

# *T'ai Chi Principles and Concepts*

© Margaret Emerson 2009  
Published in *Qi Journal* Autumn 2009

Kao Ching-hua, known in this country as Madelaine Kao Leonida, learned a Wu style T'ai Chi as a girl in pre-Revolutionary China. She was a high school athlete excelling in track when fainting spells rendered her bedridden. Her parents consulted both Chinese and Western doctors. No one knew how to deal with what Madelaine believes was a heart ailment. Finally an herbalist suggested she learn T'ai Chi. A friend of the family trained her in a Wu form that was taught to the aristocracy. Because it was intended for people who didn't have to defend themselves—they had someone else to do that for them—the emphasis of the sequence shifted away from the martial and toward mental and physical fitness and meditation. Within a year she was back on the track, winning again. Her family was glad she took up T'ai Chi, not only because it apparently healed her physically, but also because it softened her feisty, sometimes difficult personality.

Madelaine attended National Central University in Shanghai and taught T'ai Chi to the women at St. John's University during those years. After she graduated in 1948, she and some other Chinese athletes came to this country to get their master's degrees and learn Western sports. (At the time, the only sports that were practiced in China were "Wushu" or martial arts.) Before she left China, she was made the only honorary female member of the all-male T'ai Chi Ch'uan Association of Shanghai and was slated to head the women's phys ed department in a new college in Chunking when she returned to China. The Communist Revolution took place in 1949, and Madelaine was unable to go back for a visit until 1976. In the meantime, she received her master's from the University of Iowa and did further graduate work at the University of Wisconsin. She also married and settled in Illinois with her family. Madelaine has taught T'ai Chi, phys ed, and dance in the U. S. and China for several decades.

The form that Madelaine taught me is a rare one. It's closely related to the Southern Wu Style from the Shanghai area—where Madelaine was born and went to college. I think that a key to understanding Madelaine's sequence is what she said about its being taught to the aristocracy. Primacy is given not to practical martial applications but to promoting the flow of qi and blood throughout the body. This is the most circular of the T'ai Chi styles—everything is a circle, a half-circle, an "S" curve, or a spiral. And that is perhaps what I most love about it.

I studied with Kao Ching-hua for six years starting in 1979 and began teaching in 1989. Currently I'm teaching Wu T'ai Chi, Kao Style; The 42 Combined Forms; Paul

Lam's T'ai Chi for Arthritis and Back Pain; qigong; and meditation. My new DVD is "Wu T'ai Chi, Kao Style: As Practiced and Taught by Margaret Emerson."

I've selected eighteen principles and concepts that I emphasize to my Wu style students. These developed out of Kao's teaching; my exposure to many other instructors, books, and DVDs; and my own intimate experience with Kao's Wu style. Most of them apply to other sequences as well, but as you know, T'ai Chi Ch'uan comprises many different forms and the principles of movement are not always the same.

### **Slow, Silent, and Outside**

I think the best way to practice is slow, silent, and outside.

My pace varies with my mood, but when I'm intensely focused, I'm barely moving, and this is when I learn the most about T'ai Chi and about myself. Moving slowly helps break through our habitual anxiety and ushers us into a more peaceful, alert state. We're able to notice and heed the tiniest movements and messages of our bodies and minds. We become acutely aware of the gradual transfer of weight from one leg to the other and thus are more surefooted. Ironically, our reflexes become quicker because of the heightened awareness that comes with being calm and unhurried.

Music can help relax us and slow us down. (Or I've sometimes practiced fast to fast music.) But in order to access the deepest gifts of T'ai Chi, I need silence.

Most of my classes are held indoors, but I always practice outside. When I do T'ai Chi, I become very *porous*. I absorb the green grass under my feet, the ever-changing sky, and the vitality of the plants and trees around me. I also release all the qi, the emotions, that need to be released. T'ai Chi is a daily tonic and a daily cleansing.

My original teacher, Kao Ching-hua, recommended practicing in the early morning, facing north, with empty bowels. All good advice, but I don't always face north—I face the prettiest view. Kao also said it's a good idea to face a pine tree because it reminds us to be erect and its ever-green color is nourishing.

### **Eight Directions**

There are eight directions in T'ai Chi—Front, Back, Right, Left, Right-Front, Right-Back, Left-Front, and Left-Back. You can also see them as north, south, east, west, northeast, southeast, northwest, and southwest. Being clear on which direction you're facing with each movement is an important part of your training—it heightens focus and concentration. Kao Ching-hua used the phrase "nose, toes, fingertips"—all 3 should be facing the same direction at the same time. There are some exceptions in the sequence when the eyes focus on the direction into which your energy will be delivered while the waist and arm turn away from that direction in preparation.

### **The Five Big Joints**

In T'ai Chi, movement comes from the five big joints—the waist, the hips, and the shoulders.

The waist is the biggest and most powerful joint in the body. The combination of the shifting of the weight and the turning of the waist puts power into the movements. Some of the movement of the arms through the air is purely the result of the waist turning and the weight shifting. Where the weight goes, the waist goes, and vice versa. We're constantly shifting and turning from one side to the other. (Madelaine used to say that if you don't know what to do next, do the opposite of what you just did.)

The hips move with the waist and are used in every step and leg lift. Balance is improved by having the sense that you're sitting securely on the hip and the weight travels down the leg, through the center of the foot, and into the ground. From this "seated" position, it's much easier to control the free leg.

The shoulders should feel big, broad, and expansive. There are "oranges in the armpits," and this means the arms are naturally held away from the body. The elbows stay low and relaxed. Sink them and keep them lower than the shoulders and wrists. Raised elbows mean tense shoulders. The wrists are kept as straight as possible to allow qi to flow freely into the hands.

### **Reserve**

There is a principle of reserve in T'ai Chi. Elbows and knees are never locked, never fully extended. Locked joints shut off circulation of qi and blood. Arms and legs stay within your own space and are easily followed with the eyes without bending the neck forward or backward. The sequence builds internal power which is not ostentatiously displayed on the outside. Yet when I watch the experienced people in my classes, I can see that it is conveyed to the observer nonetheless.

### **Belly Breathing**

The method of breathing is belly breathing or natural breathing. It's as if air comes into the body through the nostrils and sinks all the way down into the dan tian, the energy center in the middle of the abdomen. First the abdomen fills up like a balloon, then the lungs inflate. When we exhale—also through the nostrils—the abdomen contracts, pushing the air back up. This is the way a baby breathes when it's first born. It's also the way a singer breathes. Expanding the abdomen allows the diaphragm to drop and increases the space into which the lungs can expand. Thus lung capacity is increased. Belly breathing massages the internal organs and strengthens the deep stabilizing muscles that support the lower back. It's been shown that deep, slow breaths send an instant signal to the brain to relax.

### **Coordinating Breath and Movement**

T'ai Chi is a long, sophisticated form of qigong. *Gong* means "effort" or "work" and according to Kao Ching-hua, *qi* has three literal translations: "breath," "blood," and "internal energy." The three are intimately connected. "Qi pulls blood; blood pushes qi,"

and breath energizes them. As the legs and arms contract, air is drawn in. This is the yin phase, the gathering energy phase. As the legs and arms expand, air is expelled. This is the yang phase, the delivering energy phase. The breath is fitted to every part of every movement. Insert breaths wherever you need—it's important to be comfortable while doing T'ai Chi. But make sure you're breathing in by the end of every yin movement and out by the end of every yang movement.

Both the movement and the erect posture of T'ai Chi help us to breathe in nourishing qi and move it through our bodies without obstruction. Following the breath, thinking of it as an exchange of new qi for old qi and as a way of gathering and delivering energy is one thread of the complex weave of consciousness that's maintained throughout the sequence.

### Eyes

Eyes should be connected to the arms and legs. There are 3 possible ways to do this—single focus, double focus, or soft focus. Single focus is when the eyes are pointedly fixed on one hand. Double focus is when the eyes are watching both hands or a hand and a foot at the same time. Soft focus is when the eyes are looking inside a space formed by the arms. It's important to remember to keep the neck and spine lined up, and avoid bending the neck to watch your hand or foot. We can cast our eyes upward, downward, or sideways and use peripheral vision when necessary.

If we don't use our eyes and our gaze is diffuse, energy leaks out and is squandered. Thoughts follow the eyes and become diffuse too. I tell my students that when they use their eyes, it looks like they know what they're doing. Maintaining visual focus in T'ai Chi completes the circuit of energy. The current flows and builds; concentration is intensified. This is a way of connecting with *yourself*.

### Walking

T'ai Chi teaches us how to walk. In this form we walk the way we usually do, but everything is slowed down and exaggerated. When we walk forward, the heel is extended and the weight rolls onto the foot as it gradually makes full contact with the ground. As the toes go down in front, the heel comes up in back. When we walk backward, we land on the ball of the foot. As the heel goes down in back, the toes come up in front. You're like the runners on a rocking chair. When we walk sideways, we land on the ball of the foot.

The Chinese terms "walking like a cat" and "walking as if you don't know what's under your feet" are apt descriptions. We like practicing what I call "feather walking." It means that each time the heel or the ball of the foot touches down, there's initially no weight there—it lands light as a feather. Then, when you decide to, you transfer your weight. This way you're not falling from one foot onto the other or constantly catching yourself with each step. You could pause with one foot in mid air. Try to avoid the clunks—in the leg lifts too.

Visualize the center of gravity in the center of the abdomen settling itself over the center of the standing foot. Imagine a cord connecting the two points. When you transfer your weight into the next foot, the center of gravity shifts slowly over until it settles above that foot. Also, “look” at the hip and consciously sink into it. You want to be balanced on one foot before picking up the other one. And you want to stay balanced on the standing foot until you’re ready to shift your weight to the other. Feather walking should be practiced moving forward, backward, and sideways. Combine the breath with it; move very slowly and make it into a qigong exercise—a walking meditation. Breathe in as the foot lifts off the ground; breathe out as the foot comes down. Feel a connection like elastic strings stretching as your heel pulls away from the ground, and the compressing of energy as the ball of the foot lowers to the ground. Cultivate the sensitivity of the yong chuans in the centers of the feet just as you do the lao gongs in the centers of the palms. This way you are never really separated from the ground and it’s always there to support you.

### **Continuous Movement**

Fully complete each movement and then flow into the next without halts or hitches. This builds balance, strength, and coordination. The entire sequence is done not just slowly but continuously slowly. If I speed up, it means I’m daydreaming. It’s easy to give short shrift to the yin parts of the movements and focus on the yang parts. (Yin fast, yang slow.) Gradually, over years of practice, I’m ferreting out all the crevices of the movements, opening them up, giving them the attention they deserve, and savoring them. I’m slowing down for them.

### **Simultaneity**

I use the word “simultaneity” to express the coordination of the upper half of the body with the lower half. Everything begins and ends at the same time—otherwise the components of my body are at odds with each other and I feel clumsy, heavy, and stiff. When everything comes to a close at the same time—hands reach their final destinations, weight is entirely shifted, waist finishes rotating, a breath arrives at its point of return—I occupy an instant of perfect, weightless balance. There is no inertia to overcome as I rebound effortlessly into the next movement.

### **Combining Breath, Movement, and Imagination**

T’ai Chi is a true mind/body exercise that coordinates the parts of the body with each other and the mind with the body. A central goal of T’ai Chi practice is to combine these three things: movement, breath, and imagination.

Other words for imagination are “visualization” or “imagery.” Imagination is a powerful tool that gains strength and effectiveness as we use it—the same as we gain muscles in our arms by lifting weights. We direct our qi and our bodies with intentions and images. In a general way, we can see ourselves moving like honey, like water, or as if we’re *in* water and feeling its gentle resistance and support. The possibilities are endless—and differ with each individual.

The intellect is always engaged in order to navigate through the sequence; the emotions are evoked by the names and shapes of the movements; the eyes and breath accompany each gesture. This means that the whole person, on every level, is acting in harmony with herself. We're engaged in what we're doing right here and now and get a wonderful vacation from the usual mind chatter. For people who are dealing with chronic pain, it provides a calming and positive distraction.

When all the parts of me come together and act in concert, I can expand into a state beyond thought, place, and time. This is T'ai Chi at its deepest.

### **Reversing Left and Right in the Sequence**

Like other traditional T'ai Chi styles, this sequence is weighted toward right-sided people. Once you've learned the sequence, it's important to reverse left and right and become adept at practicing it that way too. (Fortunately front and back stay the same.) I'm convinced that symmetricalness of movement helps balance the body, the brain, and the emotions.

### **Chen**

*Chen* means "awareness of the dan tian" and refers to the primary energy center located in the middle of the abdomen. There are four other dan tians in the body—one at the sternum, two in front of the armpits, and one at the third eye. When we're nervous or excited, our qi rises to the upper dan tians. When we relax, qi sinks into the lower dan tian. It's a qi bank—a place where qi is stored, and a qi pump—the place from which qi is sent out into other parts of the body. It's the source of the movement of the trunk and the arms and legs. Maintaining a constant, underlying awareness of this point gives us access to its power and solidity.

From the start of the sequence, belly breathing promotes chen because we visualize the breath always coming into and out of that place. As the abdomen fills up with air, I have the sense that I'm gaining not only the strength that comes from bringing new qi into the body, but also ballast that significantly helps my balance—both mental and physical. Of course the human center of gravity is located in the middle of the abdomen, so I'm conveniently connecting with it too.

I like the two movements in this sequence that require me to actually touch my waist because that's another way to draw my awareness to my center. Additionally, the constant turning of the waist brings attention to the dan tian. The dan tian doesn't just turn from side to side, it also moves in circles and half circles that can be horizontal or vertical. I think of it as a ball bearing. In Embracing the Tail of the Jumping Sparrow, the dan tian circles out and then circles back in. It's a subtle internal and external movement driven by visualization. It affects all the big joints and travels outward to the hands. My hands are a little higher, a little farther out in space as the dan tian circles outward. Then they're a little lower, a little closer in as the dan tian circles inward. Various movements provide opportunities for full circles and half circles. Maintaining an

awareness of the dan tian can make the flow of qi palpable. The dan tian is the inner source of our movements.

## Song

*Song* refers to the joints and is often translated as “relaxing” or “loosening.” But I think the words “expanding from within” best express this concept. It should be used from the very beginning—when you’re standing still in the Introduction to T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Kao Ching-hua told me to imagine the jaw and jaw muscle spreading outward, particle by particle. This opens up the joint and releases the tension that we often hold there. Also before starting to move, look at the spine and see it being lifted upward as if suspended by a string coming down from the sky and attached to the crown of the head. At the same time the tailbone is reaching downward into the ground. This straightens and elongates the spine, vertebra by vertebra, and gives the discs more room. See the pelvis arching outward like a rounded bridge. Architecturally this form is much stronger than an inverted “V” shape. You’ll be broader hiped, a little lower, and noticeably more grounded. Look at your shoulders too. See them spreading sideways, becoming very broad and loose and open. The image of “oranges in the armpits” is useful here. The shoulders are not constricted and the arms are not clamped up against the sides, limiting the flow of blood and qi from the trunk into the arms. Because of this, there is always plenty of space between the arms and the body, and this space is filled with resilient qi. It surprised me that spreading my shoulders out horizontally enhanced my balance. It’s as if the shoulders become like outriggers on a boat, extending my base.

Experience shows me that when I expand one joint, all the joints of the body follow suit. They all soften and open up and relinquish their tension. I “look” at joints and tell them to relax, release, and let go. Using song makes us calmer, more present, more balanced, and more capable. Incorporating this into the way we stand and move—not just when we’re doing T'ai Chi—makes us *perceive* ourselves as bigger, more expansive people. And the fact is, we are—on every level. What we do with our bodies, we do with our minds. And what we do with our minds, we do with our bodies. People perceive us as we perceive ourselves—they register our degree of inner and outer expansiveness.

## Jing

*Jing* means “quiet mind.” Another thing we can do while standing still, preparing to start the sequence, is look at our thoughts. We can acknowledge the mind chatter and then sweep it away, focusing on the path of the breath to and from the dan tian. T'ai Chi gives us so many things to incorporate at once—there are so many layers of content—that it draws our thoughts away from anxiety-producing obligations and worries. Daydreams will inevitably intrude, but we can keep coming back to the movement, the breath, the eyes. One way to promote jing is to bracket the sequence with an image of the most beautiful, peaceful, secure place that you’ve ever been. Evoke this image during the Introduction to T'ai Chi Ch'uan and again at the Conclusion. This helps set the mental and emotional tone for your practice and by

investing the sequence with these feelings, you come to have very positive associations with T'ai Chi. We use the tapping of a brass bowl before we start to move and when we finish moving to remind people to visualize themselves in their favorite place. You can see that the Introduction and the Conclusion are vital parts of the sequence. Take as much time as you need for these. One of my students said he never started moving until his arms rose by themselves. I love that idea.

### **Wu Wei**

*Wu wei*, “effortless effort.” T'ai Chi teaches me what it means and what it feels like. It's moving energy without exertion, as water falls downhill, unselfconsciously carrying with it tremendous force. Not only is my body relaxed and “soft” on the outside, but even internally I'm not using coercion to move qi along its pathways. I'm simply allowing it to flow, opening up the meridians and directing it with my mind and movements. There's the suspicion that if I'm not in a state of tension, I can't be accomplishing anything. I need the gritted teeth and the equivalent feeling in my center to believe that anything is happening. It's a welcome revelation that the life force is powerful in and of itself and that my puny struggle to make it so only impedes it. I just have to get out of its way. There's so much to think about and incorporate while we do T'ai Chi. Sometimes it's good to forget about all that and let the sequence take you through. I think of T'ai Chi as my friend. It's the kind of friend that's very forgiving and even though I don't always give it the focus and attention it deserves, it never deserts me. The sequence is there for me; it supports me; I can rely on it. Even on days when I'm anxious or distracted and never manage to quiet my disgruntled thoughts, it helps me. I know I'll feel better after each encounter. Kao Ching-hua said that T'ai Chi is cumulative—every practice is like a drop in the bucket.

### **The Martial Art**

T'ai Chi has martial origins. When I teach the movements, I talk about their martial applications. Having this knowledge informs our movements and clarifies the direction of our energy. But I'm not thinking about fighting or addressing an opponent while I'm practicing. I'm only thinking about the circulation of energy as I send it away from me and then gather it back in. Even the style of Push Hands that Kao Ching-hua taught me is a sensitivity exercise—an exercise in sensing, adhering, and yielding. It also provides practice in alternately assuming the roles of leader and follower and being able to differentiate between the two. Kao Ching-hua's—and my—idea of Push Hands is very different from competition Push Hands.

Yet life has a lot in common with a martial art. Everything we do while practicing the sequence—blocking, striking, and retreating—is a metaphor for how we navigate through life. All the underlying skills that we cultivate—stability, mobility, flexibility, a quiet mind, sustained concentration, and a knowledge of how to gather and use all our resources—make us less vulnerable, more likely to succeed in the things we choose to do. T'ai Chi shows us that we can accomplish more and be happier and healthier by slowing down, staying within our own space, standing on top of our feet, and knowing our limits and respecting them.



### **We Do T'ai Chi to Become Better People**

The sequence is composed of yin and yang, feminine and masculine, contracting and expanding, retreating and attacking. There's plenty of opportunity for practicing both modes. If you tend to be too aggressive and dominant, T'ai Chi—over time—will teach you restraint and self-control. If you tend to be too timid and deferential, it will teach you to be more self-confident and assertive. It can also help you to be discerning about which behavior is appropriate at any given time. My family was glad I took up T'ai Chi. I mellowed out.

The quiet and slowness of T'ai Chi provide a chance to see ourselves clearly and objectively—our attributes and our flaws, both physical and mental—and gain the composure and resourcefulness to work with that raw material. We can learn patience, tolerance, and compassion for ourselves; and then turn those qualities outward toward other people and the planet. T'ai Chi brings a force for balance into an out-of-balance world. It's a ritual that connects us with ourselves and with nature. In the end, we do T'ai Chi to become better people.