, when they start to do that, it was really funny, especially comes to the cloud hand with hands go to the left side but the feet still moving in the right side direction. They do feel that the movements on the left side are distinctively weaker in comparison to that of the right side Form, and firmly believe that learning the left side is important.

Jim R. writes:

“When you perform an internal movement correctly, you will feel the sensations of stretching and intense energy flowing across the junction in an otherwise relaxed body,” Stephen Hwa. I want to thank you and give you some feedback on how well the training is going. ...

As I sit here typing I find that I can use the abdomen and back with much more ease (to generate internal movement) because of the stability you said would occur when myself (and my students) are seated. When I stop typing and bring my hands up in Peng, Lu, Ji, An (using correct internal movement) I feel INTENSE but still very GENTLE stretching and I find the sensations of Chi to pulsate INCREDIBLY in my palms. Combining this with thoughts of making it circulate (tell it go down, up the arms to the palms and back) I can feel it moving up and down first the forearms, then underarms). Then with a little more “imagination” I can feel it in the chest, back and down to the legs. The sensations up the neck and over the top of the head are quite stimulating. My wife likes it when I use my “chi hands” by hovering them over her sore neck and for headaches.

..... I'm encouraging my students to seek out your website. I include the URL on my class handouts.

I say this to emphasize the fact that I DID not feel the intense sensations of stretching and Chi flow when I was practicing with other tai chi instructor to the incredible extent that I feel them since I started training with you. Quite honestly, I heard other students in those other tai chi classes “say” they did not feel anything either. I am not exaggerating when I say this and by example let me explain: You remember giving me a correction on how to do quarter body movement for “blocking movement” in our very first meeting. At that time you said I was “scrunching” up my chest. I “scrunched” because of bad habits I had accumulated from both training at and subsequent lack of training after leaving those tai chi classes. **My opinion is I accumulated bad habits because of overemphasis on martial art training which leads one to use external movements.** Plus, I never got the care and attention to detail when I was learning elsewhere that you provided in just those brief statements. ...I'll finish by saying: “Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, Teach him how to fish and he'll eat forever”. **Since I started with you I realize I have plenty to “eat”, maybe that's why I enjoy “sharing” it with MY students.**

Master Hwa's reply:

It is gratifying Jim, to see the fruition of what I am trying to accomplish and when a student "gets it" it is most gratifying.

Before one is handy with using internal discipline in the movements, free sparring or san shou will only bring out the natural instincts of using arms and legs, the normal external motions.

You asked me to explain why you were instructed to lure the opponents close to you during push hand practice in your previous tai chi training. My answer was, "No. You have to maintain certain security zone not to let opponent to penetrate that." The reason you are instructed to lure opponents close to you is that the instructor does not know how to use internal power instead has to depend upon the arm strength. In that case, you have to bend the arm so that you can push out. But, at that close distance, the opponent can also try to bend his arm and hit you with the elbow. When one uses internal move, then it does not need to bend the arm to push out and you can maintain certain distance from the opponent.

In my classes here, I am encouraging my senior students to teach newcomers. I find it not only gives newcomers more individual attention, but also challenges the senior students to examine his or her own Form practice more critically - a real motivation factor. Several of my video students who have been Tai Chi teacher before started to learn from my video asked me about teaching Classical Tai Chi to their students. I now firmly believe that one should teach one's student the Classical tai Chi even though the teacher only started Classical Tai Chi recently.

Jim D writes:

.... And as you have reported in other correspondence through your forums, it has been frustrating, rewarding, and an arduous journey with many moments of pleasing experiences for me. I am glad that this undertaking will take time. I have to admit that my endeavors to learn Taiji were initially goal oriented rather than process oriented. I am no longer concerned with the speed of learning, but have an eye to the depth, self control, meditation, and spiritual components of Taiji.

Master Hwa's reply:

This is the golden attitude for learning tai chi. It can not be expressed better than this!

Jim D : I appreciated your encouragement regarding my training regimen. Some questions and experiences I have are as follows:

1) Your insight "sometimes what we think is real is only an illusion" concerned me at first because I am not able to see myself objectively, and I do not know what your experience is subjectively. How does one know that we are continuing to maintain/attain the correct form when we do not have the benefit of a watchful eye of a Master?

Master Hwa's reply:

I use two approaches:

The external approach: From time to time, take a video of Form playing and reviewing and critique the video. If one understands what is required, this method can reveal certain deficiencies in the movements. From your comments below, you have already considering doing this.

The internal approach: Develop one's internal eye; see the movements from inside. This is to develop a keen **sense of feeling** of your body and remember what you should feel when you do a movement correctly. The beauty of this method is that, since there are many duplicate or nearly identical movements, if you know one of them, you can apply to the others also. In fact, when you start on the journey of learning tai chi, you have to develop better sense of feeling with your movements in the first place. Otherwise you will not be able to learn the subtle internal movements. Furthermore, when you have mastered the Form, the **sense of feeling** of the circulating internal energy and the feeling of stretching and coiling in the body constitute the flowing of qi in the body. **Sense of feeling is the heart of Tai Chi Form practice.**

Notable examples are: the feeling of tuck-in-the-behind; the feeling of stretching in the back and energizing in the tan tien when you keep the elbow-in, instead of the spread-chicken-wing style.

Again, from your question, you are already mindful of this.

2) What is the criteria for achieving Master of Classical Taiji?

Master Hwa's reply:

Let's consider only the mastering of Classical Tai Chi Form practice. In this case, what I mentioned above is applicable here. That is, when you have mastered the Form, every movement is carried out with internal discipline. Therefore, the **sense of feeling** of the circulating internal energy and the feeling of stretching and coiling in the body will flow unceasingly like current in the river. At this point, you have fully tapped into the spring of health and vitality inherent in Tai Chi and have mastered Classical Tai Chi. For my own experience; this took ten years of practice. As far as martial arts are concern, it is boundless. I do not have a simple definition of what is a master.

I am always amazed at the external martial arts school that they can have such fine distinction between different color belts and different color strips on each belt.

3) When folding the body especially in the ending form of the first four-forms before the beginning of the brush knee set, (I'm not sure what the form it is called. Please help me here), should I be feeling a tightening or stretching across my upper back?

Master Hwa's reply:

Yes. Stretching across upper back is one of the primary sensations. Since you have to energize your lower waist and buttock to turn left foot into alignment with the right foot, you should feel energizing in that region also. With your body now lean forward and form a straight line with the left leg, you will sense a slight stretch from neck down to the Achilles' heel.

I do not know if there is a name for this folding move.

4) Is playing out the forms in bare feet acceptable? I find that I have more stability and more of a sensing of the surface beneath me.

Master Hwa's reply:

Yes. This is fine.

5) How does Taiji fare against other martial art disciplines? Other disciplines e.g. Aikido, Karate, etc., appear vicious, uncompromising and more like street fighting. Whereas Taiji seems to be the gentle martial art which gives the offender a chance to reconsider their initial commitment.

Master Hwa's reply:

How does Taiji fare against other martial art disciplines really depends upon how well prepared are the combatants. Yang Lu Chan traveled the country and challenged every well known martial artist he can find without meeting an equal. Everyone recognized him as invincible at a time when martial art was still unencumbered by competition rules.

(Note: I do not think Yang searched out these challenges only for the purpose of establishing his reputation. I think he was genuinely curious about other martial arts and how they stack against his Tai Chi. One story about Yang is that a master who did not want to fight with Yang after challenged by Yang told Yang that he acknowledged the superiority of Yang's martial art above his. Yang was so disappointed by not having a chance to test out his capability that Yang continued to beg him for a little tussle.)

As I discussed in forum 11, it is more difficult and takes longer time to train a Tai Chi martial artist than most other discipline precisely because of the use of "soft to conquer hard" approach. But, there are opportunistic moves in Tai Chi that are vicious, such as the one-inch punch at the solar plexus.

6) I have noticed with surprise that I am reacting instinctively to incoming force after a relatively short period of time in studying Taiji. Is this to be expected in light of that I have also studied the 24 Forms Yang Style Tai Chi over the last three years as well?

Master Hwa's reply:

Several other emails mentioned this too. Some of my classroom students who have never learned other martial arts before told me the same thing. They are very surprised that they can now instinctively defend themselves even though in my class they have not practiced sparring yet. The intrinsic training in Tai Chi about martial art and fa jing are amazing. One has to appreciate the wisdom and instincts of early Tai Chi masters for their discovery of using "Yi-martial art intent" (see forum 6) in martial art training instead of using full power-strike motion in the training used by external martial arts.

7) In leaning forward just behind the toe of the forward foot, what would be the approximate angle from the heel of the foot to the top of the head? This leaning feels awkward because I have been use to taking large steps forward while keeping my body erect (24 Forms Tai Chi), not leaning forward.

Master Hwa's reply:

The angle is determined by the step size and the degree of knee bend. Lesson 9 discusses the rationale of step size and knee bend. If you select a step size and keep knee bend not over the toe, with the torso on a straight line with the back leg, you have already fixed the angle of the lean. Even though I have recommended, for normal built person, that the step size is the back toe even with the front heel, in other words, the step size is equal to the length of those two feet. For a lanky person with long legs, a longer step size will be more suitable.

As far as feeling awkward with the body leaning forward is a common problem with students just started on the lesson. As I have discussed previously, you want to develop a sense of feeling for this lean. When it is a straight line, you will feel the slight stretch from the neck down to the Achilles' heel. I CAN NOT OVER EMPHASIZE THAT TO FEEL THIS STRETCH, YOU HAVE TO KEEP ALL YOUR WEIGHT ON YOUR FRONT BENT FOOT. ANY WEIGHT ON THE STRAIGHT BACK FOOT, YOU WILL LOOSE THE STRETCH. In fact, keeping weight off the back foot is also necessary for you to make the next move with the back foot. When you feel awkward, you probably have some weight on the back foot that prevents you from making a move with that foot and you will feel stuck.

8) How important is sparring?

Master Hwa:

Discussing and demonstrate sparring could certainly help the learning of tai chi form. Actual doing sparring is best wait until one is reasonably good with the form. My teacher did not want us to try push hand, until we knew how to sit back (see forum 10 "sit back move") and ward off with internal move. As I discussed previously, it is possible to learn from sparring about internal moves, however, it is difficult to structure such a sparring program that is effective and will not waste a lot of time flailing around or develop some bad habits (see Jim R.'s post above) or worst still, get injured.

9) Should I be feeling light and unrestricted when playing out the forms?

Master Hwa's reply:

The feeling changes with the progression of learning. Certainly, when he or she mastered the Form such that it can be played **without thinking**, the feeling will be light and effortless. Prior to that stage, one may have to be mindful of what the movement should be and some of the moves can be a challenge.

10) Regarding objectivity, I have begun to use a mirror and have seen the mistakes in my form by using your DVD as a reference point. I am now trying to correct them. I think that I may use a video camera next.

Master Hwa: Good!