

“Consciously Embodying the Tai Chi Principles”

GPYTCA Workshop Title: “Tai Chi Principles as Metaphors for Right Living.”

Presented by Jarl Forsman and Steve Sekhon
at the 2011 Guang Ping Yang Tai Chi Annual Convention

Please check out Jarl and Steve’s website which focuses on these concepts:

<http://www.gratitudetwentyfourseven.com>

The path to wisdom lies not in the intellect, but in experiential understanding.

“Just practicing the form will teach you all you need to know.” Kuo Lien Ying

There is a variety of ways in which one can pursue an understanding of the Tao. The classics, *Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching* are ancient texts that help to provide an intellectual understanding of Taoist philosophy and cosmology. The Tai Chi Symbol offers a visual representation of the nature of reality or, the Tao. However, it is only through actually practicing the Tai Chi form that one can gain a physical experience of the wisdom of the Tao through embodiment.

How does Tai Chi lead to embodiment of Universal Principles?

Practicing Tai Chi, while maintaining a conscious awareness of the principles, enables you to comprehend Universal truths on a visceral level. This understanding is based on actual, tangible, physical experience. There is no need to intellectualize or speculate, you just know.

The classical Tai Chi texts advise you to focus your mind on sung, flow, continuity, balance, integration, yin/yang, moving from the core of your body and remaining upright, to name a few. These concepts are as valuable to you in the rest of your life as they are in the form. It is therefore worthwhile to focus on key principles while doing Tai

Chi. When they're consciously embodied they can provide you with valuable insight and understanding of the wisdom of the Tao.

*According to spiritual nature,
we are the products of our
environment and we are
here to fulfill one great purpose;
to use the body as a laboratory
to do the work of self-refinement
which is also called internal alchemy.* Hua Ching Ni

In our Tai Chi classes, we often do an exercise that students of all levels can practice together. It's a combination of the traveling steps in the Guang Ping Yang Set. The main purpose of this exercise is to give proper attention to the essential principles on which the form is based. For instance, as we travel forward and backward or from side to side, we focus on core alignment, integration of upper and lower body, using the waist as the fulcrum, developing centeredness and balance, establishing root, awareness of substantial and insubstantial weight distribution, enhancing flow, moving with slowness & continuity, and maintaining present moment awareness, among others.

When I first began doing this exercise, I noticed that certain metaphors for 'living life in alignment with the Tao' would arise in my mind for each principle. For instance, as we move between left and right (yin and yang) through center, it becomes very clear that one side cannot exist without the other. Right cannot be distinguished without wrong. Good would be meaningless without bad. There would be no ups without the downs.

In walking there is no right step without the left. In breathing there is no inhalation without exhalation. No specific condition can exist without it's opposite or complement.

Understanding the nature of reality, the entire dance of life, the lila or the play of the relative world is the ultimate objective of an advanced Tai Chi practice.

While practicing these moves, we can experience the complementary nature of the pair of opposites. No matter how far to one side we go emotionally, whether into joy or anger, maintaining awareness of our core keeps us from losing our balance or going off center psychologically. As we move with continuity, flow and equanimity, we experience that the process is as important as the goal or end result.

When we stay focused with our awareness on the activity of the present moment, life feels full, alive and in balance. We notice the effects of tension on the body and how much more easily we can move physically in the set and metaphorically through life with the attitude of ‘sung.’

Tai Chi Symbol

Lightness and darkness are a pair, like the foot before and the foot after in walking.

The Tai Chi symbol is a graphic representation of the nature of reality. The outer circle represents the whole Truth. It is the ‘Supreme Ultimate’. The inner teardrops depict the varied and complementary nature of manifest reality or relative truth. Only through this play of opposites is it possible to understand anything.

In contemplating the symbol, you can begin to discern that, without differentiation, everything is just one mass of sameness. Yang gives birth to yin just as yin gives birth to yang. There is no such thing as pure yang. Even in the midst of a yang soaked essence, yin is lying quietly influencing the situation, having its effect on the outcome.

When you consistently and consciously experience the physical movement from yin to yang and back again over and over, you begin

to embody this principle. You know experientially that both empty and full, yin and yang are equally necessary. Eventually, you simply know the truth that reality is the totality of both yin and yang, the dynamic balance of opposites. You recognize the endless flow of life as a process of evolution and accept the inevitability of change. This awareness, recognition and acceptance, when consciously embodied, has a profound effect on the practitioner. With an embodied awareness of this truth, disagreements, for example, take on a lighter and softer feel. Attachment to positions or beliefs, no longer makes sense.

Time, change, beginnings and endings occur only in the world of perception (the inner circle) and are based on interpretation, not facts. This is the world of births and deaths, right and wrong and yin and yang. Ultimately nothing truly exists apart from the totality (represented by the outer rim of the circle.) The relative world is defined by a belief in opposites and separate wills in perpetual conflict with each other and with the Tao.

What we see and hear appear to be real because we allow into our awareness only that which conforms to our wishes. This causes a world of illusions, which need constant defense precisely because they are not real. When we embody this understanding, our attachment to our own beliefs and positions relax and we live more in alignment with the Tao.

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase **each other**
doesn't make any sense. Rumi*

SUNG

Sung is the quintessential principle of Tai Chi, which encompasses all the others.

When a person embodies sung, everything they do will be Tai Chi.. Ben Lo

Sung is most often translated as relax. However, this definition is not sufficiently rich or nuanced to describe the significance of the concept.

You can say that sung is a quality of being. Children and people who exist in a state of easy and calm awareness exhibit this principle.

Getting into that space is the true objective of any internal or meditative practice.

Sung is also an indispensable precondition for the cultivation of qi. When you are mentally and physically in a state of sung there is more qi, the body is more supple, elastic and resilient. In sung you are at ease yet alert, calm and focused. Your center of gravity is lower, which results in greater physical and mental stability and balance. In a state of sung, when the body moves effortlessly with continuity, the mind entices the qi to flow freely.

Without sung, Tai Chi is merely another physical movement. Tension impedes the flow of qi, and makes movements clumsy and heavy, whereas in a relaxed state every movement is smooth and fluid. In Tai Chi even at the point of impact, there is no muscular tension.

Synonyms for Sung

Effortless, relaxed, agile, loose, letting go, opening, easy, flowing, sinking, stable, focused, soft, easy-going, awareness, centered, harmonious, calm, yielding, fluid, changing, alert, sensitive, integrated, circular, energy conserving, rejuvenating, rooted.

Below are some key Tai Chi Chuan principles that can help us to develop a deeper understanding of sung. The first of these is a sense

of flow.

“In any single movement of whatever sort, the whole body must move lightly, nimbly, and in coordination.” Sifu Kuo Lien Ying

FLOW

Physical Principle

The Tai Chi set has no breaks in fluidity, no stopping or settling into a move. As if reeling silk from a cocoon, there are no obvious endings or beginnings from one move to another. Each move naturally flows into the next, just as each moment in your life naturally flows into the next.

Each move must connect to the next move, which means each part of the body is attached to and moved by a part that moved just before. This initiates a smooth wave of energy through the body created by the rhythm of movement and the circumstances in which each part of the body is aligned and joined to each other part.

While there are obvious places in the Guang Ping Yang set that speed up and slow down, the principle remains valid. One can still find flow even in these places.

Universal Principle

The benefit of constant, consistent and steady flow is a universal principal that's easy to appreciate. As you are moving in these exercises, try to become conscious of the fact that you are developing one of the most import skills you can have: the ability to feel within yourself a recognition of and an affinity with a sense of flow in your life. It's like a sixth sense that you develop. You'll not only be able to recognize when you are and aren't in the flow, you'll eventually be able to remind your self to get into the flow and be able to shift into that gear at will.

When you are in flow in your life, there is no past or future. There is only the present moment. When you are present, you are complete with all that is necessary to meet every need arising in the NOW.

The rational mind, with its belief that it needs to organize and control everything may find this difficult to accept. All the same, people throughout the ages that have experienced complete present moment awareness have consistently reported that this state results in incredible peace and wellbeing.

When you view life in sections as the past, present and future, too much importance is placed on the past in fear that it will repeat itself in the future. If you're worried about the future, you may be concerned or fearful that something will (or won't) happen. Whichever one of these versions of the future you think about, **THEY ARE NOT REAL!**

Focusing on flow during Tai Chi allows you to continuously bring your attention back to the present moment. When you physically embody a sense of flow and continuity, you endow yourself with an intrinsic understanding of presence.

Effortless flow is the state of acceptance. It involves surrendering to the reality of what is happening in this very moment. It doesn't mean ignoring or denying the reality of what is. It is the combined state of alert awareness and complete acceptance. When you relax your need to control life, it flows in its natural way.

When you develop a highly subtle sense of flow and continuity, you are synchronizing yourself with one of the great truths of existence. Energy flows, life flows, time flows, change flows, your blood flows, rivers flow, and consciousness flows.

*Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.*

*If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life. Wu-Men*

AVOIDING DOUBLE-WEIGHTEDNESS

Physical Principal

Double weightedness is a cardinal flaw in the Tai Chi set. When you distribute your weight equally on both legs, you divide your attention, increase your response time and limit your range of movement. Like a tennis player, who needs to always be ready to move, double weightedness is a beginner's flaw.

Bi-lateral weight distribution is tempting because it feels stable and balanced, almost like a resting position. But, according to Sifu Kuo, it is the major fault in Tai Chi. When you're standing with equal weight on both feet, you're not poised for movement, you're static, you're fixed. You're locked-in and unready for action. When you move through center with your weight constantly shifting from one side to the other, you are 'fresh', poised and prepared for sudden changes in both direction and movement.

The words "fullness" and "emptiness" are essentially the same as "substantial" and "insubstantial". When body weight is constantly shifting from leg to leg, it results in a natural flow of movement.

Universal Principal

Being prepared to listen to and honestly entertain new ideas and concepts is the philosophical corollary to physical double weighting. Who can predict the circumstances and situations you'll encounter in any moment of your life? Each of us knows that life can present us with unexpected challenges. Since it's impossible to anticipate or prevent these from happening, the only intelligent thing to do is to develop openness and flexibility.

Being adaptive and ready for change is like constantly moving your

weight from side to side through center. This includes not being overly attached to your opinions, your surroundings, or your way of doing things. Being poised and ready to respond enables you to be nimble, to seize opportunities and to react quickly to unexpected circumstances.

EQUANIMITY

Physical Principle

A calm mind, a tranquil perspective, and a levelheaded approach are essential elements in a balanced, flowing, and even set. When your attention is focused in each move, you're vision is soft and undisturbed and you're completely in the moment. When you're present, your mind is focused, your chi is flowing and your health is supported. The chattering of the mind abates and you increasingly establish a connection with your inner self. And, of course, when you're present, you're sensitive to energy around you and you're unlikely to find yourself in compromising situations.

Universal Principal

The ability to maintain a sense of equanimity in your life may be the most important life skill you can develop. And, it *is* a skill. There's an entire religion based on pursuing this important attribute. The central practice of Buddhism is developing the ability or rather the habit of maintaining equanimity in every situation. What does this actually mean?

It means mentally flying above the workings with compassionate detachment. It means having deep awareness without getting tangled up or identified with particular perspectives or positions. This doesn't mean you have no preference or opinions, it just means you aren't attached to your point of view.

When you comprehend that every side of any conflict is part of the

same energy that created it, you realize the futility in trying to solve anything with that energetic mindset. There would be no conflict without the two sides. If you place your point of view or perspective on the outer rim of the yin/yang symbol, and take the viewpoint of the whole picture, you will immediately understand that this is simply the dance of matter in the universe. It's also the play of human interaction in the material world.

It's understandable that you, as a being moving through space and time, will have particular ideas and desires. And this is perfectly acceptable. But when you identify with your perspective as the truth and the other side as falsity, then you are in conflict with reality.

Developing a sense of equanimity means accepting the present circumstances of 'what is' as the truth of the moment. It doesn't mean that you can't change it. In fact, once you refrain from resisting what's happening in this moment, you gain immediate power and insight into how you might transform it.

The benefits of maintaining a continuous sense of equanimity in your life are obvious, but how does one practice this skill? First, have the humility to understand that whatever you think may be right, true, or desirable - is only *one* way of looking at the situation. Second, develop the habit of reminding yourself that your perspective in this moment may be such that you are not seeing the whole picture. Third, loosen your focus on the matter. Understand that being calm and collected greatly enhances your ability to deal with people, problems, and issues.

Emotional equanimity is a key factor in the martial aspect of Tai Chi. According to Sifu Kuo, anger is the biggest enemy and the number one issue to gain control over if you are subject to its tyranny. When you're angry, you are not in control of your actions. When you aren't in control of yourself, you're easy prey for others to overtake.

We're going to guide you through an **exercise** that will help you to develop this important life skill.

Sit with an easy, soft gaze and begin to scan the room. Don't let your eyes rest on any one object longer than any other just as in the Tai Chi set. Listen to these statements with an open mind and try to see the truth in each of them.

Equanimity exercise: Sentences to contemplate.

- Nothing I see in this room means anything.
- I have given everything that I see in this room all of the meaning it has for me.
- I do not understand anything that I see in this room.
- These thoughts do not mean anything. They are like the things I see in this room.
- I'm never upset for the reason I think
- I'm upset because I see something that is not there
- I see only the past
- I see nothing as it is now
- My thoughts do not mean anything
- My thoughts are images that I have made
- I have no neutral thoughts
- I see no neutral things
- I am not alone in experiencing the effects of my thoughts
- I do not know what anything is for
- I am not the victim of the world I see
- I have invented the world I see
- There is another way of looking at the world
- I could see peace instead of this
- There is nothing to fear

SLOWNESS

Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished. Lao Tzu

Physical Principle

The slow, flowing movements in Tai Chi help to eliminate qi

blockages, balance the system, promote healthy qi flow and facilitate a meditative state. When movements flow evenly, qi flows freely. When done slowly, qi flows with the movements and energizes the whole body.

Universal Principle

When you slow down, you can more accurately tune into what's going on with yourself and others. You can more nimbly adjust to the needs of the present moment.

Slow, peaceful movements help calm the mind. They help you to tune out the enormous number of distractions bombarding you daily in modern life. Without the ability to filter the noise, it's very difficult to get in touch with your Inner Presence. On the other hand, when your mind is calm, you can listen for subtle information.

But slowing down isn't just good for getting in touch with your Inner Voice. What's going on in your mind has a profound impact on what's happening with your body. The AMA reports that slow motion movement enhances the immune system.

It's now widely accepted that stress is the major factor in 90% of ailments. When you calm your mind, you reduce stress. Reduced stress enhances the immune system and that is the most sophisticated resource you have to combat sickness.

Slowing down is not unrelated to single pointed attention. It's also connected with the objective of present moment awareness and developing a practice of being quiet and not needing to constantly be involved doing, making, creating, or distracting yourself from the moment in any other way.

ROOTING AND BALANCE

Physical Principle

Rooting is one of the most important aspects of solid Tai Chi Chuan

practice. You root by physically sinking your body weight and mentally sinking your qi to your Tan Tien. The whole body must be sunk so that the power generated from the feet can be transferred to the upper body. Rooting permits your qi to flow and connect with nature so you can harness the energy coming from the earth. Rooting facilitates balance during kicks so that flow is continuous. Once rooted, your whole body moves together as a unit.

Rooting and balance must be distinguished from double-weightedness. Continuous and fluid movement from yin to yang and back again is necessary.

Universal Principle

To be rooted in life means you are stable and grounded rather than flighty and out of control. When you're rooted in balance, you can respond with agility, flexibility and heightened awareness to situations as they arise. No scrambling is required either emotionally or physically to regain balance before you take further action.

Emotionally, when you are in balance you're more likely to make good decisions and avoid being overwhelmed. You are in flow.

Rooting exercises:

- Standing meditation, where the mind is focused on developing a conscious connection with the earth, is a great way to cultivate rooting.
- Another useful exercise is to practice moving the root, by shifting the weight from one leg to the other. The body must not rise up while transferring weight because the power generated will be lost.
- Tai Chi walking with and without the hand movements is another effective exercise to help develop rooting in your form.

INTEGRATION OF UPPER AND LOWER & CORE ALIGNMENT

Physical Principle

Core alignment means the body remains upright and plum, the shoulders are in alignment with the hips, the navel is in alignment with the nose and the wrists are in alignment with the knees.

All moves begin with the feet and legs. This is followed by the waist, which moves the upper body. Using the waist and torso as the fulcrum allows you to issue your movement from your center of gravity in order to take action with full power. This keeps the movements integrated and balanced.

When there is lower and upper body integration, qi is regulated throughout the whole body - soothing, mending and creating a state of wellbeing and mental calm.

Universal Principle

Growth often requires you to move out of your comfort zone. Staying mentally and emotionally connected to your core allows you to do this without losing your balance. When you move with awareness of your truth and core values, you can maintain alignment no matter how far off center into yin or yang you actually go.

Just as moving different parts of your body in a disconnected way can lead to loss of balance and, in the martial context, vulnerability, so too, can engaging in behavior that is out of alignment with your values lead to emotional instability, confusion and unhappiness.

Identifying your consciousness with the outer circle and the center-line of the tai chi symbol is a effective technique to help you to stay in alignment with the truth in almost any situation. In this way, you resonate with the totality of what is and remain calm in crisis and stable in storms.

Exercise

With one hand on shoulder, the other on the same hip, rotate your body left and right keeping your hip and shoulder, and your nose and

navel in alignment.

UPRIGHT TORSO

Physical Principle

This consists of lifting your Head lightly, as if suspended by a string. It enhances your peripheral vision, keeps your body positioned as it's naturally engineered to be, and allows you to see farther and consequently be ready for anything that may be coming your way.

Universal Principle

Metaphorically speaking, maintaining an upright posture signifies being alert and in alignment with what is good and appropriate in every situation. It gives you a broader perspective, wider vision and clearer understanding of the truth that 'this too shall change.'

Keeping the chin up is also indicative of expecting a positive outcome, facing your life with clarity and awareness and being open to allowing the light and beauty of the surroundings to enter into your conscious awareness. Trying to strategize your way around unclear and ethically or morally ambiguous situations is a waste of your qi. Keeping an upright posture reminds you that you do not stoop down to engage in that kind of behavior.

Exercise

Stand with your feet shoulder distance apart in Tai Chi posture with your knees soft, your back sung, and your eyes gently closed. Now open your eyes and keep them focused on the floor two feet in front of you. Turn your head from side to side maintaining your gaze on the floor. Do you notice how limited your ability is to see everything else that's going on in the room beyond your 3 foot semi circle? Now turn your head forward in front of you and raise your gaze to eye level. Turn your head from side to side as you would in wave hands like clouds. Can you see how different these two positions are?

Living the Tai Chi Way of Life

Summary

When you practice the Tai Chi set correctly with awareness, you can embody physical principals, which mirror universal principals of the Tao. This physical embodiment leads to a concrete understanding of the Tao that will endow (in Tao) you with wisdom and sweeten your experience of life.

“Be soft in your practice.

Think of the method as a silvery stream,

Not a raging waterfall.

Follow the stream, have faith in its course.

It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there.

It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices.

Just follow it. Don't ever let it out of your sight

It will take you”