

*This draft was given to me by a student many years ago. In honor of William Prensky I have reproduced it here almost in its original form. Its content has some wonderful observations about the spiritual art of Tai Chi. Thank you William. Colin Snow 2014*

# Tai Chi - Spiritual Martial Art

by William L Prensky

Man follows the ways of the earth,  
The earth follows the ways of Heaven,  
Heaven follows the ways of Tao,  
Tao follows its own way.

Now, what is the Tao?  
It is something elusive & evasive,  
Evasive & elusive!  
And yet it contains within it a capital form.  
Elusive & evasive!  
And yet it contains within itself a capital substance,  
Shadowy & dim!  
And yet it contains within itself a core of Vitality.  
The core of Vitality is very real;  
it contains within itself an unfailing sincerity.  
Throughout the ages its name has been preserved.  
In order to recall the Beginning of all things.  
How do I know the ways of all things at the Beginning?  
By what is within me. – Tao Tei Ching

The real sense of Tai Chi is elusive – as evasive as the Tao itself. Like so many other oriental arts, it has become enormously popular in this country, primary as a physical exercise. But this is certainly not its deepest meaning, & I believe that when we concern ourselves with the practices of other cultures, it behooves us to use care & respect. Anyone who wishes to learn Tai Chi & find the benefits it can give will need to find not only an authentic teacher – one who deeply understands its meaning as well as technique – but also to have grounded themselves as thoroughly as they can in the knowledge & tradition from which it comes.

The Tai Chi has been practiced for many purposes. For at least the last six hundred years, it has been a meditational form, a health practice, part of the oriental system of martial arts, and an art the perfection of which – like any art – could be used to approach the Tao. In the final analysis Tai Chi is a sacred dance. The movement, postures, & the connection between the two exist independently of the abilities of the player, & call forth, when done correctly, a definite relationship between the player & their understanding of the entirety of what they have learned & experienced. As a sacred dance it is a prayer – a call for the evoking of the movement of the Tai Chi – The Grand Ultimate, the Life Force.

A real prayer is not a petition for results but a position from which to see. It must begin patiently. Like a good hunter stalking their prey, that part of the mind which has resolved to engage in this exercise must wait & study – must sit quietly in the blind & observe the movements of that which it seeks to capture. This watchfulness is not violent. It proceeds from a desire to understand the relationship of the watcher & the watched. There is no attempt to coerce, but rather to cooperate.

In Tai Chi, as a spiritual martial art, the watchfulness is serious; I am at stake – my real value to myself. I am both hunter and hunted. By evoking the opponent, my mind is focused on the true opponent – the resistance in me. This demands a recognition & sense of the orbital movements in me & a desire to keep the center in view.

Just as the moon orbits around the earth, the earth around the sun, & the sun around the center of the galaxy, so too, do all the parts of a human being orbit around respective centers of gravity. Thoughts follow their own orbits, but this movement of thoughts is rarely seen. They also have an apogee & perigee. And they, like the limbs of the body, must find a true center of gravity around which to revolve.

In the Chinese martial arts Tai Chi is the internal or esoteric school, as opposed to the external or exoteric school generally known as Kung Fu. The Tai Chi is the esoteric system because it is a systematic training of the mind from which the movement of the body springs, as opposed to a training of the body from which comes the movement of the mind.

Tai Chi is attributed to the monk Chang Sen-Feng, born approximately 1247 A.D. A Confucianist from the age of 12, he later in life became interested in the alchemy of the Taoists, which he studied in the Shao Lin monastery, founded by Boddhidarma. Having finished the work of his life & retired to a cottage which he built on the mountain of Wu Tang, Chang was sitting one dawn observing his garden in quiet meditation. As the sun arose & began to shine, a snake crawled out upon one of the flat rocks to sun itself. A Shrike sitting in a tree above the garden saw the snake & determined it was to be its dinner. The Shrike flew down from the tree, swooping down upon the snake with all the force it could muster from its high vantage point. The snake, using its sinuous & continuously flowing movements, transmitted the force of the Shrike to the rock & allowed the shrike to dash itself upon the ground. Over & over again, throughout the day until dusk this simple battle was repeated & with each attack of the shrike the snake defended itself. Then as dusk drew near, the shrike flew back to the top of the tree & in one last attempt to overcome its enemy; it hurled itself down with the greatest possible velocity. The snake, continuing only the effortless movements, simply disappeared from the line of attack. The Shrike threw itself against the rock, broke its neck, & was killed. Chang San – Feng having observed this in meditation throughout the day, was enlightened, & the dance of the Tai Chi was born fully complete in him at that moment. It is said at that time he was 80 years old, & from that day forward he began to travel China to teach this form & continued to do so for the next 33 years until he died.

The Tai Chi Chuan is a dance which consists of 108 postures, many of which are repetitions of 37 basic movement patterns. The intention of this movement is the flow from one posture into another, so that each, although it has a definite stop which could be depicted in a static fashion, is in fact composed of an indefinite subset of points of movement from the preceding posture into the final posture. In practice there are a series of postures, all of which have names & a much greater series of intermediary movements from one posture to the next.

The practice of Tai Chi in its entirety describes an infinite sequence of movements. The goal of the practice is to arrive at a balancing of the movement with no excess muscular activity or tension, keeping the body balanced on the spine, the spinal column pivoted at a point in its center of gravity so that at any given moment all parts of the body are properly balanced. Finding this center of gravity places emphasis on the relativity of measurement. The Chinese traditional physiology measures the body proportionally with an integral consistency. Every portion of the body is subdivided about its own

center. Studying the Tai Chi involves experimentation to find this center in movement as it constantly shifts due to tensions & day-to-day fluctuations.

Being centered enables one to perform in balance; that is, the movements through each posture & through each intermediary movement can be Wu Wei, the Effortless Effort. The motivation for the movement must come not from tension & imbalance but from relaxation & centering. Excess tension, regardless of its source or expression, will prohibit the free movement of the Chi.

The movement of the Chi comes from the Tan Tien, the center of gravity of the body, a point half the distance between the navel & the top of the pubis, approximately one-third of the distance into the mass of the body. It is not only the center around which the rest of the body must orbit, but it is also the repository of Chi. The Chi is generated in the body from food, from breath & food, & from breath combined with spirit. Chi flows through every part of the body, is resident in every cell & flows through certain specific bodily channels called meridians. Each meridian relates to a specific organ or organ system to which it is functionally linked, & of which is a mirror as well as a channel for influence. These meridians form a topographical network on the surface of the body which suffuses every region and generates a field through which the Chi flows. The flow of the Chi through these meridians is inhibited by constriction of the muscles around the meridians from tension or inflammation. Relaxation causes an enhanced freedom in the flow of the Chi.

The purpose of the Tai Chi is to generate Chi; to actualize, mobilize & motivate the movement of the Chi in its course around the body throughout the meridians through which it flows, so that at the end of the practice the Chi has made one complete revolution throughout the body's meridian system. One completion of the Tai Chi Form, if done correctly, generates the flow of the Chi throughout the body in its revitalizing capacity as it would move in one full 24-hour period. The relaxation which results from finding it precedes quieting of mind which is necessary for further study. The role of thoughts in the learning of the Tai Chi follows 3 stages of development. In the first stage one learns & pictures the execution of the form: the thought learns the form, the sequence, the picture of what each posture looks like. The second stage of the development is relaxation, the training of the thoughts & the mind to be only concerned with the execution of the form as it has been learned, & the striving to have the question alive in oneself while playing the form, "Am I relaxed? - Am I moving around my center of gravity? - Are the various parts of my body moving independently or are they motivated centrally from my center of gravity?" The question is really, is the body following a movement proceeding from a central point, & does the thought follow the movement of the body?

In the first stage of the development the thought is the leader, learning the sequence of the movements. In the second stage, the body has learned this sequence: the mind must now follow & question its relationship to it. The key to finding this center of gravity is the relaxation of the body & of the thought. In the third stage, once the sequence is learned & relaxation attained so that the movements are balanced, the thoughts must be devoted entirely to the movement. The question becomes: "Can I think only of the movement?" The Chi will not be generated unless there is no thought but the movement. This third stage of development is the concentration of the thought upon the application, the devoting of the thought to the understanding of the presence of the opponent in the practice of the form.

One of the first things that the student sees is that they cannot limit the movement of their thoughts to the sequence of the movement. In the beginning, the thought is held to the movements by the

difficulty of remembering them; but as they are learned & become more automatic, the thoughts invariably begin to wander. Then the student begins to see that they carry on an unceasing conversation with themselves about everything imaginable. This ceaseless dialogue prevents the player from being able to find the state of relaxation in which the attention is free to follow the inner movement that reveals the natural state of being. As the player looks & struggles with their attention, they find that this continuous dialogue does from time to time inexplicably halt. This quiet may only occur once in a while. It may happen with more frequency or with less. But once it has happened, the student has a foretaste of the possibility of existing for a moment with all of the faculties usually occupied by this conversation freed to attend to following the movement.

It is the form of Tai Chi itself which evokes this quiet. It is not within the power of the student to command it. It is due to the power of the form that it is possible for the student, for a moment, to slip into the right posture & the right rhythm. When that perfect balance around the center of gravity appears, for a moment this conversation stops. The student must come to terms within themselves with the problem posed by the fact that even when this magic appears for a fleeting moment, they do not understand its origins nor from what place it appeared and cannot request its return. It is this predicament which faces the student of Tai Chi, as it faces the student of any sacred art or exercise designed to produce the sense of quiet watchfulness.

The movements of Tai Chi alternate in a definite & steady rhythm between yielding receptivity & forceful creation. It is this yielding & pressing forward, this retreating & advancing in repetitive rhythm which probably led to the erroneous attempt to control the breathing in the practice of Tai Chi.. The breathing like all muscular functions contains unnecessary tensions which cause its rhythm & tempo to be out of balance with the rest of the body. Like all other muscular events with which the Tai Chi is concerned, the breathing needs to be more relaxed & not intentionally regulated. As the tai Chi is practiced more, & more correctly the breathing will in & of itself relax & become harmonious.

The body & the mind are not Oxen or other beasts of burden to be harnessed to some idea & beaten into submissive cooperation. The tai Chi is not an exercise of will & determination but an exercise of attention & observation. Developing the sense of Chi, at first very grossly, it flies from the observer at the first sign of being aware of it. Later we begin to see that it is possible for a very fine sense of this energy to coexist with the movements of the muscles & that at those rare times when thoughts do cease their constant chatter for just a moment, we are permitted to observe a movement of an energy motivating the actions & maintaining the postures which is in partnership with the energy of the muscles & their strength but which supplants them to a degree equal to the relaxation which the player is able to maintain.

Is it possible that the Chi itself & not the muscles upholds the posture after time? Is it possible that the Chi in its flowing in & out ceaselessly from the Tan Tien through the meridians does in fact generate a movement of a finer quality than my ordinary muscular activity? If we have but one experience that transcends the ordinary gross movement, then we cannot help but question from time to time the possibility of another motive force than the one with which we are accustomed. If we have one experience of the movement finding a rhythm which follows a music not of our own devising, but which is there just the same, this question must recur & strengthen as we continue the play of Tai Chi.