

The Tai Chi Chuan Lun (Discourse)

full text without commentary

Commentary by Dan Docherty

**Once you move, the whole body must be light and agile,
In particular, it must be linked together**

If you are tense or move in an uncoordinated manner, the balance, speed and smoothness of technique will be adversely affected. This applies to self defence and to forms equally.

**The Chi (Vital Energy) should be aroused and agitated,
While the Shen (Spirit) must be internally hoarded.**

Chi and Shen together with Jing comprised the three interactive treasures of the Taoist

氣

alchemists. I've rendered "Chi" as Vital Energy in the present context, but this is very far from being an adequate explanation of the concept. The character itself represents rice being cooked in an pot and giving off vapour, so there is the concept of alchemical change so beloved by the Taoists. In fact Chi is many different things. There is Chi all around us; the air is Chi. The oxygen that we extract from the air is Chi. The oxygen transported by the haemoglobin which is delivered from the lungs to the tissues of the body is Chi. The carbon dioxide and methane gas discharged from various orifices are also examples of Chi. Vital Energy seems the best choice of

神

translation, despite its limitations. The character "Shen" represents on the left the sky and the various heavenly bodies and on the right two hands extending a rope, so there is the concept of expansion. The combination has man reaching for the stars, so perhaps Spirit is the

精

best translation in the present context. The third treasure "Jing" means the Essence; semen. Again the character on the left depicts the rice plant while on the right the upper part means to give birth and the lower represents the colour of plants. Without a good supply of Chi the Essence would be lacking and the Shen would not be at ease. If the Shen was not tranquil, the breathing would be adversely affected and the ability to produce or retain Jing would be adversely affected. Many people particularly those with sedentary life styles and the elderly suffer from poor respiration and circulation therefore it is necessary to stimulate the respiration and thereby the circulation by exercise. This requires full movements involving sinking and raising, contracting and expanding in this way the Chi can be said to be "aroused and agitated". Because the movements are smooth and co-ordinated the Shen (Spirit) is calm and therefore the concentration is good.

**No place should be deficient or defective,
No place should have hollows or bumps.
No place should be cut off or extended.**

Deficient or defective moves occur where for example we raise the hand to defend but fail to make a complementary body movement or where we strike an opponent but fail to use the waist

or get the weight behind the technique. The Chinese characters for hollows and bumps are



actually pictographs:



If we fail to extend the arms sufficiently in say "Single Whip", then a hollow is created at the elbow joint. Techniques such as this should be extended so that the elbow joint is just short of being locked. This means that there is Yin within Yang and Yang within Yin in all techniques. This is a physical way of expressing the dot of Yang in Yin and the dot of Yin in Yang in the Tai Chi symbol. Bumps indicate the localised tension or locking of joints as where the shoulders or back are/is hunched when we perform an arm movement. Many practitioners either run techniques together by "cutting off" i.e. failing to finish one movement before starting the next or go to the other extreme and over extend their movements whether going forward or back. When going forward we go sufficiently far forward so that the front knee extends over, but not beyond the toes of the front foot and the weight is therefore mainly on this foot; only when we get this far forward do we start to move back. Going further forward will cause us to "uproot" ourselves. The key to all this lies in correct weight transference.

**The root is in the feet;
Discharging is done by the legs,
The controlling power is in the waist,
And the appearance is in the hand and fingers.**

Beginners following a teacher usually concentrate on what the teacher is doing with his hands and fingers and fail to see that the power is coming from the feet through the legs to the waist and finally to the hands and arms. Thus pushing off the rear foot, the rear leg is straightened pushing the weight forward onto the front leg while at the same time the waist turns as for example in "Step Up Parry and Punch". Beginners would tend to notice the punch, but fail to notice the other parts of the process. This problem can be remedied by Pushing Hands and Nei Kung training, where we are repeating the same movements many times, while discharging with the legs and turning the waist.

**From the feet to the legs to the waist,
All must be completely uniform and simultaneous,
Whether stepping forward or moving back.
This will result in good timing and correct movements.
If in certain places good timing and correct movement are not achieved,
Body movements become arbitrary and disordered.
This sickness must be sought in the waist and leg.**

In Tai Chi Chuan we have total body movement rather than localised or uncoordinated movement. All parts of the body should therefore start and finish a technique together. Again these skills can be trained in certain Pushing Hands drills. In Pushing Hands drills there should be complementary body movement; if your partner goes forward you go back and vice versa. Therefore in techniques such as Brush Knee Twist Step, the weight goes forward as the striking/pushing hand is extended while the defending/diverting hand comes down and across the body as we push from the rear leg and turn the hip and shoulder into the technique. Failure to do this is a "sickness".

**Above and below, forward and back, left and right are all like this.
In general this is controlled by the Yi (Intent) and not externally.
If there is up, immediately there is down;
If there is forward, immediately there is back;
If there is left, immediately there is right.
If the Yi is to go up,
The Yi to go down is there immediately.**

**Or, if you raise something up,
Then there is the Yi to smash it down with increased force.
In this way its roots will be severed
And destruction will be swift and beyond doubt.**

From a health point of view, the Tai Chi form involves constantly contrasting movements, first in one direction, then in another. This method is excellent for improving balance and co-ordination. The circulation and joint movement are also improved. For example by raising the hands above the head, the heart has to work harder to pump the blood through the arteries against gravity, but the blood flows easily through the veins in the other direction. Lowering the hands of course has the reverse effect. The principle of total body movement applies no matter what direction we are moving in. Now we are dealing with the practical application of Yin Yang theory as directed by the Yi, the intent. If we try to lift an opponent and he resists then we change the force to downward directed force; if we pull him forward and he resists we can throw him back; if we divert his attack with the left hand then it is natural to hit him simultaneously with the right. This can also be considered applied psychology. The opponent attacks us because he hates us and wants to hurt us, therefore whatever we do he will oppose it. If we exert force in one direction to provoke a reaction, he is likely to resist us. When we detect his resistance, we can use maximum force in the opposite reaction. This indirect method is much more devastating as we are exploiting the opponent's anger and adding our force to his. This ability is trained by repetitive drills and training in Pushing Hands until it becomes a natural reaction in self defence.

**Void and Substantial must be clearly distinguished.
Each place of course has its individual balance of void and substantial,
Every place consists of this, one Void and Substantial.**

Void means empty and is Yang. Substantial means full and is Yin. In a front stance the front foot is substantial/full/Yin and we can't step with it unless and until we shift the weight back. Effectively the foot is dead - this is what makes it Yin. Similarly, again when in a front stance, the rear foot is void/empty/Yang and can step easily in any direction. This potential for movement is what makes it Yang. In a back stance or cat stance the rear leg is full and the front leg is Yang for exactly the same reasons. When in a horse riding stance the void and substantiality exists in so far as the lower body is full or Yin while the upper body is Yang as it has the potential for movement. This division also applies to the hands. If one hand is striking the other hand should be ready to strike, also the force is concentrated on the striking hand at the moment of impact. However, it's not just the hands that strike, it's the whole body force. Mentally too there should be this division of void and substantial, intending to defend automatically implies intending to counter.

**Every part of the body in turn is strung together,
Without causing the least break.**

**This Tai Chi,
It's like the great river, the Chang Jiang,
Surging and flowing without interruption.**

An old name for Tai Chi Chuan was Long Boxing - Chang Chuan and the name was derived from this comparison to China's famous river, the Chang Jiang. This comparison implies that firstly that like a river our movements whether in self defence , forms or Pushing Hands should flow and be continuously using total body movement. Secondly, we need to spend time on long and continuous practice to get benefits from Tai Chi Chuan. Thirdly, there is no one way in which or one speed at which we should do the form. Some movements are more demanding than others, some require greater or lesser emphasis. The form can be done in a slower, softer and more internalised or in a more vigorous, more martial way. Fourthly, a river follows the quickest route to its destination. and substantial, intending to defend automatically implies intending to counter.

**Of the Thirteen Tactics,
Peng, Lu, Ji, An, Cai, Lie, Zhou and Kao;
They are the Eight Trigrams.
Step Forward, Move Back, Face Left, Look Right and Centrally Fixed;
These are the Five Elements**

I have deliberately used the translation "Thirteen Tactics" rather than the more common "Thirteen Movements", because they are not just thirteen ways of moving, but eight ways of defending or striking combined with five ways of standing or stepping. They are not used in an arbitrary way, but are logical responses to an opponent's actions.

**Peng, Lu, Ji and An,
Are the trigrams Chien, Kun, Kan, Li, the four cardinal points.
Cai, Lie, Zhou and Kao
Are the trigrams Sun, Chen, Tui, Ken the four corners.
Step Forward, Move Back, Face Left, Look Right and Centrally Fixed;
Are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth.**

The arrangement of the Eight Trigrams associated with the Eight Powers was that attributed to the legendary Emperor Fu Hsi. The main reason for identifying a particular trigram with a particular way of using force would seem to be that this is usually the direction in which that type of force is used. For example, in using Peng our hand/s diverts the opponent's arm/s up from underneath, i.e. towards the trigram "Chien", which means Heaven; while in using Lu we divert the opponent's arm's by placing our hand/s above his and diverting it/them to the side and behind us i.e. towards the trigram Kun, which means Earth. Likewise Ji, a straight push, usually followed Peng and was therefore at right angles to Peng, while An, a downward thrust, was normally employed after Lu and therefore was also at right angles to it. Cai, to uproot, is normally used diagonally upwards, while Lie, spiralling force was normally used diagonally downwards. Kao, to lean or use the shoulder was also used diagonally downwards while Zhou, the use of the elbow or forearm was normally employed diagonally upward. The Five Steps are linked with the Five Elements because the Five Elements have Yin and Yang qualities and a positive or negative relationship to one another. For example Metal destroys Wood, and Water extinguishes Fire. Earth is the key element and so occupies the central position; on the one hand it produces Metal and Wood, on the other it can destroy both Fire and Water which shows the relationship of the Five Elements to one another. This configuration is, however, different from that proposed by the 1st century BC philosopher, Tung Chung-shu of the New Text school. Indeed various authors put the Five Elements in different orders sometimes with Earth coming third sometimes not. In any case there are two basic arrangements of the Five Elements. The first is a mutually generative cycle; the second is a mutually destructive cycle. In the generative cycle :-

- Metal gives birth to Water
- Water gives birth to Wood

- Wood gives birth to Fire
- Fire gives birth to Earth
- Earth gives birth to Metal

In the destructive cycle :-

- Metal destroys Wood
- Wood destroys Earth
- Earth destroys Water
- Water destroys Fire
- Fire destroys Metal

Each element is also held to be stronger than the element which gave birth to it. Thus, as Metal gives birth to Water, Water is stronger than Metal. When any element is opposed by another quantity of the same element the stronger element will win. To sum up, any element is stronger than two of the other four elements and weaker than the other two. The interaction between the elements is eternal and continuous. Each element also has both Yin and Yang characteristics. Thus Metal could be sharp and shiny or rusty and dull, while Water could be a roaring waterfall or a muddy pool. To go back to the linking of the Five Steps and the Five Elements, if we use Metal (advance in a straight line) and the opponent also uses Metal (advances in a straight line), then the stronger force will prevail. It would make more sense to use Fire or Water and evade the attack or to use Centrally Fixed or Move Back in conjunction with a diversion to redirect the opponent to one side or the other. The Five steps are of key importance in using Tai Chi Chuan as a fighting art. They are trained to some extent in the hand and weapon forms and the Nei Kung, but more fundamentally in Pushing Hands training. Many Tai Chi stylists do not know fundamental Pushing Hands exercises such as Seven Stars Step, Nine Palace Step and Gathering the Wave. I believe that this is partly the fault of Yang Cheng-fu in so far as he is shown in Yang family books using self defence applications in a way that might have worked for him with his massive build, but which is absurd for a small person dealing with a larger opponent. Centrally Fixed is identified with the element Earth and just as Earth is the key element so Centrally Fixed is the position from which the other steps spring. Face Left and Look Right accordingly take their places as Water and Fire respectively and Step Forward is Metal while Move Back is Wood. Tai Chi Chuan makes extensive use of evasion and counter attack as well as the Chinese military stratagem of retreating in order to advance. It should be well understood that the identification of the Eight Powers, each linked individually to one of the Eight Trigrams, and the Five Steps, each linked individually to one of the Five Elements is artificial and, while it helps us to analyse Tai Chi techniques, it is not a straightjacket which we must don prior to practising Tai Chi Chuan, though this has not stopped some practitioners from using it as such and insisting that everyone else does the same.