

# CLASSICAL TAI CHI FORUM

**VOLUME 3  
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Dear Students,

The May edition of the Forum will be delayed. Master Hwa will be traveling to England in the last two weeks in May. The Forum will resume in the beginning of June. It is great to hear your comments and questions. Master Hwa hopes you will continue this ongoing exchange. It will enhance your practice and learning of classical tai chi as well as his instruction.

I notice that so many of us have similar experiences and questions and there is no doubt that when we study from a tape, we feel sometimes that we are alone with one or another problem we have with learning.

On this page you will see the picture from the Chinese New Year celebration and birthday celebration of Grandmaster Young Wabu. Master Hwa and some of his students presented a special gift to Grandmaster Young, who is now in his late nineties but continues in good health and enjoyed the evening very much.

Following the picture are some excerpts and questions from emails that have come to us in the past month. Thank you for contributing your thoughts and questions.

Please continue to send your observations and questions to me at:

parea10@yahoo.com

E. Marie

## **PICTURE FROM CHINESE NEW YEAR CELEBRATION HONORING GRAND MASTER YOUNG WABU**

Master Hwa and some of his students standing by Grandmaster Young Wabu at the Shanghai Restaurant, Rochester NY, February 2003.



## QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

The beginning forms are very difficult to learn. There are just too many things going on at same time, without even including any internal discipline yet. **The few movements that I think I can do feel very awkward, not the smooth movements shown in your video. Help!** S. T.

### MASTER HWA'S REPLY:

One way to simplify the learning process is to first concentrate on the footwork and the corresponding shifting of body weight, pay less attention to the upper body movement. In that way the amount of complexity is reduced greatly. Once you are more comfortable with your footwork and its corresponding shift of body weight, you can pay more attention to the upper body movement.

A common mistake of the beginner is that they are attracted by the graceful upper body movements and therefore eager to learn the upper body movements. The footwork appears to be unremarkable and attracts less attention. The fact is that footwork and its corresponding shifting of body weight is the foundation of tai chi and. any glitch in that area will result in a loss of balance, awkwardness, heaviness of the foot and worse, a foot glued to the ground cannot be moved. It is very important to practice the Tai Chi Walk of Lesson 1. This will give you a good foundation in footwork.

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Barbara R writes:

Please tell Master Hwa that the only reason this one of his video students didn't experience the usual anguish and frustration of his "on scene" students during the first few lessons was that she--all right, I--had already been through the worst of the "Grasping the Bird's Tail is for the birds!" syndrome while I was learning the Wu style long form, which is, of course, very similar to classical tai chi. I thought there must be something the matter with me because I was having so much trouble with such relatively simple-seeming movements until I read Alfred Huang's book, Complete Tai-Chi, in which he expressed a sentiment similar to Master Hwa's: Master Huang said "Grasping Sparrow's Tail" could be regarded as tai chi's entrance examination.

**MASTER HWA'S REPLY:** This is an excellent observation and well put.

She continues:

I am, myself, very interested in how one form and style grew out of another, and would be glad to hear **anything Master Hwa could tactfully say about possible influences on Wu Chien Chuan's tai chi other than Yang**. I have heard that he was influenced somewhat by another form, but am not sure whether the writer was speaking of the other, different tone Wu style which is sometimes called Hao, which Yang Banhou is supposed to have learned from the other tone Wu and been influenced by in preferring the smaller style he taught Quan Yu or whether the other style referred to was something else.

## MASTER HWA'S REPLY:

You should read <http://www.wustyle.com/en/db/person.php?cid=9991>

(In Forum 2, I gave the link <http://www.wustyle.com/essay.html> which is **no longer working**. Above link should work)

In this article, it is clear that the Wu's learned Tai Chi from the Yangs' without any other influence. It also gives you an account about the Yang family and how much they treasured their Tai Chi heritage particularly the small circle or the compact form. From other histories about the Yang family, it's just not possible Yang Pen-hou would learn from anyone else besides his father, after all his father was already recognized by his peers to be the "invincible".

She writes:

I have also wondered, considering that much of Yang as presently practiced comes down through Yang Cheng-Fu, who was not initially much interested in tai chi despite his family's key role in its development, **if all of the differences between Yang and Wu are a matter of Wu Chien Chuan's making departures from the traditional.**

None of this is of great moment in learning to play the form, and discussion of styles too often seems to emphasize differences that are of less importance than shared principles; it is just always interesting to me how things came to be as they are.

## MASTER HWA'S REPLY:

Translated from a Chinese book about the History of the Yang Family:

"Yang Cheng-Fu was not interested in Tai Chi until his father passed away. He then practiced day and night to improve his Tai Chi. Much of it were self-taught based on what he remembered in his younger years. He was a patient teacher and had many students. **His style was the large circle which people refer to now as Yang Style.** His brother Yang Shao-hou started serious Tai Chi training with his father when he was seven. His accomplishment could match his father and his uncle Pen-hou. In fact, people think that his temperament very much resembled his uncle. His preference was small circle and liked to use fa-chin to throw people- often his students. Because of his compact movements, impatient to teach the basics, and eager to punish, very few students could take it. It is unfortunate that this highly accomplished Tai Chi Master was not able to pass on his knowledge about Tai Chi."

she continues:

The point is--if there are any historical insights on the development of the Wu Chien Chuan form that Master Hwa feels it would be appropriate to share in the forum, they might be of interest to those of us who are coming to classical tai chi from another style. (Though I have to say, I do not feel I am learning a different style, just adding a deeper level to the one I learned from other people's Wu style tapes that did not present the physical aspect of internal discipline so clearly. In fact, I am beginning to share Master

Young's belief that Yang and Wu should not be considered separate styles. But if I had to choose one of the two, I would still choose Wu--which is just as well, since classical tai chi goes back through Wu Chien Chuan!)

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Tom L. writes:

I am enjoying learning your lessons very much. As you said the internal movement especially gives a good feeling, even though I can only do just a few of them. **I do have problems in turning on the heels. It seems that I can not cleanly turn on the heel and some time I find that I am really turning on my front sole or the entire foot is in contact with the ground during turning.**

I took several years of Karate before and familiar with several other martial arts, very seldom the turning is done on the heels. **In fact most of the stance are on the ball of the foot. I know you said that the power comes from the heel. Could you elaborate?**

#### **MASTER HWA'S REPLY:**

Difficulties in turning from the heel is often due to the following factors:

1. Too large a stance or not sufficient knee bend. In this situation, when one shifts the weight to front foot, the back foot's heel will not be able to touch the ground.
2. Not able to lift the front of the foot off the ground. Lifting the front of the foot is not an everyday movement. Some people have difficulty in executing the lift in a timely fashion, especially when the leg is at an acute angle with the ground as in the case of the back foot when all the weight is at the front foot. Without the lift, one cannot turn on the heel cleanly. That is why the Tai Chi Walk lesson practices the lift movement.
3. Not using the power from the waist region to make the turn, instead using power from upper back.

As to the reasons why tai chi, unlike other martial arts, emphasizes the stance with heel on the ground could be explained both from martial art and health benefits view point. Most other martial arts are emphasizing offensive movements and utilizing considerable amount of momentum force (see discussion in Tai Chi Overview). When you are on the ball of your foot (refer to as "on the toe of your foot" in my video), it is easier to push off and rush your opponent and build momentum in your movement. When one is depending on momentum in his strike force, it is not important that he is well connected with the ground. After all, a flying heavy object in the air could knock a person down. For the delivery of internal force, fa-chin, solid connection to ground is very important. The power generated at the ying-yang junction is delivered against the supporting part (ying part) of your body, which in turn is supported by the ground. As I demonstrated in the Overview, some of these fa-chin are involving very small movements. The so-called "one inch punch" is an example of it. Now if the supporting structure has slack, flabbiness, or "play" in its various locations, an eighth inch here quarter inch there, pretty soon the power reaching your opponent will dissipate to a small fraction of what was generated. So, not only do you have to be able to generate the internal power, but also you have to be able to deliver it to the opponent with minimum loss. During fa-chin, if the heel is not on the ground, the reaction force from fa-chin will likely push the heel

down until touching the ground. This slack in the body will diminish the power delivered by you.

In certain instances, Tai Chi does use the ball of the foot to push off such as the skipping steps after Needle at Bottom of the Sea. This enables one to pursue the opponent quickly. The purpose is to maintain “stick” to the opponent; not letting him getting away from ones’ touch. It is not used to build momentum of the body; that is against the principle of Tai Chi..

The practicing of tai chi form to achieve the maximum health benefits is to have the internal energy continually circulating in the body without interruption, i.e. the circulating Chi. To achieve this, every movement needs to generate certain internal energy in order to maintain the continuity. As pointed out in various locations in my Instruction Video, the firm contact of the heel with the ground, such as in Walking Forward (and Backward) Brush Knee, or the pull of body backwards by the heel, such as in Cloud Hand, are important movements to generate internal energy in the back of the body. Without the contribution from the heel to ground movements, there will be many breaks in the circulation of internal energy.

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I have shortened and narrowed my stance almost to the point where my back foot goes slightly higher than the heel of the front foot. **It appears to help out the knees quite a bit and makes it much easier to do knee follow the elbow.** Having such a narrow and short stance is quite different from karate training. **Is the difference between a short and wide stance a matter of strength in the legs?** If I build up more strength in the legs, will I be able to go into deeper stance without causing knee problems? **I am wondering if I should slowly go to bigger stance to build up more strength in the legs.**

KL

**MASTER HWA’S REPLY:**

Please look at My Tape 2 lesson 9. I have discussed implications of step size and its trade offs.

I strongly advise that, if you had knee problem before, your first order of concern is to protect your knee. When you are comfortable with your knee and can do the form regularly, you will not need to worry about not having strength in your legs.

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Dear Mster Hwa,

I have been working with the tapes this month and have come to **cloud hands** and think I have learned it pretty well, but I am **moving in a north easterly direction, mostly east, but definitely at a diagonal. Is this correct or should I be moving due east?**

I really appreciate how you put the lessons together and especially how principles are introduced at key points for example the rules of turning the foot at the end of the first tape and the rule on the elbow being in and down at cloud hands. This form makes a lot of sense to my body and given the various principles and rules the timing on the various elements of the moves becomes selfevident.

Thank you, William C

**MASTER HWA'S REPLY:**

The direction of motion you described is correct. I did observe students having the problem of moving easterly direction that is because they did not draw the left foot back (north east direction) when their body is facing south west, instead they move the left foot side ways (east direction).

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HH writes:

...I just wish I could show Master Hwa my movements to get his critique.....

**MASTER HWA'S REPLY:**

I am also interested to see your progress. In time, I hope we can organize some get togethers for some intensive training sessions.

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