

Classical Tai Chi

FORUM 14

JULY, 2006

Dear Students,

It has been way too long since we issued our last Forum and it is good to be back. Master Hwa planned and attended his family's reunion in Wuxi, China this past Spring which took about a year's planning. This included the rebuilding and dedication of his family's ancestral hall, a labor of love, magnificently done by his elder brother, Master Hwa, and his middle brother.

I could not go because I was successfully recovering from a total hip replacement....but it was way too soon to travel.

So we are now all back. We hope that you have had success with practice and a sense of accomplishment and are enjoying the benefits derived from your practice. Please do not hesitate to email us with questions or feedback on your practice and the Forum.

Sincerely,

Eva M. Hwa

HOW TO MOVE THE ARM AND THE CORE BODY AS A UNIT

We have spent considerable time on the topic of learning internal discipline and how to apply it in the tai chi movements. I realize many of you are still have difficulties in this area. I have been examining my own movements and trying to come up with a better way of teaching this. I think I have found an approach which can accelerate the learning curve. I have tested it out on my students in class, and it seems to work. I want to share this with you.

(Some of you may already practice what I am going to talk about. After all, you will develop this naturally by just practicing what I have shown in the video. My desire to shorten the learning curve might have been viewed with disapproving eye by the old masters of the past. They believe in diligent practice and self discovery: not hand held by their teacher. I hope I am not doing Mencius' story about a farmer who was impatient watching his seedlings grow so slowly that he went to the field and pulled the seedlings up to help their growth.)

In the beginning of the learning process, you are instructed to relax or forget about the shoulder and the arm, just concentrate on the abdomen and the back for the internal movements. This is to eliminate the common habit of moving from the arm or shoulder. The shoulder and arm just follow the movements from the internal core. (My student Ernie said that trying to relax the shoulder did not work for him, because the act of "trying to relax" placed too much attention on the shoulder which kept the shoulder in play.) For most people, the difficulty here is to find the neural pathways in the core which can make the internal move you intended.

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After you practice the form in this way for a while you will develop some knack for moving from the core. Now comes the second stage of learning that is to integrate your arm with the internal movements and to expanding the circulating internal energy and qi from the torso to the arm, the palm and the finger tips. In Forum 6, I talked about the incorporation of “yi”, or martial art intent, in the movement. With practice, one will achieve the state where the arm and the internal core move as “One” and, that the internal energy and qi flow with the “yi” of the movements to the palm and the finger tips.

By examine my own movements I found that, in this state, my arm constantly exerts a slight stretch or pull on the shoulder. This stretch firmly engages the arm to the shoulder. Since the elbow is always lower than the shoulder, there is a downward stretching force on the shoulder causing the shoulder to sink which in turn connects it to the core enabling the arm and the core moving as “One”. The stretching force involved here is quite subtle and small, just sufficient to achieve the engagement. Those of you who have already achieved such engagement in your practice probably do not even know it. You can sense the difference if you purposely left out the stretch.

Example 1: Hand at the face position such as “walking forward brush knee” (see Figure 1.)



Fig. 1

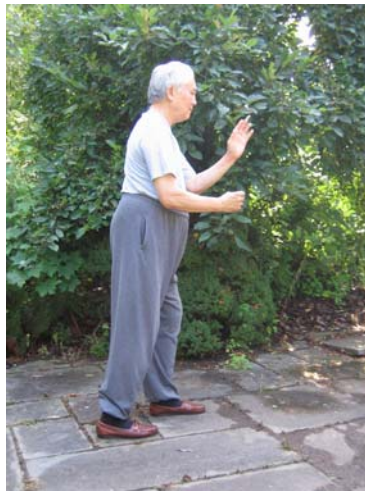


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

In Lesson 3 and 4 of Vol. II, I describe the desirable position of the elbow and arm in relation to the body. When you achieve that position, you are exerting a downward as well as outward stretch of the shoulder. Similar situation in the “parting of wild horse mane”, outstretching of the downward pointing elbow will sink the shoulder and connect to the core. Now, the arm, the shoulder and the core are all firmly connected into “One”.

Example 2: The punch movements with arm at the side of the body, see Figure 2, and the arm at forward position, see Figure 3.

If you maintain a constant downward stretch of your shoulder through the elbow, in other words, when the arm is bent, just lower the elbow to engage the shoulder and the core. The arm and the core will be engaged whether the arm is moving forward or pulling back.

Example 3: When the arm is at a downward position, such as the arm in “brush knee”, (see figure 4,) or the folding move after the “single whip”, (see Figure 5,) or the downward rotation of the arm in the “cloud hand”, (see Figure 6.)

In all these cases, you just lightly stretch the shoulder using the arm, which will naturally sink the shoulder and engage the core. The arm itself does not have to be straight in order to exert the stretching force.



Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

The above examples show how to engage the arm, the shoulder, and the core to move as a unit, following the “yi”, or intent. Since, in the entire 108 forms, the elbow is always lower than the shoulder, the engagement can be maintained throughout the form. Therefore, the first major goal of practicing tai chi form is to achieve the level that every move is an internal move and that in every move, the arm and core are engaged.

Among arm, shoulder and core, it is often difficult to tell which part is leading or following. It is best to always keep the shoulder passive as a follower. But the arm, the elbow, or the finger, filled with “yi”, may sometime give the sensation of leading the movement. The synergistic effects between core movement and engagement of arm and core give unexpected results. When I try the engagement exercise on students new to my class, it seems to help them to learn how to make the core move.

FOLDING THE BODY ALONG THE SPINE

Visualize your left and right side of the body as two panels of a door connected by hinges to the spine. To develop internal discipline, the ability of folding and unfolding your body along the spine is as important as the ability of turning your body at the waist. Most students practice the turning body move and can achieve good success with it fairly quickly. The folding move such as in Figure 5 is more subtle, more difficult to sense. For some people this folding move is natural and easy to do. But, for some this is a very difficult move to do and in their everyday life, they never make a move in that area.

The ability of doing this move is essential for upper quarter body movements, such as the forward push move in Figure 1. If one can not fold the upper quarter body along the spine, the forward push move will become an upper-body-turning move not a quarter body move, and lose the explosive fa jin power. From a health viewpoint, it is important to move in this area to strengthen the muscles surrounding the spine and improve blood flow stimulating regeneration along the spine to lessen spinal deterioration with age.

There are many folding and unfolding moves, such as Figure 5, in the tai chi long form. The mistake is to make the folding action at the shoulder rather than folding along the spine. Viewing from the back one can clearly see the correct folding action centering around the spine; while the incorrect folding merely moves the shoulder blade.

When one practices this move, it should include the entire spine not just in the upper back region. Take for example the move just before “needle at the bottom of the sea”; (see Figure 7,) both the right and the left side of the body squeeze inward. This is a good move to exercise the folding at the spine. Notice on my video, Lesson 7, the entire body is involved in the folding move. Pushing the abdomen in expands the lower back for folding. Even the buttocks are involved in the squeezing. One could use another exercise; (see Figure 8 and 9,) which provides a wider angle for folding and unfolding moves.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig.9

Maurice B writes: **I would like to know if our lymphatic system is activated while playing tai chi.**

Master Hwa's reply: Tai Chi with its internal discipline is perhaps the most effective propulsion scheme on lymphatic system, because the movements reaches deep recess of the body with a slow rhythmic tempo. The only exception is the lymph in the neck. That will need additional exercise for it.

Jim D. said: I fluctuate from wanting to be a Tai Chi Fighter to just being happy with mastering the 108 Forms. This dilemma comes from my age. When I hear you state that learning push hands, and sticking to your opponent takes a long time, it seems that at the age of 59, I may not have enough time left in my life to accomplish my first love--martial application.

So the question is **“Should I take on a lesser goal of mastering the Form or should I, when the time comes, push on to do push hands, sticking and sparring?”**

Master Hwa's reply

Hi Jim: Practice Tai Chi Form is to develop power especially explosive power such as fa jin. Practicing the Form cultivates the internal power and the ability to maintain a relaxed body with the flow of internal power.

This enables one to develop the explosive power and the ability to deliver it. All these are best accomplished by practicing Form only, not depending on practicing push hand or sparring.

Push hand and sparring are important to develop the “Timing”- when to use the power, the “Strategy”-how to take an advantage position and put opponent in an inferior position, and the “Sensing”- know what opponent is trying to do.

When one reaches the stage that internal discipline becomes second nature, then one could concentrate more on push hand and sparring. Otherwise, one might develop bad habits of using external move during sparring.

Jim D. writes: In kick boxing training, self defense students are taught to kick towards vital parts of their opponent's abdomen/stomach when they are grabbed by the hand.

In the Form, it appears that a pressure point and subsequent release from the grab is employed when an opponent grabs hold of the wrist.

Would you explain the differences in technique...commenting on which is more effective and why?

Master Hwa's reply: The intention of kicking as you described is ideal for the application of Tsai or Cai described in the Thirteen Movements of Tai Chi Chuan.

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If the opponent is trying to kick, a quick tug or yank of his hand forward and downward at an angle away from you.. He will lose balance and fall, or at least terminate his kick to catch himself from falling and open himself up for further attack.

If the opponent twists his forearm to loosen your grip and at the same time maintains his rooting, you will not be able to Tsai him. That is why this is the better approach for this situation.

There is general misunderstanding in how Tsai is carried out. Some describe it using a snap of wrist and even use two hands to assist. Tsai is a fa jin movement using the internal power. Arm and wrist are held firm just transmit the internal power. Definitely does not need two hands. The problem is that people try to study and learn the Thirteen Movements without first develop the internal energy for fa jin. It is like putting the cart before the horse.

Mary P. writes:to keep the elbow down, I find myself often bringing the upper arm close to the body, or in some instance pressing against the body. Is this the right way to do?

Master Hwa's reply: What Mary is talking about is not an uncommon problem among students, jamming the upper arm against the rib in situations such as figure 2 and figure 6 . This limits the range of motion possible for that arm and also reduces the qi flow to the arm. You should leave enough room in the under arm that the arm can move across the front of the body freely. The Compact Form in lesson 17 demonstrates the extreme example of this openness at under arm.

Greg W. writes: The "punch move" after the "walking forward brush knee" and also after "needle under the sea", all involve first pull back the hollow fist and then thrust forward. I think you said that the one inch punch does not require draw back and punch. Why does the Form include moves like this?

Master Hwa's reply: This question is analogous to one of your early question on "why we forward lean when walking backwards" (see Forum 13). Tai Chi Form pieces together many different moves into a smooth continuous thread of motion which can keep the jin and qi circulating continuously without stopping. The order of arrangement of these moves in large part reflects the intent of achieving this smooth continuous effect, not necessarily a martial art application sequence.

Yes, the one inch punch can be triggered whenever the fist is in touch with the opponent, no need to wind up by pulling the arm back. The pull back (or the draw back) move has a grasping motion to initiate the move. It is a Cai move, grasping and quick tug or yank, discussed on page above. When you practice this move, you want to gear up the internal power and to engage the arm as described in example 2 above. This is an important martial art move, more useful than the one inch punch because the punch is not very useful during sparring exercise. It is too dangerous to use on your friend.