Tai Chi (Teaching) Diary

Growing up near Chen Village, where Chen style Tai Chi originated, I witnessed much about Chen Tai Chi, either hearing stories from others or seeing it for myself. I have studied and practiced Tai Chi for over 50 years, learning from some of the most famous Chen Tai Chi Grandmasters in Chen Village, such as Chen Xiao Wang, Chen Zheng Le, Zhu Tian Cai; and the Tai Chi New Frame grandmaster, Chen Zhao Kui’s (deceased) students, Zhang Mao Zhen and Zhang Zhi Jun. I have been teaching Tai Chi full time for over 16 years and when I moved to Los Angeles in 2001, founded the “Los Angeles Chen Tai Chi Center”. I created and have perfected my “New Concept Tai Chi Teaching”, an efficient and very effective teaching method that greatly enhances a student’s interest and results when practicing Chen Tai Chi.

I am a gentle and humble man who knows that he is but a speck of dust in the universe, so I do not seek to show off my knowledge or ability; however now, almost 60 years old, a desire to do something for this world has stirred within me.

Practicing Tai Chi is a lifelong journey and teaching Tai Chi is a deep responsibility, so I would like to write down my knowledge of Chen Tai Chi to share with those who have an interest in taking this journey.

**(1) If you would like to practice Tai Chi, Yin Yang is the key**

Whoever wants to learn Tai Chi, it is best to give them the key to that learning; and the key is Yin Yang.

In ancient Chinese culture, Yin Yang is the basic element of which everything in the universe consists. Yin and Yang generate each other and the “one goes down, one goes up” relationship between Yin and Yang fuels the growth and decay of all things, therefore it is life’s major principle. Chinese Taoist theory believes: nature is humanity’s teacher. We need to understand nature and we also need to understand ourselves, both of which can be achieved through understanding Yin Yang. Tai Chi is the archetypal example of “Yin Yang”, therefore Tai Chi practitioners should match the principles of those who practiced Tai Chi before us and use Yin Yang as the entry point to our Tai Chi practice. For good health, the balance of Yin Yang in our body is vital. We should not perceive balance merely as something that is lost when one falls over, but also, that if some part of our body becomes unwell, we should realize that this was caused by having lost balance in that part. However, once you understand the transfer and absorption of Yin Yang, then all the external factors can be repaired; all the internal factors can be adjusted.

As we advance in years, life can bring us success and fortune, but it can also leave the marks of physical trauma we have endured over our lives. No one can avoid it, more or less. Have you had trouble with your shoulder? Have you had problems with your back and knees? The reason is: you don’t understand Yin Yang; you have not learned how to use your body properly.

If Kung Fu is what one wants to learn, then it must be understood that the Yin Yang balance in our body is fundamental to the practice of Kung Fu. The body’s wholeness and coordination rely on understanding Yin and Yang and the ability to transfer one to the other. It is often said, “Never expose your throat (to your opponent)”. The throat is a Yin point, it needs to be protected by our mind at all times; masters also say: “Never lose ‘Wei Zhong’ ”. “Wei Zhong” is the point in the back of your knees, it is also a Yin point and needs to be protected at all times.

There are 16 “Yin” points like this in our body that need to be protected from a macro perspective: front of the throat, back of the head, front of the chest, the lower back, all the soft points on our limbs and joints (6 points on both arms, 6 points on both legs) – 16 points in total. If someone was to say that there are more than 16 Yin points, I would agree, because wherever there is Yang, there is always Yin corresponding to it. For now though, those16 points are sufficient for us.

Once we have found the Yin locations, we need to use a strong mindset to give them our focus and attention. This is the rule of Internal Kung Fu (Fist). We can start with the standing stance (Wu Ji Stance) to find these feelings in our body. This stage can be called practicing “Wu Ji” and it is the basic method to start Tai Chi practice. The attention given to our Yin point and its corresponding Yang point forms a basic balance. Once you have balance, you have connection; and connection to a certain level you will give wholeness; which is the foundation of our skills. Using our whole body against an opponent’s partial body is one of the strategies in Martial Arts.

Tai Chi consists of Yin and Yang; Yin and Yang also represents Tai Chi. Just like the most complex computer programs start from a binary code of 0’s and 1’s, the complexity of traditional Chinese culture is based on Yin and Yang and finding Yin Yang within our body is a very direct and easy way to understand it.

There is an old saying “Tens of thousands of people practice Tai Chi, but only very few can succeed”. Those “few people” are the ones who focus both on practice and theory. Practicing Tai Chi is a process of “Tao realization”. If you can pick up the key - Yin Yang - and start from the small universe, our body; then you can gradually understand the wider universe. And through this process, our body’s health can improve and other small changes will be seen, such as the ability to react, the ability to adjust, the ability to protect ourselves, an ability to self-cure, along with even more advanced abilities. It means we are opening another way to explore our body’s abilities. Tai Chi theory and concepts will help build your abilities in this way and it will benefit you for a lifetime. This is the magic part about Tai Chi and while you practice, you will also gain martial arts skills without even noticing it. Therefore, don’t just spend time and money learning routines from a teacher. Yes, you want to learn the physical movements, but more importantly, you need to practice your mental ability; and that can lead you to a deeper discovery of yourself.

(2) “Tao is ruled by Nature” – Body is the foundation

Chinese philosopher Lao Zi said: “Human beings are ruled by earth, earth is ruled by the celestial, the celestial is ruled by Tao and Tao is ruled by Nature”. Lao Zi talks about an order. Humankind’s connection with Nature not only has to penetrate the understanding of “earth” and “celestial” but also, the pursuit of Tao.

A lifetime of study is contained within those works. However, there is one thing we can all do that would help hasten our understanding about “earth” “celestial” and “ourselves”, which in turn will hasten our ability to connect with Nature; and that is practicing Tai Chi.

People say, ”One (routine of) Tai Chi can secure the world.” Here it refers to Tai Chi’s way of thinking and the theory of Yin Yang. Tai Chi has been praised by people worldwide for many years because of its musical rhythm, philosophical essence, beautiful style and poetically artistic conception, which allows practitioners to maintain health while having utmost enjoyment. What I value more however, is how it brings us closer to Nature. For example, Tai Chi has the property of water; it is broad-minded and continuous, harmonized and rotates; it doesn’t compete, is extremely soft yet profoundly strong. As another example, the spiral movements in Tai Chi are like those seen in flowers or sea shells, or in galaxies and cosmic nebulae. Modern science has proven that this kind of spiral is the most reasonable orbital movement in the universe; it is also the most beautiful. When we perform a Tai Chi routine, it contains the universal laws of motion - what an amazing thing.

Don’t you feel that we’ve finally found a shortcut to connect with Nature?

The beginning form of Tai Chi: it requires us to calm down mentally and physically; all becomes one.

When walking through while doing wind-cloud hands, you will get used to shaking off the chaos of the world and stop worrying about the troubles in your life.

After sometime, you will have the feeling of a light body and being agile. When you observe your body, it feels like a gurgling stream. This is the remarkable nature of Yin Yang.

Outside of body and mind, you can also feel the solidity of the Earth; it is also the basis of our “move forward, move backward, look left, look right and settle”. If one day you have the urge to “borrow force”, then the earth is your bottomless, ultimate power source.

If you put your mind into your body for long enough, your mind will create a dome. Internally it can observe all the subtle insights; externally it can protect us from the world outside.

The things we easily ignore in daily life become so clear when practicing Tai Chi, such as the action of Gravity, such as setting our body in the middle, such as changes and shifts in our weight etc.

If you want to understand the universe, we first need to set our body correctly. Yin Yang is the balance of “Tao”, “Tao is ruled by Nature”. We can start to experience this first in our bodies. Practice every day, gathering your thoughts and your mind. The level you can reach in Tai Chi depends on each individual. However, the “Tao” of Tai Chi can assure to give all practitioners a life of high quality and contentment.

**(3) Soft start a bit early**

What does it mean to be loose or soft? It is a state of the body, the results of strict training for many years or decades, and endless probing. It is not a training method for beginners. When beginners told to "relax", without the training, it cannot be properly done. Being relaxed is the feeling of the body. If the feeling is not in place, there can be no real understanding. Without this understanding, misunderstanding of relaxation may end up with the habitual issue of being loose, too soft, etc.

In practice, when people start to learn Taiji quan (boxing), they should understand:

* the structure of the body.
* that various body joints are not dependent on muscle adjustments
* the requirement to keep the body upright.

These principles are basis to build upon for the state of relaxation.

It is very important to comprehend the concept of "Yin and Yang" from the various body joints.  Every joint can be divided into inside and outside which corresponds to strong ("Yang") and weak ("Yin"). With your mental intention focused on "Yin", these focused intentions will assist in producing stronger results and balance. Achieving joint balance between "Yin and Yang" allows body to be in a static state without the dependence on the muscles.  This state can be achieved through practicing the standing pose. This allows the body to be in the state of “wuji”, ultimate stillness or nothingness.

I have mentioned in the previous article, we have 16 “Yin” points, guarding these points with your mental intentions are the basics of Tai Chi ldren practice. We can also learn boxing at the same time but two of aspect must be separately practiced. In the beginning, memorizing forms are the primary focus but the basic skills are to establish a clear concept of "Yin and Yang".

Eventually the 16 points of“Yin” need to gradually form into a line, expanded into areas, hence the understanding of "Yin" and "Yin mian (area)" will gradually surface. This is the basis of internal flow of qi in your body.  It is also how to keep the form’s dynamic balance and the basic skills in TaiJi quan.

To focus on relaxation. especially in the beginning, can be too abstract while practicing the forms. When you learn a new movement, stiffness always comes up, and relaxation becomes something that can’t be achieved.

The conclusion is that only with the balanced Yin and Yang, body coordination can be achieved. Only with balanced body, one can achieve real relaxation. So instead of attempting to start by trying to be loose, it is better to deliberately seek balance.

1. About Tai Chi "turn" and "move"

Let’s observe what we feel when we hear the words Turn and Move: an object moves from one place to another; an army moves from one location to another. We don’t know how they change their locations yet it’s somehow mysterious since it describes a complete process. This is like Yin and Yang, you never ignore it but yet never make it clear.

Turn and Move comes from two basic forms of core body movement: the waist is turning, and the hip is moving, ceaselessly. Neither of these two forms of movement can be missing when practicing. You will look clumsy and imperfect if either is absent. Of course you can say that there are lot of other movements in our body such as rolling, levers, etc. You can still do well without them but not without Turn and Move.

We say that Taiji is a kind of perfect movement, it’s perfect because you coordinate every piece of your body to the extreme to get close to nature. This includes the core movement of our body – Turn and Move. This is very natural in daily life, but it looks not quite right when starting to practice Taiji, either forgetting to turn or moving too much.

The waist and hip are the center of the body; its importance is just common sense for all internal martial art participants. This awareness and acknowledgment is an essential part pf the process of seeking Gong Fu . It’s more important than what kind of martial art you practice. The waist includes Dantian which old masters often pay strict attention to. But Dantian is not all waist. Movement of Dantian is a kind of Qi movement after you can feel Dantian, and it cannot replace the initial physical movement of your core body.

Let’s have some brief comment on waist and hip movement and give more detailed description later. First of all, waist is turning all the time because one part moves, every part moves. Of course waist is included. Second, plane turning is the main form of waist movement, except a very few movements, try not to turn and lean. Third, don’t turn more than 45 degrees, it would cause too much torque and rotation on lower body in order to balance upper body if you turn too much.

In turns of hip, its main function is central body displacement. First of all, moving hip left and right should also move up and down, like required by Chen Taiji: crotch follows lower curve. Secondly, body central axis should not exceed 1/3 of the line between your two feet when both feet are on the ground. This is kind of strict but one rule of Taiji is excessive, while beginners often push too much. Third, movement of hip is called Back Thread in Chen Taiji, which is their secret and now people call it Figure 8. You can never emphasize too much on its importance which is the core concept of Taiji. We are not going to put too much words on it here and it is left in the future.

(5) **Six Questions regarding “Yin Yang” in the body**

Grandmaster Wang Zongyue, who wrote “Tai Chi Fist Theory” says: Tai Chi was born from Wu-Ji, Tai Chi itself is stillness and motion, it is the mother of Yin and Yang.” Using modern language, Motion and Stillness is Tai Chi itself; the things that have the closest and most direct relationship are 1) its predecessor-Wu-Ji, because Wu-Ji generates Tai Chi; 2) Tai Chi’s own child, Yin and Yang, because “Tai Chi is the mother of Yin and Yang”.

**First Question:**

Yin Yang and Tai Chi have such a close relationship, so why do teachers only teach students the various forms of Tai Chi, but rarely explain Yin Yang? Why have we studied and practiced Tai Chi for so many years but still only vaguely understand the concept of Yin Yang?

“Yi Jing” says: “one Yin and one Yang is called Tao.”

**Second Question:**

“Tao” is the origin of all change and movement in the universe. It is the objective principle of Nature and the basic premise for which humans can understand the world. If that is the case, with Nature being the big universe and our body being a small universe, why has nobody told us how to recognize Yin Yang in our body and why aren’t we using the concept of Yin Yang to lead our Tai Chi practice and application?

Fact from 360 Baike (Chinese Wikipedia): In ancient Chinese culture, Yin Yang describes the fundamental factors behind all natural change and development. It is the original force that drives all things in the universe from birth and development, to maturity and decay. It is the core foundation of Chinese culture and philosophical thinking.

**Third Question:**

From the above, we can conclude that “Yin Yang” is the reason Tai Chi is seen as the essence of Chinese Culture and why its practice is strongly recommended, not only for the martial art aspect. We should see Tai Chi as a mountain, the peak being “Tai Chi” itself and Yin and Yang being two sides. If Tai Chi is a general concept, then Yin Yang can be used to make it more tangible. Following this, the two sides (Yin Yang) beget four directions (for example: spring summer autumn winter); the four directions generates eight trigrams and from the eight trigrams, everything in nature is generated. Just like our Tai Chi practice, it becomes more detailed and complex as it progresses. If we want to achieve the highest level of Tai Chi, then Yin Yang cannot be ignored; it also happens to be the most direct way to the highest level. Therefore, I ask, why not start with the specific and tangible concept of Yin Yang in our study and practice of Tai Chi?

Wang Zhongyue in “Tai Chi Fist Theory” says: “If you want to avoid sickness, you have to understand Yin Yang. Yin and Yang don’t separate from each other; Yin and Yang complement each other. If you understand this, then it means you understand strength.

**Fourth Question:**

Tai Chi Grandmaster Wang Zhongyue pointed out, first of all, you need to understand Yin and Yang; secondly, Yin doesn’t leave Yang, Yang doesn’t leave Yin; thirdly, Yin are Yang are complementary to each other. This made me realize that “not understanding Yin Yang” and “not being willing to understand Yin Yang” are the biggest obstacles for this generation of Tai Chi practitioners.

Quan (Fist) theory says; “one Yin and one Yang is called “fist””.

Conversely, can we understand that as; if there is no Yin and Yang, there is no fist? Some people say: Tai Chi theory does not separate from Yin Yang. Yin Yang is not a thing; it is a rule.

**Fifth Question:**

Because Yin Yang is considered “a rule”, it confuses people into not using it. How can the concept have persisted for several hundred years if it has no practical application? For example, Tai Chi has a saying that “a standing wooden stick can hold a thousand pounds of weight.” Using a standing wooden stick as a metaphor of the human body, if we don’t have Yin Yang balance at the front and back of the joints, then how can the piece of wood stand up. Another example, if someone attacks me, that is considered Yang; and if you don’t know how to meet that attack with Yin, then the result would be a “collision” of Yang; and if I attack someone, the target must be the opponent’s Yin, otherwise the result will not be ideal.

Yin Yang has four relationship pairs: Yin and Yang complement each other; Yin and Yang generate each other; Yin and Yang oppose each other; and Yin and Yang originate from the same root.

**Sixth Question:**

Tai Chi embodies Yi (Mind), Qi (Energy) and Xing (tangible forms), three in one motion. Can Yin Yang theory only be used to explain Tai Chi’s movement of forward and backward, strong and soft, dissolve and attack, open and close, flow and sink, internal and external? Despite all those vague and general concepts that Yin Yang supports in Tai Chi theory, is there any specific Yin Yang on our body?

Of course there is. What we talked above is like a microscope; using that to focus on our body, the vagueness of Yin Yang theory can actually become apparent on our body. The human body has a perfect Yin Yang system existing harmoniously.

The characteristic of Eastern culture is simple, concise, greatly unified, and deeply wise. The characteristic of Western culture is detail oriented, specific, easy to understand and easy to operate. Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine are great examples and both have their own merits with which the other cannot compete. In today’s world there are about 200 Million people practicing Tai Chi. Practicing and analyzing Tai Chi no longer has strictly Eastern ways or Western ways. As a Tai Chi practitioner and exponent being from Eastern culture, I of course believe in the traditional training method which is, “if you practice thousands of times, the meaning will reveal itself”; however, when dealing with Yin Yang Theory, we cannot not discuss it because of our fear, or try to avoid it and not address it directly. This is why I believe we can achieve a concise and effective Tai Chi training method that combines the merits of Eastern and Western culture. The central tenet is “if you want to be proficient at Tai Chi, Yin Yang is the key.”

In the next article we will specifically discuss this key - “Yin Yang”.