

CLASSICAL TAI CHI

FORUM 10

October, 2004

AFTER FINISHING THE LESSONS, A BEGINNING

Several of you have indicated to me that you were either already finished or nearly finishing the lessons. You have made a very good beginning. Now you can start to take the long and rewarding part of the journey in which you will gradually improve every aspect of your form playing and enjoy the fruits of tai chi.

You need to remember “sometimes the appearance of reality is actually an illusion”. My students in class often told me that they thought I was moving certain way and tried to do the same. Later they found out that their observation was not correct. That was the reason I incorporated different views in my video so you could see my moves at different angles to lessen the chance of wrong impression. Using a fresh eye to review the lesson video could also uncover any misinterpretation of my movements.

The other thing to remember is “you perceive that you are moving a certain way, but in fact, you are not moving that way.” I met one student who had finished the lessons from the video. One problem I observed was that when he tried to internalize his movement away from the arm and shoulder, his movements initiate from the chest area. He would scrunch his chest to start an upper body movement. When one of the students in my class makes the turning movement, she does stabilize the pelvic area, but the turning movement is initiated from the upper abdomen area. In both of these cases, the concentration on the internal position is too high. It has to be in the navel and below. When it is done right, you will feel the tight connection to the lower body through the buttock. My 12 year old student in class made a very succinct comment on this “one thinks that he is not doing external so it must be internal.” It is not an either or situation. There is an intermediate region, which is neither external nor very internal.

Learning Tai Chi often follows an unexpected path: advancement followed by periods of stagnation, and even a turn for the worse. This is because, at this stage, you still have not built a firm foundation under your form practice. Once you are familiar with the movements, you may become careless, neglecting some of the fundamentals in the form playing. You can test this by critically looking at how you do the tai chi walk. My experience with my students in class is that such review often showed missing details which they had done correctly years past.

Learning the square form will help greatly to build a firm framework of the form.

Eventually, when you fully grasp the principles, rationale, and common thread of the movements, you will be able to maintain an even-keel progress, and make discoveries on your own.

Maurice B. writes:

I am working on the 3rd lesson, brush knee and the first step to change direction. I have trouble when I turn because my left foot is too far forward. I just pull the left foot back but it feels like a stop gap?

Also when I do brush push I can feel that the arms are connected and strong feeling of the inner power very good. Thank you for your help .It is great to know some of these mysteries are being solved.

Master Hwa's reply:

You raised some good points here. That left foot will be always farther forward than the normal step size. This is due to the prior move, when you lift your back left foot forward to be placed parallel with the front right foot with body standing straight (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The distance between the parallel feet will be the additional distance to the normal step size when you make the turn (see Figure 2 & 3). In order to keep the distance manageable, you need to reduce the distance between your parallel feet in figure 1, even though that will reduce the width of the two feet to be less than the normal width, i.e. equal to shoulder width. Narrower width between feet is acceptable when the two feet are parallel, but not acceptable when one foot is forward and the one is back from a stability consideration (see discussion below, the sit back move). How to handle different step size are discussed in Lesson 9.

Mike H., in response to the discussion of keeping body always perpendicular to the ground in forum 9, writes:

Keeping the body in vertical axis perpendicular to the ground allows the torso to "spin like a top" when attacked. If the body tilts in any direction, leaning forward, backward, or sideways, an attacker can more easily locate the body center and push the person off balance. Of course, the kua (groin) must remain open on the back leg so the structure is not double-weighted - with the knee slightly flexed rather than locked. Any kind of leaning will invite an attack. Perpendicular rotates smoothly with gravity and neutralizes incoming force.

Master Hwa's reply:

In Forum 8, I talk about the "sit back move" (see figure 4) with the body perpendicular to the ground for ward-off the attack with body rotation or side way fa jin. This move is the yin-yang counter part to "forward fa jin" move (see figure 5). Both of these two moves, because of their importance, appear repeatedly in the form practice and during push hand.



Figure 4

Figure 5

As I described and demonstrated in the Overview video, the forward fa jing move is used only when one finds a weakness or opening in the opponent's move, then lightening strike without any forewarning. It is not a move for one to lingering on. I am not saying that this move is invincible. In fact, the bigger the stance, the more angular and long lasting will be the leaning movement, and the vulnerability described by Mike will be more pronounced. When the movement is compact, the lean will be fleeting and elusive and yet provide the synergistic support to forward fa jing . The Compact Form is intended for martial art application.

As Sun Tzu (Forum 7, reference book page 127) said "...so an army varies its method of gaining victory according to the enemy. Thus an army does not have fixed

strategic advantages or an invariable position. To be able to take the victory by varying one's position according to the enemy's is called being inscrutable" Sun Tzu's statement holds the truth for many endeavors, whether it is martial arts or investment. There is not an infallible position, only winning executions. One needs to arm oneself with multitude of superior moves to be able to take advantage of different situations.

If one has to maintain a fixed posture like Mike talk about (see figure 6), it not only weakens the fa jing move, it is also less effective for neutralizing opponent's attack in comparison to the "sit back" move. The sit back move engages opponent's attacking arm and then "yields" by sitting back (or take a step back and then sit back) to stretch the opponent out which drains off his power and bring him closer to unbalance, at the same time, rotating the body to ward off (see figure 7) plus pulling, fa jing etc. to render the opponent out of balance. Therefore, the "sit back" is an offensive move disguised as a defensive move. It is not an easy move to make. The practice of Form develops the foundation of the move. Push hand trains the application of this move. Because of the importance of this move, I shall talk about some pointers in the Form practice of this move.



Figure 6

Figure 7

The Sit Back Move

One starts to practice this move intensely in the first lesson, Tai Chi Walk, and continue into the rest of the form practice. Many beginning students consider this move very awkward and therefore do not sit back completely, i.e. not all the body weight resting on the back foot. To do this move correctly, one has to fully tuck the behind (lift the pelvis forward and up) in the sitting position (see figure 4) so that the backward momentum is absorbed by the tucking motion and then transmitted to the legs. A portion of the momentum can be absorbed by the forward foot with the heel firmly planted on the ground with the tip of the toe drawn up by the stretch in the leg muscle.

During push hand and Form practice, immediately following the sitting back move is often the body moving forward move. To make this transition from "sitting back to moving forward" smooth and effortless, you can take advantage of the stored "sitting back" energy in the forward leg by depressing the toe down with your pelvis as you have learned in the "Tai Chi Walk Lesson" that draws your body forward to start the forward motion by pulling with the forward foot. The cycle of back and forward moves can be practiced while you are waiting in line, watching TV, etc. It strengthens the lower back and stimulates the internal organs such as the intestine.

It is important to maintain the correct width between the feet, i.e. the width between the feet is approximately equal to the width of the shoulder or width of the pelvis. When students unconsciously narrow their width between their feet, they will experience instability during the sitting back move that often resulted in the students developing a bad habit of turning their back foot outward (see figure 8)



Figure 8

The forward foot with its heel firmly planted on the ground serves many purposes. It is useful to the balance and stability of the body. It is ready to kick the opponent; to pull the body forward; or to take a step back. Strong senses or qi transverses between the back of the body and the heel of the forward foot as well as the back foot. You should be able to sense it. After much practice, you should feel comfortable and agile in moving in and out of this position. At this point you are ready to do push hand.

Both the "sit back" move and the "forward fa jing" move contribute to the up and down flow of internal energy and the chi in the body. Therefore, they are important components in the internal energy and qi circulation during the playing of Tai Chi Form.

Understand the Capability of Dan Tien or Tan Tien

...I also don't understand when using internal movement how do you keep your abdomen loose, or is that myth not true. (Maurice B.)

...I am finding the Tai Chi Walk difficult probably due to my having to break old habits with the Yang Style. But it is coming along. **The step backward is awkward in that I find it hard to keep my buttock tightly in and pivot at the same time.** (Jim D.)

The sit back move requires you to fully tuck in the behind by energizing the abdomen and at the same time you have to be able to turn at the waist with ease and with power to ward off opponent' s attack (see Figure 9). (Master Hwa)



Figure 9

The above three examples illustrates that dantien has to be able to do multitasking. One has to understand that energizing the dantien for certain move is different from tensing up the tantien. Tensing or stiffing the tantien immobilizes the entire section of that part of the body indiscriminately. Energizing is a selective utilization of certain muscle for certain function. Energizing has the character of agility, sudden surge and ebb not static. Even "tuck in" should be fluid in nature. So, even one is fully tuck in, one should still have the feeling of suppleness ("soong" in Chinese) at the dantien.

A simple minded picture of what is going on during the sit back and ward off move mention above could be as follows: The tuck in move uses the Rectus Abdominus muscle, while the turning move uses the the External and Internal Obliques. Even though both muscle are next to each other in the same region, with the yin-yang training in tai chi, one should be able to use its distinctive feature independent of each other or in cooperation with each other. All those attributes mentioned above can be developed by practicing the Tai Chi Form. I have seen this among my students.

Mary H. writes:

I have discovered a way of learning from the DVD which really helps me a lot. My system is as follows: After viewing the instruction repeatedly to develop some feel about the movements, select the best view (front, side, or back) to follow the movements and also use Master Hwa's suggestion of putting ribbon on right hand and leg. Set the

beginning move to "pause". Now a nonmoving picture of the beginning move is on the screen so that I can set my body following that fixed picture as a starting form. Then, **set the video running at slow speed, preferably at 8x time slower (that is what available on my DVD player). I find that I can learn this way much easier.** I also only learn a small number of movements at a time. It sounds time consuming but actually speeds up the learning considerably. It is also very interesting viewing the speed up video. I can only speed up to 2x without flickering. Even at this speed, the hidden power in the movements becomes much more obvious and also I can see more the martial art intent of some of the moves.

Master Hwa's reply:

Good method. Thank you for sharing this with us.

Marvin S. writes:

I've only been working with the Classical Tai Chi DVDs for a couple of weeks now, but so far I'm having the most trouble adjusting to the foot placement. The Tai Chi forms I have studied before all had wider, longer foot placement with the back foot at roughly 45 degrees. I understand Master Hwa's explanation for the foot placement in Classical Tai Chi (Lesson 9 on the DVD). As a matter of fact, Master Hwa made it clear to me why my body could never really get used to the foot placement I had learned in the past. That said, **old habits die hard, so even though I am practicing the Tai Chi Walk a lot, I still have a way to go before I can fully readjust.**

Master Hwa's reply:

Good, make sure you stick with walking practice for a while which is so beneficial to your health and tai chi practice when you do it correctly. It is not easy involving concentration on every little detail. But, every little detail have its purpose. Even students who have been with me several years already, I still practice walking with them from time to time, and invariably we find area of improvements which always pleased my students because they can feel the difference.

Jim D. writes:

As I watched Master Hwa play out the forms involving kicks **I was wondering how it is that kicks are not higher as in "heel kick right/left" (Yang Family Style Tai Chi).** Are forms such as "golden cock stands on one leg" or "snake creeps down" found in Classical Taiji. Or are these forms a divergence created only to keep the attention of the practitioner, or the observer? Do they have any real practical application in combat situations?...

You'll be happy to know that I am beginning to appreciate the "great depth" that Classical

Tai Chi obviously contains. It seems that the 24 Forms Tai Chi I learned have no real substance. It does feel like a "relaxing dance with superficial movements."

Master Hwa's reply:

Sun-tzu's The Art of Warfare (see forum#7, reference to the book cited, page 115) says:
"expert in battle would first make himself invincible and then wait for the enemy to expose his vulnerability."

The high kick is perhaps one of the most obvious moves in martial arts. Often, the intention of kicking can be detected early by the opponent. In addition, the higher the kick, the more distance it has to travel, the longer it takes to reach the target. The higher the kick, the weaker is the force of the kick since the split at the crotch increasingly restricts the force it can generate, unless of course you put your body weight into the kick using the momentum force of body rotation behind the kick which makes the kicking movement even slower. When one kicks high or uses momentum behind the kick, it is a move that puts the kicker in a vulnerable situation with no recourse – it is fully committed, cannot back out. If the move is not successful, the kicker can easily be forced off balance. That is the reason we do not use high kick in actual applications. Low kicks, not higher than the knee position, are more difficult to anticipate and defend. The kicking lesson involves the practice of shin, ankle and knee kicks and sweeps. In other lessons, there are practices of tripping with the foot.

During external martial art competition, high kicks are used frequently. But, in most of these competitions, the rules forbid the opponent grasping or trapping of the kicking leg and thereby reduces the vulnerability of the high kick. From the health viewpoint, there are hip and lower back injuries among external martial arts practitioners due to their penchant for high kicks. But, the high kick is such a crowd pleaser, for the sake of promoting interest to their program, it becomes a necessity of any external martial arts demonstration.

Jim D. further writes:

.... a client who is studying Aikido subsequent to her taking a Tai Chi class the 24 Forms Tai Chi. She shared the same view point as you did about the vulnerability of the high kick.....She also was constructively critical about **"snake creeps down" as well for the same reasons of vulnerability in combat.**

Master Hwa's reply:

The high kick and the low posture "snake creep down" (see picture 10) are in the large frame of Yang and Wu style. Our mid-frame also has such moves, but they are subdued not flashy. The large frame is intended for young students to develop a strong lower body, primarily external in nature.

A strong lower body is certainly very important for martial art application. But, the moves are not optimized for martial application just like square form. Like square form, it is a part of the training routine to build the foundation of Tai Chi. Because of the physical demand on the joints of lower body limbs, it is riskier for adult to learn the large frame especially if the instructor is not sensitive to such risks. Figure 10 is the epitome of such problems. Notice the misalignment of the back foot and the leg and the resulting twist at the ankle and the knee. This is a strong invitation to joint injuries. After all, we learn Tai Chi, the first objective is to improve our well-being not to destroy it.



Figure 10