

#1 – Head Upright, Spirit Rising

虛靈頂勁

xū líng dǐng jìn

Yang Cheng Fu’s comments: To enable *shen* to rise to the top of the crown, the head must be upright. Do not use strength. Although your head can be upright if you use strength, blood and *qi* cannot flow smoothly. So although there is the will to let *shen* rise to the top, if it is forced, there is no *shen* rising, and you will not attain mental clarity.

FZ comments: *Shen* is a difficult term to translate. It is usually translated as “spirit”, but that can be a confusing word in English. A better translation, in this context, might be “focused awareness.”

A lack of *shen* is probably easier to describe. **You can tell when someone’s *shen* is dull because they can’t focus on the conversation, they are easily distracted, and their eyes look dull and lackluster.**

We want the opposite of that. Think of an athlete who is totally in the zone. Or think of a Zen archer, completely focused, and yet totally relaxed. That’s what we call a “bright *shen*”. Usually, you can see the brightness of a person’s *shen* reflected in the clarity of their eyes.

In many ways, this is the first thing that I teach to both Qigong and Tai Chi students. But I say things a little differently. “Stand upright and relax.” That’s the feeling of “Head Upright, Spirit Rising”. When you stand upright, but also relax, when the head feels like it is being gently pulled upright, as if by an invisible string — then the mind will be clear. And that’s the first of the Ten Essentials.

Later, you can get the same feeling throughout the various Tai Chi postures. But for new students, it’s easier to feel this principle by simply standing upright and relaxing.

2. Sink the Chest, Raise the Back.

含胸拔背

hán xiōng bá bèi

Yang Cheng Fu’s comments: The chest is drawn in to enable the *qi* to sink gently down to *dantian*. Do not expand the chest. If you do, then *qi* will rush to your chest resulting in “top heavy, bottom light”, and your heels will float up. Raising the back means *qi* focusing on your back. If you can raise your back, you can emit internal strength from your spine, enabling you to be victorious in combat.

FZ comments: Cheng Man-ch’ing, a famous Tai Chi master and a student of Yang Cheng Fu, once said the following: “Sink the chest means that one must not stick out the chest, but also not allow it to cave in. Rather, the chest should be relaxed. Only this is the correct method.”

In my classes, I usually say the following: “Soften and open the chest.” Don’t sink the chest so much that you look depressed. Just relax it a bit, until you feel that your breathing gets nice and soft.

In my experience, it’s best for beginners to forget about raising the back. Many beginners exaggerate this, and it can cause big problems later. You see some Tai Chi practitioners who look like hunchbacks because they take this point to an extreme. This will cause long-term blockages in the *qi*. Don’t make that mistake.

Yang Cheng Fu mentions “top heavy, bottom light”. This is actually the reverse of what we want, which the classics describe as “top light, bottom heavy.” When you relax fully, then you start to experience the feeling of the feet being incredibly rooted and heavy, but everything above the feet feeling light and relaxed. That’s “top light, bottom heavy.”

3. Loosen the Waist

鬆腰

sōng yāo

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: The waist is the commander of the whole body. Loosening your waist enables your feet to be strong so that your stance is stable. All the variations and interactions of empty and solid are executed from the waist. Thus, there is the saying, "The will of life has its source at the waist." Those who fail to acquire power in their combat should remedy the situation at the waist.

FZ comments: The "waist" is a confusing word for many Westerners. In Tai Chi, when we refer to the waist, we mean the entire area from the hips up to the belly button.

Watch a pro golfer. Or a pro baseball player at bat. Or a basketball player doing a crossover. All of them use the "waist". Their power comes from the hips.

In Tai Chi Chuan, when the waist is loose, the belly button will naturally turn left and right as you move, and the hips will "fold". If there were a beam of light shining out from your belly button (this is not something you should visualize; it's just a teaching tip), then the beam would sweep left and right like a lighthouse.

The waist is what allows us to deliver power in Tai Chi Chuan. It's what enables a small-sized woman to hit like a truck. It's also what allows her to neutralize a punch, a kick, or a grab. (We'll talk more about this topic below.)

4. Differentiate Between Empty and Solid.

分虛實

fēn xū shí

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: Differentiating between empty and solid is the first fundamental of Tai Chi Chuan. If the whole weight of the body is over the right leg, then the right leg is solid, and the left leg is empty. If the whole weight is over the left leg, then the left leg is solid, and the right leg is empty. When empty and solid can be differentiated, movement becomes agile, as if effortless. If not, then your movements become heavy, and stances are unstable and can be easily exploited by the opponent.

FZ comments: This is hard for beginners to learn, which is probably why Yang Cheng Fu called it the "first fundamental". I joke with students that if they can walk, then they can learn to differentiate between empty and solid.

When you walk, there is a moment when one leg is 100% empty, and the other is 100% full. If you can walk slowly, carefully placing the foot down rather than letting it drop, and if you can change direction gracefully, then you're differentiating between empty and solid.

Later, when the legs become stronger and more flexible, you'll be able to do the same thing, but in the Tai Chi stances. And the real trick is to keep the waist loose (see Essential #3) while differentiating between empty and solid. It takes practice, but in my experience, almost anyone can learn to do it.

5. Sink the Shoulders, Drop the Elbows

沉肩垂肘

chén jiān chuí zhǒu

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: Sinking shoulders means that both the shoulders are relaxed and dropped down naturally. If the shoulders are not sunken, but raised, then qi rises and the whole body will lack power. "Drop the elbows" means that both the elbows are relaxed and dropped naturally. If the elbows are raised, the shoulders will not sink, and the flow of qi will not be far-reaching. This weakness is similar to the weakness in external kung fu known as "interrupted power".

FZ comments: Just relax! That's basically what Yang Cheng Fu is saying here.

It's very common for tension to accumulate in the shoulders and arms, especially with people who have done other martial arts. As a result, the shoulders rise a bit, and the elbows flare out. This is a telltale sign that you are not relaxed.

No matter what Tai Chi posture you're doing, dropping the shoulders and the elbows will help you to relax. Even if one hand is above the shoulders (for example, see the pattern *White Crane Spreads Wings*), you can still drop the shoulder and sink the elbow!

When you relax, when you sink the shoulders and drop the elbows, then the qi will flow more easily. And vice versa, if you don't relax, then the qi will not flow.

By "external kung fu", Yang Cheng Fu is referring to styles of kung fu that don't emphasize relaxation and the flow of qi. Although external martial arts can be powerful, the power is what we call "interrupted" because it does not flow continuously (see Essential #9).

6. Use Will, Not Strength

用意不用力

yòng yì bù yòng lì

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: The Tai Chi Chuan classics say: "All this means use will and do not use strength." When you practice Tai Chi chuan, your whole body must be relaxed. There must not be even one ounce of strength in the sinews, bones, and blood vessels, or it will result in self-restriction. When you have attained complete relaxation, you are able to be flexible and agile in your movements. You will be able to move freely any easily.

Some people may wonder: "How can we develop power without using strength?" This is because our body possesses meridians, just as the earth possesses ditches and channels. If the channels are not blocked, water flows smoothly. Similarly, if the meridians are not blocked, qi flows harmoniously.

If the whole body is tense with strength, qi and blood flow are blocked, and movements become awkward. Even if you pull a hair, the whole body moves.

If you use will instead of strength, then wherever your will directs it, the qi will follow. Thus, you must have your qi and blood flowing smoothly every day, all over your body, without interruptions at any time. If you do this persistently, then you will develop true inner strength.

The Tai Chi Chuan classics say, "When you are extremely soft, then you become extremely hard and powerful." The arm of a Tai Chi Chuan expert is like iron wrapped in cotton and is extremely powerful and solid. For those who are trained in external martial arts, they are powerful when they use strength, but light and floating when they do not. Using strength without using will easily results in instability, which is not a complete art.

FZ comments: Whew! This is a long one! But it's important, so let's analyze it carefully.

In my classes, I usually say "use qi, not strength." But the classics often use the word yi (意) instead of qi (氣). Yi can be translated as "will" or "intent". **Where the yi goes, the qi will flow.**

For example, if you've been practicing Qigong or Tai Chi for a while, then if you bring a focused awareness to your index finger, you will naturally feel the qi flowing there. That's yi.

But if your muscles are tense, and more importantly, if your mind is tense — then the qi will not flow. That's what Yang Cheng Fu means by "strength". Don't muscle it. Relax, and then the Qi can flow.

Yang Cheng Fu's hypothetical question about how we can develop power without using strength is an important one. This gets us into a discussion about internal strength (nei jin), which is beyond the scope of this article.

7. Coordinate Top and Bottom

上下相随

shàng xià xiāng suí

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: The meaning of coordination between top and bottom is revealed in the Tai Chi Chuan classics: "The root is in the feet, released through the legs, controlled by the waist, and materialized in the hands and fingers."

From the feet, to the legs, to the waist, the action is complete "in one qi". Hand movements, waist movements, leg movements, and even the eye movements — all are in one unified movement. Only this can be said to be top and bottom coordination. If there is one movement lacking, if there is any interruption, the unified movement becomes disorderly.

FZ comments: First of all, the phrase "in one qi" basically means to perform an action continuously and spontaneously within the time of one comfortable breath.

Imagine that your car dies, and you have to push it out of the road. Do you push it with your arms, or your legs? If you said "with my legs!" then you're only half right. **Actually, you push it with a coordinated effort between the legs, which do most of the work, and the arms, which deliver the effort of the legs.**

In Tai Chi Chuan, you shouldn't punch or block using only the arms. Instead, your power should come from the legs, up through your hips, and then out through your hands. Like the analogy of pushing a car, the hands only act to deliver the power of the legs.

This is the great equalizer for smaller and weaker people, like myself. At 5'8" and 150 pounds, I can't hope to compete with the big boys when it comes to size and strength. My arms will never be as strong as theirs.

But what about my legs? Well, now we're talking! My legs are stronger than just about anyone's arms. When I coordinate top and bottom, when I make full use of my legs — then I can punch and block with surprising power.

This is one of the reasons why I think Tai Chi Chuan is the perfect art for women. What applies to me as a small-sized man also applies to women. Tai Chi is designed to help the weaker overcome the stronger, the smaller to overcome the taller. It plays to our strengths rather than our weaknesses.

8. Harmonize Internal and External.

内外相合

nèi wài xiāng hé

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: The focus of Tai Chi Chuan is the training of *shen*. Thus the phrase: "The shen is the commander, the body is the agent." When the *shen* is trained, movements and actions become naturally light and agile.

Tai Chi Chuan patterns are none other than movements of solid and real, opening and closing. By opening is meant not only the hands and legs are extended; by closing is meant not only that the hands and legs brought back — but also that the mind and will are brought back. If the internal and the external can be united into one qi, it means there is no separateness in the cosmos.

FZ comments: Once again, we have to contend with the word "shen". Earlier, I translated it as "focused awareness." This time, we probably need to translate *shen* as "spirit".

A violinist can play all of the notes perfectly, and yet still lack soul or spirit. The notes are there, and yet the music does not move the soul.

What's lacking is spirit, or shen. Playing all the right notes is important, but it's only one aspect of playing the violin — the external aspect. To be a great violinist, you must play all the notes AND play with spirit.

In other words, you must harmonize internal and external.

Like the violinist, your Tai Chi Chuan movements might be technically correct, but if they lack spirit, then, as Yang Cheng Fu, says, there will be "separateness in the cosmos".

The physical movements are only the external aspect of Tai Chi. You must coordinate the movements with the internal

aspects. When you move, the spirit and the energy must move too. When everything moves together, when there is no separateness in the cosmos, then Tai Chi starts to really come alive.

Personally, I also take this one step further than Yang Cheng Fu. A violinist must still practice her scales, and a Tai Chi Chuan practitioner must still work on her fundamentals. For example, Tai Chi Chuan practitioners sometimes neglect the more physical aspects of strength and flexibility. If you are weak and stiff, then you are not harmonizing internal and external.

9. Move with Continuity.

相连不断

xiāng lián bù duàn

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: In external martial arts, power is the result of brute force. Thus, there is beginning and completion, continuity and then interruption. When the old strength is spent, and new strength has not been generated — that is the instant to take advantage of them.

Tai Chi Chuan uses will, not strength. From beginning to end, it is continuous, without any break. After each cycle it starts again, circulating without end.

The original classics say that it is “like the continuous waves of the Long River”, and that the circulation of power is like “drawing silk from a cocoon.” The above conveys the idea of stringing the movements together into one harmonious qi.

FZ comments: External martial arts, like Western boxing, rely on strength. That's why you have different weight classes in boxing. Heavyweights hit harder because they are bigger and stronger.

A boxing punch does not have continuity. It fires like a cannon. But after the cannon fires, it needs to be reloaded. This is what Yang Cheng Fu means when he says “the old strength is spent”. When a boxer is reloading his cannon — that's when you want to take advantage of him.

Tai Chi Chuan, on the other hand, uses a different power mechanism. It is not like a cannon. Although we still punch and kick with 2 legs and 2 arms, we don't have to “reload” the same way a boxer does. And that's because the power in Tai Chi Chuan is continuous, without any break.

The slow and flowing movement of Tai Chi Chuan is probably its most easily recognizable feature. It's what makes it so beautiful to watch, what makes it so good for the health, and also what makes it a formidable martial art!

Yang Cheng Fu reminds us of two analogies from the classics. First, Tai Chi should be like the continuous flow of the Yangtze river, which twists and turns and yet flows with power. And secondly, the power circulation should be smooth, like the act of drawing silk from a cocoon (which I've never done, but I hear requires a consistent pull that is neither too hard nor too soft).

10. Seek Stillness in the Movement.

动中求静

dòng zhōng qiú jìng

Yang Cheng Fu's comments: External martial arts stress leaping and bouncing as desirable. Much strength is expended, thus the exponents pant for breath after training. In Tai Chi Chuan, stillness controls movement. When one moves, there is also stillness. Therefore, while practicing Tai Chi Chuan, the slower the movement, the better. When the movements are slow, breathing becomes deep and long, and the qi sinks down to dantian. Naturally, this keeps the pulse from elevating. If the student practices carefully he may be able to comprehend the meaning behind these words.

FZ comments: Tai Chi Chuan training is very different from the way a Western boxer trains. In boxing, it's desirable to bounce around, and it's okay to get out of breath. But not in Tai Chi Chuan.

We practice slowly so that our qi can flow (and sink to dantian). We also practice slow so that we can train the nervous system to relax.

To me, this point also reminds us that Tai Chi Chuan is a form of moving meditation. There is a stillness, a meditative aspect, even while we are moving. Or perhaps I should say — ESPECIALLY while we are moving. Sitting meditation is wonderful, but for me and many students, the flowing movements of Tai Chi provide easy access to surprisingly deep states of meditation.

If your monkey mind is jabbering while you are doing Tai Chi, if you are constantly thinking about the next move, or the placement of your foot — then you are not seeking the stillness in the movement. You must go deeper, into the wonderful stillness.