

Yang Chengfu Taijiquan Theory 10 Essentials

Following are the Ten Essentials of Tai Chi Chuan Orally transmitted by Yang Chengfu Recorded by Chen Weiming Translated by Jerry Karin

1. Empty, lively, pushing up and energetic 虚灵顶劲

顶劲者，头容正直，神贯于顶也。不可用力，用力则项强，气血不能流通，须有虚灵自然之意。非有虚灵顶劲，则精神不能提起也。‘Pushing up and energetic’ means the posture of the head is upright and straight and the spirit is infused into its apex. You may not use strength. To do so makes the back of the neck stiff, whereupon the chi and blood cannot circulate freely. You must have an intention which is empty, lively (or free) and natural. Without an intention which is empty, lively, pushing up and energetic, you won’t be able to raise your spirit.

2. Hold in the chest and pull up the back 含胸拔背

含胸者，胸略内涵，使气沉于丹田也。胸忌挺出，挺出则气拥胸际，上重下轻，脚跟易于浮起。拔背者，气贴于背也，能含胸则自能拔背，能拔背则能力由脊发，所向无敌也。The phrase ‘hold in the chest’ means the chest is slightly reserved inward, which causes the chi to sink to the cinnabar field (dan1 tian2). The chest must not be puffed out. If you do so then the chi is blocked in the chest region, the upper body becomes heavy and lower body light, and it will become easy for the heels to float upward. ‘Pulling up the back’ makes the chi stick to the back. If you are able to hold in the chest then you will naturally be able to pull up the back. If you can pull up the back, then you will be able to emit a strength from the spine which others cannot oppose.

3. Relax the waist 松腰

腰为一身之主宰，能松腰然后两足有力，下盘稳固；虚实变化皆由腰转动，故曰：“命意源头在腰际”，由不得力必于腰腿求之也。The waist is the commander of the whole body. Only after you are able to relax the waist will the two legs have strength and the lower body be stable. The alternation of empty and full all derive from the turning of the waist. Hence the saying: ‘The wellspring of destiny lies in the tiny interstice of the waist. Whenever there is a lack of strength in your form, you must look for it in the waist and legs.

4. Separate empty and full 分虚实

太极拳术以分虚实为第一义，如全身皆坐在右腿，则右腿为实，左腿为虚；全身皆坐在左腿，则左腿为实，右腿为虚。虚实能分，而后转动轻灵，毫不费力；如不能分，则迈步重滞，自立不稳，而易为人所牵动。In the art of Tai Chi Chuan, separating full and empty is the number one rule. If the whole body sits on the right leg, then the right leg is deemed ‘full’ and the left leg ‘empty’. If the whole body sits on the left leg, then the left leg is deemed ‘full’ and the right leg ‘empty’. Only after you are able to distinguish full and empty will turning movements be light, nimble and almost without effort; if you can’t distinguish them then your steps will be heavy and sluggish, you won’t be able to stand stably, and it will be easy for an opponent to control you.

5. Sink the shoulders and drop the elbows 沉肩坠肘

沉肩者，肩松开下垂也。若不能松垂，两肩端起，则气亦随之而上，全身皆不得力矣。坠肘者，肘往下松垂之意，肘若悬起，则肩不能沉，放人不远，近于外家之断劲矣。Sinking the shoulders means the shoulders relax open and hang downward. If you can't relax them downward, the shoulders pop up and then the chi follows and goes upward, causing the whole body to lack strength. Dropping the elbows means the elbows are relaxed downward. If the elbows are elevated then the shoulders are unable to sink. When you use this to push someone they won't go far. It's like the 'cut off' energy of external martial arts.

6. Use Intent Rather than Force 用意不用力

太极拳论云：此全是用意不用力。练太极拳全身松开，不便有分毫之拙劲，以留滞于筋骨血脉之间以自缚束，然后能轻灵变化，圆转自如。或疑不用力何以能长力？盖人身之有经络，如地之有沟壑，沟壑不塞而本行，经络不闭则气通。如浑身僵劲满经络，气血停滞，转动不灵，牵一发而全身动矣。若不用力而用意，意之所至，气即至焉，如是气血流注，日日贯输，周流全身，无时停滞。久久练习，则得真正内劲，即太极拳论中所云：“极柔软，然后极坚刚”也。太极拳功夫纯熟之人，臂膊如绵裹铁，分量极沉；练外家拳者，用力则显有力，不用力时，则甚轻浮，可见其力乃外劲浮面之劲也。不用意而用力，最易引动，不足尚也。The taiji classics say, “this is completely a matter of using intent rather than force”. When you practice taijiquan, let the entire body relax and extend. Don't employ even the tiniest amount of coarse strength which would cause musculo-skeletal or circulatory blockage with the result that you restrain or inhibit yourself. Only then will you be able to lightly and nimbly change and transform, circling naturally. Some wonder: if I don't use force, how can I generate force? The net of acupuncture meridians and channels throughout the body are like the waterways on top of the earth. If the waterways are not blocked, the water circulates; if the meridians are not impeded the chi circulates. If you move the body about with stiff force, you swamp the meridians, chi and blood are impeded, movements are not nimble; all someone has to do is begin to guide you and your whole body is moved. If you use intent rather than force, wherever the intent goes, so goes the chi. In this way – because the chi and blood are flowing, circulating every day throughout the entire body, never stagnating – after a lot of practice, you will get true internal strength. That's what the taiji classics mean by “Only by being extremely soft are you able to achieve extreme hardness.” Somebody who is really adept at taiji has arms which seem like silk wrapped around iron, immensely heavy. Someone who practices external martial arts, when he is using his force, seems very strong. But when not using force, he is very light and floating. By this we can see that his force is actually external, or superficial strength. The force used by external martial artists is especially easy to lead or deflect, hence it is not of much value.

7. Synchronize Upper and Lower Body 上下相随

上下相随者，即太极拳论中所云：其根在脚，发于腿，主宰于腰，形于手指，由脚而腿而腰，总须完整一气也。手动、腰动、足动，眼神亦随之动，如是方可谓之上下相随。有一不动，即散乱也。In the taiji classics 'Synchronize Upper and Lower Body is expressed as: “With its root in the foot, emitting from the leg, governed by the waist, manifesting in the hands and

fingers – from feet to legs to waist – complete everything in one impulse.” * When hands move, the waist moves and legs move, and the gaze moves along with them. Only then can we say upper and lower body are synchronized. If one part doesn't move then it is not coordinated with the rest.

8. Match Up Inner and Outer 内外相合

太极拳所练在神，故云：“神为主帅，身为驱使”。精神能提得起，自然举动轻灵。架子不外虚实开合；所谓开者，不但手足开，心意亦与之俱开，所谓合者，不但手足合，心意亦与之俱合，能内外合为一气，则浑然无间矣。What we are practicing in taiji depends on the spirit, hence the saying: “The spirit is the general, the body his troops”. If you can raise your spirit, your movements will naturally be light and nimble, the form nothing more than empty and full, open and closed. When we say ‘open’, we don't just mean open the arms or legs; the mental intent must open along with the limbs. When we say ‘close’, we don't just mean close the arms or legs; the mental intent must close along with the limbs. If you can combine inner and outer into a single impulse, then they become a seamless whole.

9. (Practice) Continuously and Without Interruption 相连不断

外家拳术，其劲乃后天之拙劲，故有起有止，有线有断，旧力已尽，新力未生，此时最易为人所乘。太极拳用意不用力，自始至终，绵绵不断，周而复始，循环无穷。原论所谓“如长江大河，滔滔不绝”，又曰“运劲如抽丝”，皆言其贯串一气也。Strength in external martial arts is a kind of acquired, brute force, so it has a beginning and an end, times when it continues and times when it is cut off, such that when the old force is used up and new force hasn't yet arisen, there is a moment when it is extremely easy for the person to be constrained by an opponent. In taiji, we use intent rather than force, and from beginning to end, smoothly and ceaselessly, complete a cycle and return to the beginning, circulating endlessly. That is what the taiji classics mean by “Like the Yangtze or Yellow River, endlessly flowing.” And again: “Moving strength is like unreeling silk threads”. These both refer to unifying into a single impulse*.

10. Seek Quiescence within Movement 动中求静

外家拳术，以跳掷为能，用尽气力，故练习之后，无不喘气者。太极拳以静御动，虽动犹静，故练架子愈慢愈好。使则呼吸深长，气沉丹田，自无血脉愤张之弊。学者细心体会，庶可得其意焉。External martial artists prize leaping and stopping as skill, and they do this till breath (chi) and strength are exhausted, so that after practicing they are all out of breath. In taiji we use quiescence to overcome movement, and even in movement, still have quiescence. So when you practice the form, the slower the better! When you do it slowly your breath becomes deep and long, the chi sinks to the cinnabar field (dan1 tian2) and naturally there is no deleterious constriction or enlargement of the blood vessels. If the student tries carefully he may be able to comprehend the meaning behind these words.