

ESSENTIAL  
CONCEPTS *of*  
TAI CHI



It is - It is Not - IT IS

WILLIAM TING

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# DEDICATION

*Many people along the way have helped to bring this book to fruition and I am grateful for their time, effort, and knowledge.*

*I would like to thank Lynne Kemler for her many hours transcribing and editing this book. I am very grateful for her patience and assistance.*

*I would like to thank my students who continue to work hard, study, and inspire me today. My hope is that this book will be their guide long after I am gone.*

*Lastly, I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Lynn. During the many hours of working to bring my ideas to reality, she never stopped believing in my work and this book.*



STUDENTS' ONLINE REVIEWS TO MASTER TING'S FIRST  
BOOK  
"ANSWERS TO COMMON TAI CHI AND QIGONG  
QUESTIONS"

Published December 13, 2011 and available on line and through our  
website: [www.silvertigertaichi.com](http://www.silvertigertaichi.com)

**Salvatore Casano R.N., PhD** – a registered nurse with a PhD in Holistic Health, and is an ATCQZ certified Tai Chi and Qigong instructor. [www.yang-sheng.com](http://www.yang-sheng.com)

I recently had the honor and privilege of participating in a qigong workshop with Master William Ting. At that workshop, many questions were raised about various aspects of tai chi and qigong training. Master Ting did a beautiful job in answering all the questions in a lucid, concise manner. In conversing with him privately he told me that he would soon be completing a book on tai chi and qigong. This is the book he was referring to.

This book consists of answers to 65 questions involving different aspects of tai chi and qigong arts and training. It is not an instruction manual on any particular tai chi or qigong form. I believe both instructors and students of these arts can appreciate the wealth of 40 plus years' experience of his training in Bagua, Tai Chi, and Qigong as a closed door student of Grandmaster, Lu Ji-Tang. The questions addressed in the book came from practitioners of these arts writing to his website, questions from students in his classes and from the many programs he has taught over the years. One may consider this book to be an ideal primer for Tai Chi and Qigong students.

One of the highlights of the book was his answer to Question 4: **"What are the 24 Musts of good posture?"** As with any athletic endeavor including Tai Chi and Qigong, the author states that **"Without proper posture, there is no way to attain an internal balance**

**and connection between the parts of the body; proper posture allows the physical frame to move around its central axis, uniting mind and body.”** The author offers 24 postural alignments, 5 vital body connections and discusses the three major bows that need to be formed by the body for proper connections. There is enough information in the answer to suffice all levels of qigong and tai chi practice to improve on body alignments.

As an integral part of tai chi training one must practice push hands. It is through push hands that the martial applications of tai chi can best be explored. Question 35 asks: **“What are your suggestions for improving Push Hands skills?”** In his answer Master Ting reminds students that push hands requires a solid foundation in Tai Chi principles and the importance of sinking, expanding and turning which are fundamental in all qigong practice. Yielding is one of the key differences between tai chi and other martial arts. The serious student must attain calmness of mind, relaxation of the body, balance, unity of movement, awareness, and learn how to neutralize, control, and release in that order when applying and practicing push hands.

In answering Question 63, a beautiful definition of tai chi is given, i.e. **“Tai Chi is a practice of integrating the essentials of life, mind, body and energy, into unity and wholeness.”** This neatly sums up the essences of tai chi training. Throughout the book there is often reference to the Classics of tai chi and qigong literature upon which these art forms are based. The last question, number 65 asks **“What is the ultimate secret of Tai Chi and Qigong?”** The response given was **“...to me, it is that there is no secret....The secret of Tai Chi and Qigong potentially lies within every person who takes up practice. It all depends on how well one understands the basic principles, how well they assimilate them into their practice, how often and how long they practice, and how well they execute the movements, both internally and externally.”**

Through the questions and answers one can see a thread of principles and practices that make up and integrate these two art forms. When

reading the questions and answers, perhaps new questions will emerge that you wish to explore with your teacher and/or do your own research. I encourage you to go to Master Ting's website [www.silvertigertaichi.com](http://www.silvertigertaichi.com) and see what he has to offer in terms of workshops and materials.

## **Review of Answers to Common Tai Qi and Qi Gong Questions**

**by William Ting**

Fran Maher June 2015

As a Tai Chi and Qi Gong Instructor, I appreciate the way William Ting's book is structured. I can pick it up and put it down any number of times, and find ever deeper meaning in the beautifully crafted answers.

This is an excellent reference book that belongs in the teacher's library as well as the student's. The table of contents makes it easy to find a quick answer, and for the intrepid, there is a depth of wisdom to be explored in the narrative of each topic.

I'm eagerly anticipating his next book, for some Ting-style elucidation on the principles.

### **Encore Please!**

By Su Terry "Author, musician, recording artist" on July 20, 2014

Format: Kindle Edition

This book is presented in question and answer format, with the questions ranging from beginner level to advanced. Even for the advanced practitioner, there are many insights here that will be beneficial. The questions are from real students and the answers are given in detail and depth. Master Ting is not afraid to share the "secrets" gleaned from more than four decades of martial arts immersion, as many other teachers unfortunately are. This book is a welcome addition to the available literature in English on the art of Taijiquan, and I look forward to his next book!



Brian Coffey

## **Answers to Common Tai Chi and Qigong Questions.**

Reviewed June 15, 2015

Different format from most books I've read – Question & Answer Style.... As you begin to look at the Questions... Wow! That was the question that I was going to ask! ...So that's WHY! Or, I didn't realize that the answer went that deep. Gee, what a good question, I didn't think of that, let me read further to understand better. Well, if that's the answer to this question, now, what about...?

Master Ting works with words as concepts much like the blacksmithing method of old, changing and fashioning the metal into a really useful product – fulfilling its purpose. Master Ting is a Master, not only of Tai Chi and Qi Gong, but also of WordSmith-ing.

Each bite-sized answer helps to carry the reader deeper into Tai Chi principles and their related aspects - understanding grows in both depth AND scope! Master Ting is able to put difficult concepts and internal experiences into words. Excellent! It's just what I need. I find that I can begin to carry these principles (Mind, Energy/Breath, Body) from the Tai Chi world and now apply them to creating more balance in my everyday life! Thank You!

### **A little treasure**

Review by Richard Roche on July 7, 2013

Format: Kindle Edition

This is only my second review of an eBook. The reason I am doing this review is the value I have found in these questions and answers, it has helped in my understanding and application of Tai Chi and Qigong. I am a student of Tai Chi and many of the concepts outlined by Mr. Ting resonate with my own teacher, though I must say it took your book to

bring home some of the explanations my own teacher was trying to get through to me. Reading your book was in the right place at the right time for me and I suspect my teacher is a little relieved as well! Mr. Ting you have a gift for clarity, at least as far as I am concerned, so a big thank-you for this little treasure.

## **Excellent Book**

By Joe Eber on June 29, 2015

I have over 35 years' experience in tai chi as student and teacher. This book has all the answers to the questions that I have asked and that students have asked of me. It is very comprehensive and written in a way that works for all levels of students; from beginners to advanced. I have read most of the books and many of the articles about tai chi, and I found this book to be exceptional. It is clear, concise, and to the point. I wholeheartedly recommend this book for any tai chi student. It is not about style or about teaching you a form. Your teacher can do that. It is about explaining the principles and deeper meanings of tai chi that most of the tai chi teachers today think they understand but very few do. If you are a tai chi teacher then you definitely want to read this book. I was a Yang style teacher for a number of years but I did not truly understand tai chi until I met Master Ting and read his writings.

## **There is no secret!**

By Stephen Steinhoff on January 1, 2012

Format: Paperback

I can testify, as can anyone who has studied under Master Ting that this book is written by a true master, whose tai chi skills are as exceptional as his knowledge is encyclopedic. But what makes this book unusual is its clarity and accessibility. Tai chi literature, as anyone knows who has tried exploring that dark continent, can be obscure and misleading—especially for the westerner. Much of it deals in mystification (born of a tradition of secrecy); some is poorly translated

(partly because the translator is insufficiently versed in tai chi), while other works are written by would-be masters whose understanding and experience is limited.

Master Ting, who is fluent in both English and Chinese, and who has taught tai chi to Americans for over twenty five years, has the ability to translate, distill, and demystify Chinese concepts and images (often fictional constructs of misleading complexity) in a way that makes them easily accessible to the western mind. (I challenge anyone, for example, to find a clearer, more comprehensive and helpful account of tai chi posture than Master Ting's answers to Questions 4 & 59.) The fact that the book answers student questions gives it a sustained relevance and (though it is much deeper than this) a kind of handbook practicality. This doesn't mean, of course, that you can learn tai chi from reading the book—or any other book for that matter—but you can learn how to correct your mistakes and better understand both how and why you should do a movement this way rather than that. In other words, you learn not just the technique but the underlying principles and concepts that enable you to shape technique to the occasion. (“Sink, turn and expand” goes a long way here.) Without this kind of understanding, there is no way you can make progress in this exceptionally difficult meditative martial (but not mystical!) art. In this respect, the book, like Master Ting's articles, is invaluable.

### **Very Valuable Insight !!! Highly Recommended !!!**

I like this book for its honest and straightforward approach in delivering answers to questions most Beginners & Westerners might have regarding Tai Chi & QiGong. I do not have unlimited access to a qualified teacher and my brief Tai Chi lessons occurred over 5 years ago. My exposure to a QiGong form performed by a Qualified Practitioner occurred over 5 years ago as well during a trip to Korea with an impromptu visit to a Martial Arts school that surprisingly was not teaching Taekwondo. Even if I don't remember both forms exactly as demonstrated, I feel a good understanding of the underlying principles is as important or perhaps even more important. That's where I think this

book bridges the gap left open by other texts I've either browsed or read and Videos I may have watched. I think the author effectively addresses the issues involved in developing and growing one's awareness of what Tai Chi & QiGong comprise and what benefits are attainable. Aside from what is observed when one practices a form, there is something vital going on within the one who practices. That is what most of this book addresses and it has managed to do it better than any other book or article I've encountered. I'm also glad to have acquired this book in electronic (Nook) format.

## A Treasure

By Richie on February 27, 2012

Format: Paperback

These words from Master Ting are invaluable for anyone interested in qigong and/or Tai Chi. The answers he gives will explain many concepts to beginning students and as the student progresses the answers take on more and deeper meanings. I admire the thoughtfulness and care Master Ting has used in crafting his explanations. This kind of knowledge has been very difficult to acquire and decipher and Master Ting has done a great service to the tai chi/qigong community and humanity as a whole by making his teaching so accessible to us all. I will own this book forever. Peace

# INTRODUCTION

I ADMIT I CAME to the study of Tai Chi entirely by accident. In the fall of 1989, I had intended to sign up for a ballroom dance class at our local adult education program. However, unable to convince my husband to put on his dancing shoes for a night of tango, I opted instead to take the class in Tai Chi. The description in the brochure read:

*“Tai Chi Chuan is a renowned traditional Chinese shadow boxing, originating about 1300 years ago by a Taoist saint for health, longevity, and rejuvenation, as well as self-defense. Its soft and rhythmic movements, in combination with mental power, have proven to be surprisingly effective for the management of diseases hitherto baffling to medical authorities.”*

That’s quite a claim and I was intrigued. No one I knew in southern New Jersey where I lived at the time, had ever heard of Tai Chi, but I seemed to recall images on TV of Richard Nixon’s trip to China, seeing large groups of people moving slowly in unison. At the time, I thought it looked enchantingly beautiful. So, what began as an exploratory weekly exercise class 25 years ago has now become a daily practice. That single, seemingly trivial, choice of an alternate exercise program was a life changing experience for me, a journey of self-discovery.

Master Ting was the instructor and from the very first hour of class, I was hooked. I loved the feeling of performing the slow, gentle motions. What impressed me more though, was how, at the end of a busy day, tired in both mind and body, this hour and a half evening class refreshed me and renewed my energy, yet at the same time left me feeling calm and peaceful.

In hindsight, I count myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to study Tai Chi with a teacher of impeccable lineage who was classically trained as a closed - door student of a highly respected Grandmaster in Shanghai, a rare privilege imbued with great esteem in

China. As it was, I knew nothing about the teacher. What I did know was that this strange and exotic program I had decided to try captivated me in ways I didn't initially realize. At first, I discovered the joy of feeling my body move through these unhurried, graceful motions. Originally seeking a dance class, I found myself dancing after all, but in this dance, my partner was unbounded space.

Even though I was learning a set of physical movements, a process not so much different than other physical routines, it was never about just going through the motions. I found myself becoming more 'aware' of my body's posture, balance, and coordination within the experience of movement. It was about being fully present and having the knowledge of where all my various parts were; hands, feet, elbows, and knees, forming connections to each other as a whole. There was a new realization of a relationship within the spatial matrix of my surroundings. Master Ting calls this 'Total Awareness', a perception that has continued to evolve in very subtle but profound ways over the years under the guidance of this very gifted teacher.

Master Ting is a very modest man whose quiet demeanor conceals an astonishing depth of knowledge, both as a martial artist and as a philosopher. I have always felt that this man loves to teach by the efforts he takes to get us to '*understand*' some very abstruse concepts. It becomes obvious to anyone who has spent any time with him that Tai Chi is foremost in his life. He positively lights up when students ask him questions as he welcomes the opportunity to delve more deeply into the fundamental nature of Tai Chi. We call him Master, not because he requires the title from his students but because his students recognize and respect his considerable experience and obvious skill.

Tai Chi is known as an internal art; it is one thing to go through the motions of the form, but quite another to be fully aware of the synergy at work within mind, body, and energy during each moment. This internal awareness is what Master Ting refers to as *the 'Invisibles'*. This particular level of distinctive sentience is what is required to truly experience Tai Chi. For myself, I find that the more I am able to bring this awareness into my daily life; both the mundane and the special moments become

that much more fulfilling.

This is the gift Master Ting offers to his students. Following the traditional way he was taught, he does not award belts to note level of achievement or rank, nor will he give out certificates acknowledging attendance at a class or workshop. What he does bestow upon his students in every class and seminar are rules and tools to help them understand the intricacies of Tai Chi so that they can, as he puts it, “begin to figure it out for themselves”.

Within the pages of this book you will find the core essence of what he teaches and values the most: **Basic Principles**.

Master Ting presents the basic principles within the context of Tai Chi, but over the many years that I have studied with him, what has really been impressed upon me was how to use these principles outside of the classroom to improve the totality of our lives. I have come to think of them more as “Universal Truths”. It is my belief that Tai Chi Basic Principles are derived from the primal archetype essential to the function of absolutely everything.

It has been my experience that if you get any group of Tai Chi practitioners together, it is not long before talk often turns to how their practice has impacted them on multiple levels; physical, mental, spiritual. I have heard many anecdotes from students about how their practice of Tai Chi helped them to improve some aspect in their daily lives that had impact or value outside the classroom. Often discussed were the positive physical and mental benefits Tai Chi had on other activities in their lives, such as running, golf, tennis, skiing, baseball, or basketball.

For myself, I rode horses in my younger years and I would tell Master Ting that I was first introduced to Tai Chi principles on horseback. For instance, when riding, you are taught to keep your posture straight while remaining relaxed and fluid throughout the body. You are advised to sit and sink into each stride; to connect your knees through the horse while keeping your toes in line with the knees. Most importantly, you are taught to develop the sensitivity to connect with the horse through balance and coordination.

Many studies have been done and are presently being conducted as to how and why the practice of Tai Chi helps people manage the physical and mental infirmities associated with aging such as chronic disease or injury. Most significantly, many of the studies deal with the effect of Tai Chi practice on one of the chief sources of most modern day ills....Stress. If this truly is the case, it is perhaps within our daily activities that the Basic Principles in Tai Chi present the most benefit.

We have had students relate how their practice has helped them with repetitive strains and fatigue associated with most occupations, whether it is in the manual trades, office work, or housework. Among our students are those who pursue the creative arts; dancers, musicians and artists. Many of them have expressed how their study of Tai Chi has helped them to improve and consequently, better enjoy their craft.

The question remains: why does this type of training have such a common beneficial effect on such a wide range of people and issues? Perhaps the answer to this can be found in the ancient roots of Tai Chi. It is believed that the heart of Tai Chi is found in the Tao, a philosophy based upon the universal laws of nature. In a workshop handout Master Ting wrote,

*“Look closely at the natural world. It is formed of spirals, circles and spheres, it grows by evolving, moving and expanding, it renews itself within endless cycles, finds strength in balance and flexibility and binds it all together within an intricate web of interconnections whereby if any one element changes, it affects all the rest.”*

In the same handout Master Ting wrote;

*“The Foundation for the existence of life is based on the combination of these three elements;*

<i>Mind / Spirit</i>	<i>The inspiration for being</i>
<i>Posture (Shape)</i>	<i>The container for life</i>
<i>Energy (Qi)</i>	<i>The power that activates and animates life</i>



I would suggest that you to take what you learn, out of this book, beyond the classroom and past the time of practice. Perhaps you will find that the Universe will nourish and sustain you in direct proportion to your ability to cooperate with Universal Truths. Master Ting teaches us that we should:

**Practice to be: Calm, aware, centered, relaxed, expanded, connected & continuous.**

**to Establish: Balance, flexibility, stability, coordination, harmony & unity.**

**and Produce: Energy (Qi), Power & Presence**

One of the earliest lessons Master Ting offered seemed inconsequential at the time, but it has proven to be the lesson I value and use the most. He told me about the Five Tenets for practice. As Master Ting explained, a successful student should learn to appreciate and establish these five character elements which are as important to a student's practice as any of the physical attributes.

### **Confidence - Sincerity - Modesty - Perseverance - Understanding**

I have found that these five simple words can be applied to everything and every situation. They have become the guidelines I use to measure and balance my decisions and actions. These are the weapons I use to protect myself from the stresses of modern living.

**Confidence** is a belief or trust in the abilities of oneself or others. In order to possess true confidence, we need to know ourselves as well as those in whom we place our confidence. It is essential that we have full awareness of what we are capable of and how others could react. Otherwise, our confidence could degenerate into bravado or arrogance. As a false or contrived sense of confidence, neither is guaranteed to offer

assurance when it's needed the most.

In practicing Tai Chi Push Hands, I gained confidence by developing the ability to adjust. When presented with conflict, there are an infinite number of ways to solve the problem if we are flexible enough to change with altering circumstances. When sparring in class, Master Ting is not overly interested in teaching us specific techniques to use, even though we ask. He believes that a technique is only useful when applied to a very specific set of circumstances; outside the confines of the studio, there are an infinite number of deviations an opponent could choose to make during an actual encounter. Master Ting prefers that we learn to 'listen' and be sensitive to the signals coming from our opponent. He wants us to be aware of their body language, the degree of force, and the direction of the momentum coming at us. The object of his lessons is to learn how to adjust to changing circumstances using the basic principles as your foundation and guide. To Master Ting, this means avoiding or "yielding" to the obvious strength of the opponent as a ploy to reach their weaknesses, a process counter-intuitive to most of us and much easier said than done.

Confidence in our abilities gives us choices: we can struggle against our misfortune which saps precious energy and feeds tension, fatigue, and stress; or we can yield to adversity to gain the advantage. That does not mean we meekly accept our fate, rather, it allows us to free our energy to create solutions.

**Sincerity** requires absolute honesty to oneself and others in thoughts, words, and actions. Without some measure of sincerity, it is not possible to engender any of the other four personal qualities; as such, it is a measure of personal integrity.

It has been helpful for me to use my level of sincerity as a channel for inner guidance. When faced with decisions, if in my heart I am not comfortable committing to a course of action, I have learned it is most likely something I should avoid. When we are truly sincere, the chances of experiencing a reliable outcome increase dramatically. Half-hearted actions often result in haphazard conclusions.

On the other hand, there are times when something inside us stirs a passion. We may be tempted to be over-zealous in our attention to it, but this too can be counter-productive as we may neglect other things. Being sincere in the desire for *Balance* is the moderating factor between giving too much or too little or what Master Ting refers to as being “too serious or not serious enough”.

**Modesty** cultivates an inner fortitude. It embodies the attribute of humility but without being meek or subservient. Contrasting qualities such as, power, pride, boldness, toughness, or dominance, are often regarded as desirable. However, either extreme presents obstacles to understanding. The best way is in between being too submissive or too assertive...again ...the way of *Balance*.

Master Ting teaches us to let go of Ego. This is another one of those exercises that is easier said than done. Ego is a rather messy and bossy companion who hordes all kinds of nonsense and clutters the mind with constant demands for attention. Evict Ego as a poor tenant of the mind and make sure his friends; anger, resentment, jealousy and judgment, go with him. Instead, make room for tolerance, empathy, and curiosity to grow and flourish.

Perhaps this means we have to become brave enough to be vulnerable, but doesn't that open the door for opportunity to enter? Life is full of all kinds of experiences, both pleasant and disturbing, found in a rich variety of persons, places, and things. There will always be that which is better or worse. All experiences have something to teach us if we are open-minded enough to just observe, listen, and learn.

In the play of Push Hands, Master Ting has taught me that I must not stand before a partner desiring my own success. We are both equal until one of us moves. Likewise, the outcome must be of no consequence because no matter who prevails, there is always a lesson to be learned. In practice, we actually acquire greater ability if we are humble enough to let others push us. It is then we discover our limits and have the opportunity to create ways to expand beyond them. What can be more valuable than the serenity that comes from knowing oneself? Is that not where we find confidence and consequently courage?

To **persevere** means to sustain a belief or effort despite repeated discouragement or difficulty. Master Ting has taught us that true perseverance has nothing to do with single-minded stubbornness; where one repeats the same mistakes, ad infinitum. Rather, to persevere, one must be resilient enough to consider change and thereby transform the outcome.

I have learned to employ perseverance as a protection against helplessness. Master Ting uses the best learning method for this skill... repetition. While sparring under his direction, if a student is pushed out by their opponent, they are expected to start over again, and again, and again, and once more. He very patiently explains and demonstrates and corrects our physical errors but eventually, he expects us to figure it out for ourselves. If we persevere and succeed, we find a lesson which is never forgotten. We learn that the ability to help ourselves has always been inside us but once revealed, it is now forever ours to keep. Within perseverance, hope endures.

**Understanding** can be likened to a buried treasure. We find it by wanting it and looking for it. It can be defined as the act of becoming aware of the meaning, nature, and importance of something. Master Ting always encourages us to seek understanding. He often tells us that; “It is not enough to just know **how** to do something; to do it well, you must also know **why**. Only when you truly understand the ‘why’ of a particular movement will it become yours to use, control, and improve upon.”

Understanding is a powerful weapon to use against confusion, doubt, and fear. I can’t think of anything that causes more heartache than these three emotions. They are usually the instigators behind all the trouble in the world. The blessing is that they fade away in the light of understanding. Arm yourself with understanding and they have no power over you.

You hold within your hands a book devoted to understanding. It has been many years in the making: it is one man’s attempt to bring clarity to unfathomable concepts that can’t be seen but must be realized in order for

the art of Tai Chi to survive. Master Ting has taken great pains to present each concept in clear, simple terminology. He is fluent in several Chinese dialects, including Mandarin and his English is excellent. Even so, I have seen him take great pains to choose his words very carefully, poring through dictionaries in both languages along with an English thesaurus, in an effort to bridge the divide between the broad, sometimes assumed imagery of Chinese characters and the very succinct meaning of English words. Nevertheless, many Tai Chi concepts have no specific words associated in English, so Master Ting liberally uses imagery, stories and metaphors to convey the meaning of his demonstrations and lessons. Ultimately there are some concepts that just cannot be understood without the benefit of physical touch to transfer the feeling in the movement from teacher to student.

Master Ting has expressed a grave concern that the internal depth of Tai Chi has become drastically diluted. I have been witness to a great number of students finding their way to Master Ting for the first time, who have had many years of previous study, all very dedicated, but they obviously lack an internal quality in their Tai Chi. Some have expressed that they “thought something was missing”; but the old adage is certainly true in that, “you can’t know what you don’t know”. When given the opportunity, most have been eager and grateful to learn but sadly have expressed sincere regret at the many years squandered in not knowing the internal or invisible nature of their practice.

It would seem that Tai Chi Basic Principles are simply not being taught. While part of the problem originated within the tradition of the ‘Closed Door’ system of instruction where the ‘Secrets’ were imparted to a select few disciples; compounding the issue is that the very essence of Tai Chi is internal and thus not obvious. Those ‘invisible’ aspects are very hard to teach. But for the art to survive with all of the integrity that makes it unique, a way must be found. If not, the real treasure of Tai Chi will vanish forever.

Unfortunately, it may already be too late. The attributes that make Tai Chi so valuable take years of dedicated practice to develop. To a generation that is accustomed to receiving information delivered at the

lightning speed of a silicon chip; there does not seem to be much interest in a practice that reveres the timelessness found dwelling within the awareness of each moment.

I wish I had a penny for each person who has told me how lucky I have been to have had such a gifted teacher from the very start of my Tai Chi journey. Believe me; I count it as a blessing. I have benefited so much more from my many years of study with Master Ting than just learning an ancient martial art. He has taught me how to experience my life with new awareness, how to deal with change and circumstance from a place of stability, flexibility, and calmness. I have gained a confidence that comes from knowing I carry within myself the 'Basic Principles I need to help protect myself from stress, illness, and injury. In short, the mystically elusive key to healthy and peaceful living is simply....Balance.

This book, dear reader, when all is said and done, is all about creating Balance in the totality of your life, that place of in-between, the melding point that binds extremes into a synergetic wholeness.

Little did I realize when I began a simple Tai Chi class on a whim so many years ago, that it would lead me on a profound adventure into and beyond myself. Master Ting has shown me a path that always extends over the horizon on a journey I expect to last a lifetime.

Lynne Kemler  
Newtown, PA  
March 7, 2015

# CHAPTER ONE

## My Purpose for this Book

**T**HIS BOOK IS a culmination of my experiences, both as a student and as a teacher. It grew out of a need to search for ways to help my students understand the elusive internal aspects that are so essential to the art of Tai Chi. Because these internal qualities are hidden within the mind and body, they are very hard to learn and even harder to teach. As such, they would seem complex and mysterious, but for the art to survive, they must be passed onto future generations.

As I expanded my teaching beyond my own circle of students by offering workshops and retreats, I encountered an alarming number of students who were passionate about Tai Chi, diligent in their practice, yet their posture and form were missing important basic principles. Some of these students had many years of experience, with their own established schools and students. However, because of a lack of fundamental knowledge, their movements, despite all their practice, often missed the benefit of coordination, harmony, unity, and flow; elements essential to all Tai Chi styles and forms.

I asked myself how it was that so many students, who obviously spent time and effort to learn complicated movements and sequences, could be missing the most important aspects of practice. I have since discovered that the reasons for this deficit in training are complicated. Primarily, most of these practitioners were never taught the more subtle, internal concepts of the art, so the probability that they might pick them up on their own, no matter how much they practiced, was greatly diminished. They learned and practiced a series of rote maneuvers with no discernable rhyme or reason to them. Most had never imagined Tai Chi in terms of an effective martial art, its actual historic basis. In many ways, a student is a

reflection of the teacher. Unfortunately, many teachers do not know the basic Tai Chi principles for themselves, or have never practiced it as a martial art, so the actual reason for a movement is never conveyed accurately to their students. There are teachers who may know these fundamentals for themselves, but either lack the ability to communicate them effectively, or hoard the knowledge zealously to share with only a few privileged students.

This particular attitude originated from the traditional way in which the internal aspects of Tai Chi were passed on from the Masters to a relatively few, specially chosen, “closed door students”. Tai Chi developed during a period of time when the only methods available to protect and defend oneself and family were the skills available within one’s own resources of mind and body. These abilities, which form the foundation of Tai Chi, lie deep inside the practitioner in a place only they could feel and no one else could see. What an enemy could not see, they could not take. In addition, the element of surprise, flexibility, strength, coordination, and power stemming from an unarmed opponent against armed hostiles cannot be underestimated in a society which banned weapons from anyone outside the imperial influence.

Because of the seemingly preternatural abilities of the practitioner to defend and protect, their skills and knowledge became so respected among the various martial arts experts in existence that these Tai Chi “secrets” were jealously guarded and passed down within certain families. This is understandable when you consider this tactic; it is not unlike the modern day policy of keeping strict control over nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Those who have the resources to create such weapons do not want to share their knowledge for fear the same deadly arsenal could be used against them.

As a teenager growing up in uncertain times, I had a strong desire to learn how to defend my family and myself. At first, I sought out a Bagua teacher who I observed instructing students daily in the park. This teacher saw a potential in me and suggested that I learn what he described as, “a more advanced martial art”. That art was Tai Chi. It was my good fortune to be introduced to a respected local teacher, Lu Ji-Tang, who would



eventually become my Master.

Traditionally in China, a Master teacher would have a hierarchy of students, the majority of which would be public or “outer” students. In this group, the instruction was very basic with long periods of standing postures and much repetition of simple movements. In this group, there was little or no personal instruction about internal movement or connections. From this larger group of participants, some students would stand out by showing a certain talent or dedication that a Master might encourage by inviting them to study with a relatively smaller “inner” circle. Here students would receive more personalized attention, but even these students did not get the benefit of total training. All of the essential “secrets” were reserved for a few specially chosen “closed-door” students.

In China, to be selected by a Master as a closed-door student is considered both a special honor and a solemn responsibility. The Master and the student pledge themselves to each other: the student dedicating himself or herself to their Master with a diligence to learn what they have to teach, and the Master in turn, promising to bestow the benefit of all their knowledge upon the most worthy of students. This bond usually developed into a life-long relationship, in most cases as strong as familial blood bonds within the society.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be trained as a closed-door student by my Master. I had both the honor and the benefit of intense and personalized one-to-one training with my teacher who passed his traditions, learning, knowledge, and experience on to me in a singular way. However, I acknowledge how very restrictive this method of teaching is, limiting the best instruction to a small elite group of individuals.

I have now come full circle and with the blessing and encouragement of my Master, I have become a teacher myself. At this writing, I have accumulated over 45 years of teaching experience; most of it has been in the United States. As I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, during this time I have been both gratified to watch the art grow in popularity and yet dismayed to see the internal depth of quality, which makes Tai

Chi so singular, in many ways disappear from its instruction and performance. Countless students have appeared before me in my seminars and retreats who have obviously put enormous amounts of time and effort into their study of Tai Chi yet have fundamentally gained no internal substance; they have only external form. Unfortunately, this problem is not only found in the United States, I have also seen the same phenomenon in China.

The art of Tai Chi did not earn its esteemed reputation by simply having practitioners mindlessly go through rote motions. Tai Chi must come from deep inside, combine with the elemental forces of the earth and sky, and be allowed to expand out to unite with the ever evolving energies of the universe. Very simply, Tai Chi must be felt, from the inside out. It requires total awareness and the unity of mind, body, and energy.

What I am trying to share within the pages of this book are not so much secrets, but treasures which are hidden in plain view. Everything describing the internal foundational principles common to all styles is already available in the classic, ancient writings about Tai Chi. However, the authors of these works were intentionally cryptic and obscure. They did not believe in giving away their knowledge carelessly and indiscriminately to the uninitiated or casual dilettante. Cloaked within the poetic phrases of ancient Chinese are words that capture the imagination but are very hard for the Western mind to interpret. There are instructions available for all to see, but meant only for a selected chosen few to understand. Therefore, my purpose for writing this book was to attempt to consolidate and explain the essential concepts of Tai Chi, to take the enigma and mystery out of the philosophic concepts and make these basic principles more universally available.

I sincerely believe that the full tradition and scope of Tai Chi belongs to all people; not just for China, and not just for a chosen few. I have made a decision to break from the tradition within which I was taught and offer the whole breadth and depth of the skills I have acquired through many years of study and practice and share my experience, both as a student and as a teacher, with any and all who would seek me out. Often,

a subtle correction of posture along with an explanation of why and how the principles are applied will, to use an American expression, turn on a light bulb within the willing student. I am always amazed and gratified to see how a student's entire countenance will suddenly change when they actually "feel" Tai Chi for the first time.

Students desire to learn Tai Chi for so many different reasons. Some are motivated by the recognized benefits to health, others for the martial arts aspects, and then there are those simply looking for recreation and for the enjoyment found in the camaraderie of a class. No matter what the reasons are which initially bring a student to Tai Chi, none should be discounted as trivial, and all should have the benefit of the basic principles.

Students are best honored by their teacher offering not just the superficial, but also the profound, for it is within the realm of the internal that the true essence of Tai Chi dwells. Those students who have the aptitude, ability, and desire to learn will absorb the most; while those whose interest is more casual may not learn as much; nevertheless, they will have been offered the opportunity to find the experience much more fulfilling to their daily lives.

If I can leave the student with the knowledge of not only how to do Tai Chi but also the reasons why Tai Chi works the way that it does, then I will have planted the seeds of understanding for the student to nurture that will allow them to continue to grow, even after I am gone. When students only copy what they see me do and recite what they hear me say, then that is just mimicking, they are not truly evolving. When a student can express in their own words, from their own experience, the more subtle aspects of Tai Chi, then I know that they have truly grasped this art and will continue to carry it forward into the future. In this way, I hope to honor my Master and the generations of ancient Masters who have lovingly and diligently preserved an art that is priceless in its very existence. It is for that past and for this future that I have done my best, in the present, to bring you this book.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Tai Chi and Qi: The Force of Life

EACH PERSON HAS a different reason to study Tai Chi and each student comes to Tai Chi with an individual goal in mind. Some people seek good health and a calm outlook while others pursue the martial arts aspects of Tai Chi. However, as we increase our understanding of this art, we all run into the concept of “Qi”. In class, you hear people comment that they have had a “good Qi day”, or today was a “bad Qi day”. Yet, even as we speak of these things, most people have no real understanding of what the term “Qi” really means.

First, it is important to clarify that the written character representing “Qi” or energy in Chinese is not part of the word, Tai Chi Chuan (Taijiquan). (WADEGILES).<sup>1</sup> The character for “CHI” or “JI” used in these spellings is different in meaning and in script from the character meaning Qi or energy. For the purpose of maintaining synchronicity throughout this book, we will use the generally accepted Western spelling for the terms, “Tai Chi” and “Qi”.

The Chinese believe that Qi is one of the fundamental bedrocks of the universe. All things are made up and defined by their Qi. Rocks have rock Qi, plants have plant Qi, animals have animal Qi, and even insects have insect Qi. Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM teaches that humans possess and are made up of several different kinds of Qi. Anyone familiar with physics could think of Qi as a combination of both kinetic and potential energy.

Qi is more easily understood by its functions. Qi is always moving: it is both the source of movement, as well as motion itself. Qi holds things together. It controls an object’s ability to keep its shape and definition. Qi warms the body and protects us from outside influences. Qi transforms

food so that we may utilize its nutrients. We swim in an ocean of Qi in our environment, and nourish and protect our internal Qi from outside negative influences.

Qi moves constantly through the body in a network of channels that the Chinese refer to as meridians. The meridian system is similar to the circulatory or lymphatic system in Western medicine. As meridians allow for the movement of Qi and blood throughout the body; it moistens tissues and enhances joint function. The meridian channel is lined with specific points where Qi can be accessed and adjusted. The ancient Chinese system of acupuncture uses these access points to correct imbalances which cause sickness and/or weakness, allowing Qi to flow unobstructed through the body.

As human beings, we have three sources of Qi. The first and primary source of an individual's Qi is known as "Yun Qi" or Prenatal Qi and this is given to us by our parents at the moment of conception. This Qi is vital because it determines the soundness of our constitution throughout life. The strength of our prenatal Qi is determined by the parents' state of health and outlook at the time of conception and gestation. Traditional Chinese Medicine believes that Prenatal Qi is stored in the kidneys. As important as this energy is to the human body, it cannot be replaced or repaired. As we practice Tai Chi, our most important goals are to foster and protect the Prenatal Qi and to prevent it from being exhausted.

After we are born, a person needs to accumulate Qi from outside sources to maintain and support life. The second source of Qi for this purpose comes from the food we eat. We literally absorb Qi from our food. The better the quality of food we consume, the higher and stronger our Qi. Everyone knows that eating fresh fruits and vegetables benefits our health; these foods have high quality Qi which the body can easily absorb and use. Conversely, if an animal is sick when it is slaughtered, or vegetables and fruits are contaminated or rotted when consumed, the effect of this weak or bad Qi in our system could make us sick.

Our final source of Qi is the air. In fact, the Chinese expression for air is "Kong Qi", or air Qi. Many times we find that when we go to the seashore or the mountains, we feel better, more relaxed, and even

stronger. Because the air is so clean and pure; we are able to absorb a large quantity of exhilarating Qi from it.

One of the reasons Tai Chi is so important is that it gives a person the skills and ability to accumulate, balance, and coordinate our Qi. I teach my students that these are the A, B, and C's of Tai Chi. Qi exists whether or not one practices Tai Chi. However, through the consistent practice of Tai Chi, we can nurture and preserve our prenatal Qi. We can increase our post natal Qi and help it to circulate with blood to nourish every part of our bodies. We can balance our Qi to achieve excellent health benefits. Still, all this background information about Qi does not even begin to provide a picture of how essential Qi is to all aspects of Chinese life.

In China, emotions are expressed in terms of Qi. An American would think "I am happy" without necessarily assigning this feeling of well-being to an internal source. However, in China a person is said to have happy Qi, a good positive energy coming from within, having the ultimate effect of sustaining a calm and peaceful body.

Or take for example the term "Fu Qi" in China. Fu Qi is an expression which can mean both happiness and good fortune. Fu Qi is considered a very positive quality. In China, it is traditional on your birthday to eat noodles. It is believed you will have a long and healthy life because noodles are a long and healthy food. When someone who is healthy and has long life celebrates a birthday, everyone wants to share their noodles. If other people share a bowl of noodles with the celebrant, they too will acquire Fu Qi from the person; allowing them to live longer and be healthier.

In Chinese, there are many similar terms or manifestations of an individual's Qi. In English we have the expression "serendipity". It means someone has experienced unexpected good fortune. The Chinese describe this as Yun Qi, and ascribe this quality to the person's energy. When people in China get married, they are said to have Xi Qi. Everything is new for them, their life is just beginning and they look loving and tenderhearted. Grandparents are usually described as having Ci Qi. This describes the elder as having patience, kindness, thoughtfulness, especially in regard to the younger generation. Someone

with lofty life goals is said to have Zhi Qi. Zhi Qi describes high levels of aspirations or ambitions, indicating a restless, confident, or courageous personal energy.

There are also negative connotations for Qi. When people get depressed and lose their confidence, the Chinese call it “chui dou sang qi”. Literally, this expression means the posture slumps and the head hangs down, indicating a very unhappy state of Qi. An unlucky person is said to have Mei Qi. They may expect good fortune which they do not get; or sometimes, they are blamed for something that was not their fault.

Emotions, in the tradition of Chinese Medicine, go far beyond everyday events. The Chinese do not recognize a separation between emotions and physical health. They believe that the primary emotions have a profound effect upon our health and the quality of our Qi. While everyone will experience these sentiments occasionally, when they become chronic or excessive, they can damage our health.

Knowing what Qi is and how it affects the body is a foundational principle in Traditional Chinese Medicine and philosophy. What does this mean within the parameters of Tai Chi? Because we know emotions transcend mere feelings and actually affect Qi, it is essential, therefore, to keep the mind calm during practice. Any emotion that intrudes upon your practice has the power to damage both the practice and the health of the practitioner. For example, if you are “Nu Qi” or angry when doing the movements, your body and muscles will be tense. Your mind cannot calm down, and your breathing will be forced and ragged. Anger stimulates Qi to ascend, which will uproot and unbalance posture. While angry, it is impossible to absorb the important benefits derived from Tai Chi practice. In the case of using Tai Chi to defend oneself while seething with anger, it will no longer be a Tai Chi contest but rather more along the lines of a common brawl. “Nu Qi” can also have a negative effect upon the liver and can damage both the liver organ and/or the liver meridian. Chronic or excessive anger in Traditional Chinese Medicine can indicate a severe imbalance within the liver and/or liver meridian, which, if left to exist, will eventually cause liver dysfunctions.

Joy, considered by most to be beneficial to a person, calms Qi and

encourages peace or serenity. However, extreme joy can cause slow or scattered Qi which can damage essential heart function. Anxiety is most often associated with the spleen/pancreas organs and meridians. Unnecessary or extreme worry obstructs Qi causing bile to build and fester. Excessive pensiveness or brooding causes Qi to stagnate; it is allied with the stomach and can cause ulcers and heartburn. Profound grieving diminishes Qi and collects in the lung and lung meridian, impeding breath and the absorption of oxygen. Fear and fright have always been closely associated with the kidneys. Fear causes Qi to descend; extreme terror can cause kidney Qi to descend so rapidly that a person will urinate suddenly and uncontrollably.

Besides emotions, Qi also plays a major role in how the Chinese arrange their homes and their physical environments. The science of coordinating objects which surround us is commonly referred to as Feng Shui. It is the art and science of placing objects to derive maximum benefit from positive Qi while minimizing exposure to negative Qi. People unconsciously feel better and have better health in a home which has good Feng Shui. A fundamental goal of Feng Shui is to achieve a steady flow of Qi in a favorable direction. When Qi is allowed and encouraged to move comfortably and in the proper direction, it provides harmony, peace, and good fortune to the practitioner. However, when Qi is allowed to become stagnant or blocked in the environment, it transforms to Sha or bad Qi, often times bringing misfortune and bad health along with it.

This same principle of the auspicious movement of energy in Feng Shui also applies to our bodies. An essential quality of Qi is motion; and when Qi stops moving or slows down too much, it can damage our health. One of the most immediate and profound impacts of Tai Chi is simply that it gets us moving. Any movement of the body also encourages the movement of Qi.

However, Tai Chi has far greater health enhancing capabilities than simply movement. Tai Chi motions are practiced slowly to build up discipline and control. The optimum condition of Qi is constant and gradual motion, similar to water. When a stream rushes suddenly and



indiscriminately down a mountain, it is often too rough to navigate or use for irrigation; it also cuts deep gorges in the earth, many times preventing functioning access. However, if we create a new channel allowing the stream to wind back and forth across the slope, the gentle slowing of the water can benefit us. We can direct it to parched ground, we can accumulate it for later use, and we can balance its force to prevent flooding.

The silk reeling force of Tai Chi creates a circular motion that moves Qi through the body. This force is similar to wringing out a wet towel to expel water. It opens the channels allowing Qi to circulate, smoothly and consistently, throughout the body. In addition, the internal twisting of our arms and legs acts like a pump adjusting the flow of Qi to the correct direction, the proper speed, and balance. We accumulate Qi for later use by consistently practicing Tai Chi movements.

As we continue to practice Tai Chi, our awareness of Qi and its effect on the body becomes more developed. We learn to sense which parts of the body are weak or not relaxed. Our body can tell us if Qi is blocked or stagnate. We learn to adjust our posture, movements, and focus to correct the imbalance, unblock the meridians, and allow Qi to flow unimpeded throughout the body. Tai Chi gives us the knowledge and awareness of both body and energy.

In an unhealthy body, Qi tends to stagnate in the joints first. The resulting pain and stiffness often leads to less movement, which only increases the problem. Tai Chi emphasizes opening the joints by expanding them simultaneously in opposite directions.<sup>2</sup> This expansion of the joints allows blocked Qi to flow evenly throughout the body once again. Since another of the primary functions of Qi is to moisten the joints, the physical structure of the body actually becomes healthier as the practitioner improves their Tai Chi.

For centuries, the Chinese have believed that our emotions impact the quality of both Qi and corresponding organ function. The discipline we acquire in training our bodies to perform the intricate and controlled movements of Tai Chi can also help us focus our mind and teach us to regulate our emotions. True understanding of Tai Chi principles of

balance and unity give us the skills not only to practice the form but also to make necessary and beneficial changes to every part of our lives. The calm sensitivity and awareness which is nurtured in Tai Chi allow us to observe ourselves and correct imbalances in our movements and in our energy. When we understand that Nu Qi can cause liver dysfunction as well as uproot posture through ascending Qi, we use our skill and awareness to lower Qi, adjust our posture, and choose another emotion to balance ourselves. If we feel Chui Dou Sang Qi, we can immediately alleviate the problem by bringing our head up and opening the chest. When we remember the times we have been Fu Qi, we can reflect that the cycles of balance and change will bring us happiness again. By mixing hope in with the sadness, we can open our minds to alternatives and balance our internal energy.

The secret of health and happiness is living in balance. Tai Chi gives us the knowledge, awareness, and ability to balance our bodies, our minds, and our Qi. It provides us with a way to preserve our Qi and live a long and healthy life. The essence of health is living the balance found in the yin and yang, the enduring symbol of Qi in the universe.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Fundamental Principles of Correct Tai Chi Practice



**Figure 1: Central Line**

**T**HE TRUE MASTERY of any skill, whether it is virtuosity in the fine arts, proficiency in dance, athletic aptitude, or martial arts' prowess comes from understanding and applying the underlying philosophy and principles associated with the art. While painters may indulge their passions in sprays of abstract paint and form, true artists must understand the fundamental rules of color and proportion in order to bring their visions to life. Similarly, musicians must feel the harmony and rhythm of a selection, but still study the basics of scales and

music theory in order to produce excellence in their music. Poets have words in their heads and stories which beg to be spoken; however their true skills lie in the transference of their tales to verse; following rules combining meter and rhyme to produce poetry. The mastery of Tai Chi is no different. There are fundamental rules or principles common to all styles of Tai Chi that practitioners need to learn and assimilate in order to reach the highest levels in their practice. Most of these rules concern a delicate balance between good body mechanics and keen mental awareness.

## **BALANCE**

In nature, balance is a fundamental principle. All things, whether they are elements, objects, or beings, tend to seek their own state of equilibrium. Before going any further it must be said that there is no such thing as absolute balance. The nature of our environment involves perpetual movement and constant change; consequently, there is always a need for adjustment. Ideally, balance should flow along with change like water that seeks its own level. Failing that, to the degree by which anything strays out of balance, eventually an equal amount will have to be introduced in order for balance to return or elements related to the inequity will begin to falter and fail. The greater the imbalance, the more dramatic the correction will need to be.

Tai Chi's relationship with its Taoist foundations has it following the same patterns as are found in nature. When we practice Tai Chi and Qigong, the primary objective is to achieve balance and harmony. This balance, however, is more than just physical. It also means keeping mental and energetic states in balance as well. Mind (Yi), Body (Xing) and Energy (Qi) are three basic elements absolutely required for human existence and all of them seek balance to create harmony in practice and in life.

## **MIND – The Channel of Inspiration**

As the means by which a human thinks, knows, acts, and feels, the mind inherently has the ability to exert a controlling role upon the whole being. Unfortunately, many people live their lives absent-mindedly, allowing their minds to wander indiscriminately, in effect, squandering

what could be their greatest asset.

Because the mind has so much influence on our state of well-being, it is imperative that we make the best use of it. Essentially, the mind functions in two ways: it thinks and it is aware. Many people equate thinking with awareness; literally without giving it much thought. However, if we use a familiar example, we can perhaps convey a very important difference between the two. If, while driving down a very busy highway, you were to focus all of your attention on one car out of a pack of twenty plus automobiles traveling all around you, what do you think would happen? Remember, your focus is only on that one car and what it is doing in relation to your auto. Odds are particularly favorable that all of that attention, concentrated on that one car, will soon bring you into direct conflict with the twenty other automobiles speeding down the road with you. Thinking is singular and it is focused in its essence. It gives too much importance or weight to the one car and not enough attention to the rest of the traffic traveling the road with you.

However, after many years of practice, in all sorts of conditions, you now drive down the same busy highway keenly *aware* of every car, truck, and tractor around you without having to focus on only one vehicle. Your capacity for a safe journey has multiplied and while there are still many vehicles surrounding you, your ability to adjust to an unsafe situation in a crowd has clearly increased because your level of awareness has been honed through hours of practice.

What it comes down to simply is this: the more we think, the less aware we are. When we stop focusing our attention on one thing (thinking) and instead begin to treat everything as a whole, AWARENESS is possible. Thinking is a very limited way to use the mind in that most people cannot really think more than one thought at a time. Awareness, on the other hand, is the power of the mind to perceive multiple actions, sensations, and emotions, simultaneously. It alerts us to imperceptible changes all around us so that we can make necessary adjustments to look after and care for ourselves.

We live in a world that is constantly in flux and in motion. Everything seems to be happening altogether, everywhere at once. Awareness is a

natural ability that helps us cope with this type of multi-layered environment. We are born into this world with the gift of awareness. Studies have shown that a baby is aware of its environment in the womb. Although they cannot see their surroundings, infants hear things and sense things while floating in their watery environment. Emotional distress on the part of the mother will produce a similar response from the infant. Music played for the pre-born has been demonstrated to soothe and comfort a baby awaiting birth. Awareness is instinctual in all of us, it is how we perceive life, and as such, is a much more efficient use for the mind.

In Tai Chi training, there is a great deal of emphasis placed upon keeping the mind calm. By freeing the mind from thought, it is better able to sense what the body is doing and feeling. In this manner, we begin to connect the mind and body together. When the mind cannot calm down, the body will not relax. Only when the mind is calm will it have the awareness to know if posture and balance are correct; and if not, to make the needed adjustments. This practice has a cyclical and cumulative effect. The more improved our posture becomes, the more the body is able to relax; and the more we relax our body, the more we calm our minds.

## **BODY – The Vessel for Life**

Tai Chi is based upon the ability to be aware of Qi. Through our awareness, we gain the opportunity to optimize and make effective use of Qi. The basic principles were designed and tested by many generations of Masters to use the body and mind together to set up the proper conditions that would encourage the uninterrupted flow of Qi. Initially in a student's training, many hours are spent learning the principles of correct posture. This must happen in order to prepare the body for the circulation of Qi to follow. Even as one progresses in their training, the essentials of structure, balance, and coordination are continually being refined and perfected.

The basic principles are what they are; they do not change from style to style or movement to movement. However, there are varying degrees by which students actually internalize these principles in their practice, or

for that matter, into their daily lives. My challenge as a teacher is to continually search for ways to help my students understand these fundamentals, both intellectually and physically. It is this combination of mind and body together that is the foundation of Tai Chi. Ultimately, the only way to achieve the goal of wholeness and unity is through the coordination of mind and body, as one.

As we exist in a physical environment, the body is the container that holds our physical being. We use our body's posture to support and transport ourselves about. However, we also convey our inner presence to the outside world by the manner we use to present ourselves in public. Good posture uses the body in the way it was designed for optimum development, ease of function, and efficiency of movement. This, in turn, helps to increase energy and vitality and contributes to our outward sense of confidence and poise.

Since my background and training in Tai Chi had originally been focused on its use as a martial art, posture is extremely important to me in my classes and seminars. In order to use "Qi" effectively to knock an opponent away from you, you must know how to stand and how to root in order to strike quickly and successfully. Those who have attended any of my workshops will find that the list of "24 Musts" pertaining to posture is always included in the handouts. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of correct posture to high levels of Tai Chi.

The principles of posture are the means by which we establish a strong foundation; what is often referred to as our "root". These principles literally set up the physical structure for our body. Tai Chi is based on Taoist' philosophies which rely on natural laws and adhere to universal truths. As this pertains to posture, it means employing good body mechanics so that we harmonize our movements with the way the body is designed.

We live in an environment held together by gravitational forces. Our bones and muscles are exceptionally suited to working together to endure this perpetual pull of gravity. Although our skeleton is 'jointed' for flexibility, our ability to remain interconnected provides us the proper mechanism to adjust for balance.

Good balance enhances strength and stability. When the body structure is relaxed, balanced, and stable, the connecting muscles are able to function with less effort and we experience ease of movement. However, if the structure is unbalanced and weak, the muscles must work harder to offset the lack of support, causing tension, pain, and fatigue. When our bodies cooperate with gravity and not against it, we are rewarded with balance, flexibility, and endurance. In short, correct posture is synonymous with good balance.

But what is the correct posture and how do we cultivate and assimilate it into our Tai Chi practice? As I mentioned before, in all of my teachings, I present students with the list of “24 Musts”. I use this list as a reference for establishing correct posture.



# The "24 Musts" of correct posture

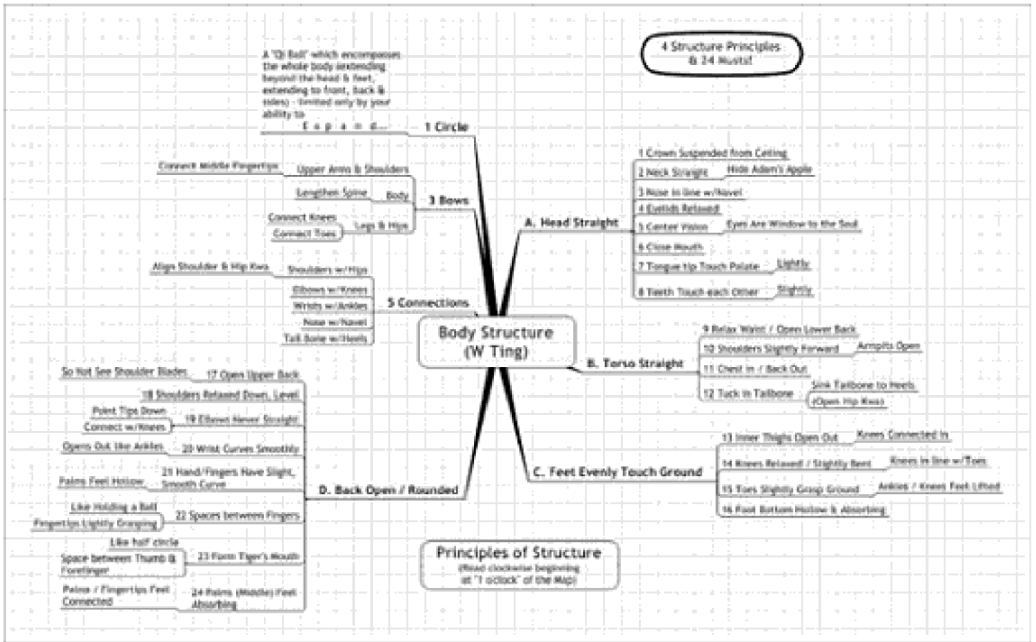


Figure 2: 24 Musts

### 1. Head straight

In the beginning of this chapter, there is a picture of the central line of the body. (see Figure #1). Imagine the top of your head suspended from the ceiling by a single hair. Or try gently balancing a paper napkin on the very top of your head. There is a ring-like bone at the base of the skull that fits over the bony point at the top of the spinal column. By lifting the head to sit lightly on the top of the spine, it will help to relieve tension in the muscles of the face and neck. The position of the head is very important. If the head tilts in any direction; forward, back, or side to side, no matter how incremental, it is out of the central line and therefore, out of balance.

### 2. Neck straight (hide your Adam's apple)

The neck is relaxed and rests comfortably above the shoulders: it is not strained upwards, nor does it slump down. Tuck the chin slightly inward as if you were trying to hide your Adam's apple. This will help you to extend the head to float on the top of the spine. It will also open the space at the base of the skull where the head and neck connect, known in TCM as the "Jade Pillow", allowing Qi to flow smoothly through the spine and head.

### 3. Nose in line with navel

Always keep your nose in line with your navel; this will help to strengthen your center and provide you with a physical point for your central axis. (Refer to Figure #6)

### 4. Eyelids relaxed

The eyelids should be relaxed like a curtain. As the eyelids relax, the mind is able to calm down and release the tension of the body's muscles. The facial muscles also need to be soft and relaxed. As always, your outlook should be aware but not focused. Another reason to curtain the eyes is to hide your intention from others. In a martial arts' sense, this is used for effective defense and offense.

### 5. Center the vision

Set the eyes straight ahead but do not focus outward onto anything in particular. I tell my students to see, without looking; likewise to hear, without listening. By not focusing on any one thing, we cultivate awareness of all things. A centered vision helps to engage our peripheral vision so that we get a better sense of what is going on all around us. This also encourages awareness of our internal environment; our sense of feeling, balance, movement, and

posture. A centered vision pertains to seeing both within and without.

6. Close the mouth.

Keeping the mouth closed will encourage breathing through the nose. Keeping the tongue on the roof of the mouth will allow this to happen naturally. Breathing should be deep, slow, and regular. It is not necessary to manipulate your breathing to synchronize with any movements; eventually this will happen naturally as the mind calms and the body relaxes.

7. Tip of the tongue lightly touches the roof of mouth.

The very tip of the tongue should lightly touch the roof of the mouth along the upper palate directly behind the front teeth. This will encourage one to breathe through the nose and will prevent the mouth from drying out. More importantly, the tongue becomes a bridge which unites the central and governing meridians, the two most important energy channels in the body. Uniting these meridians allows energy to circulate throughout the entire body.

8. Let the teeth slightly touch each other.

However, do not clench the jaw.

9. Torso straight; relax the waist, opening the lower back.

The ability to 'open' the lower back is essential to connecting the upper and lower extremities. It refers to opening the 'gate of life' also known in acupuncture as the Mingmen, a space located below the spinous process of the 2<sup>nd</sup> lumbar vertebrae or a point which can be approximated as opposite the belly button. When this essential area is relaxed and open, the upper and lower parts of the body unite and Qi is able to circulate freely through the spine.

10. Shoulders slightly forward, armpits open, elbows down.

This refers to relaxing the upper body across the shoulder girdle. The shoulder girdle consists of the collar bones and shoulder blades which provide a connection for the arms to the spine. Relaxing and opening this area allows the joints of the arm to expand, not only extending the reach of the arms but also facilitating the flow of Qi through the upper body and out to the fingertips.

11. Chest in, back out

This is formed in combination with #10 whereby the chest curves in just slightly and the back rounds out very subtly creating the illusion of a bow across the upper back.. (See Figure #8) The shoulders are slightly forward and relaxed which lengthens the back muscles across the shoulder and gives a feeling of hollowness to the chest cavity. The relaxation and expansion through

the chest cavity allows the breath to become deeper and fuller.

#### 12. Tuck in the tailbone and sink it to the heels.

This is a pelvic adjustment that opens the lower back by tilting the pelvis backwards and downwards. This movement allows the tailbone to lower and tuck between the legs. This action is directly linked with the action in #9 and both are required to open the lower back. This action will also involve the area of the groin the Chinese refer to as the “Kua” where the legs and torso are joined. This very important area bears the weight of the upper body while also providing a connection for the legs to the center axis or spine. For the smooth transfer of energy and movement through upper and lower body, the Kua must be relaxed, open and expanded. By doing so, we lower the center of gravity and create a sitting feeling in the posture.

### Connection of the Lower Extremities

#### 13. Inner thighs open out, knees connect in, ankles out, toes in.

The thighs expand outward from the hips to the knees in the manner of a bow. This position unlocks the power in the leg and facilitates the feeling of rootedness. The position of the legs provides a very stable platform which permits the back to open fully and the groin muscles to relax, thereby allowing the Kua to open.

Although the knees are physically separated, there is an awareness in the mind of a connection between the knees; both knees turning inward towards each other. It feels as if one were riding a horse. The thighs open to allow the horse in while at the same time, the knees close to hold and control the horse.

Likewise the ankle joints are flexed outward and the toes inwards. The openness increases strength and flexibility and allows for very smooth transitions during movement.

#### 14. Knees relaxed and slightly bent.

There is always a slight flexion of the knees; they are never locked or rigid, especially during movement. The classic Tai Chi books refer to this flexion as “straight within bend and bend within straight.” The correct positioning of the knees helps to stabilize the root. Slightly bending the knees places the body in the “sitting” position. More importantly however, the knees must be flexible in order for the lower back to open.

Along with keeping the knees relaxed and bent, they should also stay in line with the toes. In that way, the legs form a strong base for the upper body;

deviate from that and posture and balance will be out of alignment. When knees are in line with toes, then any incoming force can be directly channeled through the body into the ground. If the alignment deviates, the knee will take the burden of the body's weight as well as any added force.

#### 15. Toes lightly grab the ground.

The feet are extremely important. They support and balance you through the movements; they root you to the earth at the same time. The toes on each foot are flexed downward, lightly grabbing the ground, similar to a cat's claw. *Lightly* grabbing is the key here; clenching the ground with the toes creates tension and cramping throughout the body. When all of the toes touch the ground simultaneously, it provides a lifting action in the ankles and a feeling that the top of the kneecap is slightly rising. While the knees feel as if they are lifting, there should be an opposing feeling in the feet rooting more deeply and the tailbone sinking deeper into the ground.

#### 16. Bottom of the foot is hollow and absorbing.

The body's weight should be evenly distributed over the whole foot. Each toe touches the ground, as does the ball of your foot, the outside edge and the heel. The center sole of the foot is slightly arched, like a suspension bridge, between the ball and heel. This stance allows for the absorption of the earth's energy into the body, through the "Bubbling Well" and contributes to a feeling of the feet being like suction cups stuck to the ground around the edges yet hollow in the center.

## Connection of Upper Extremities

#### 17. Open the upper back so the shoulder blades cannot be seen.

Relaxing the joints of the whole shoulder girdle has another important element. The shoulders expand backwards as the arms extend forwards. It is as if you were trying to put your arms around a huge ball. The back expands by rounding slightly as the chest caves in subtly, creating a bow. (See Figure #8) During practice, you should feel a connection of the arms to the spine between the shoulder blades.

#### 18. Shoulders relaxed down and level.

Keep the elbows down while performing the movements. This helps to relax the shoulders. In practice, this means that the arms feel as if they are resting on a table and/or alternately feel as if they are floating on the surface of water. When the shoulder is relaxed, there should be a slight depression on the top point of the shoulder where it meets the collar bone. If, during practice, you

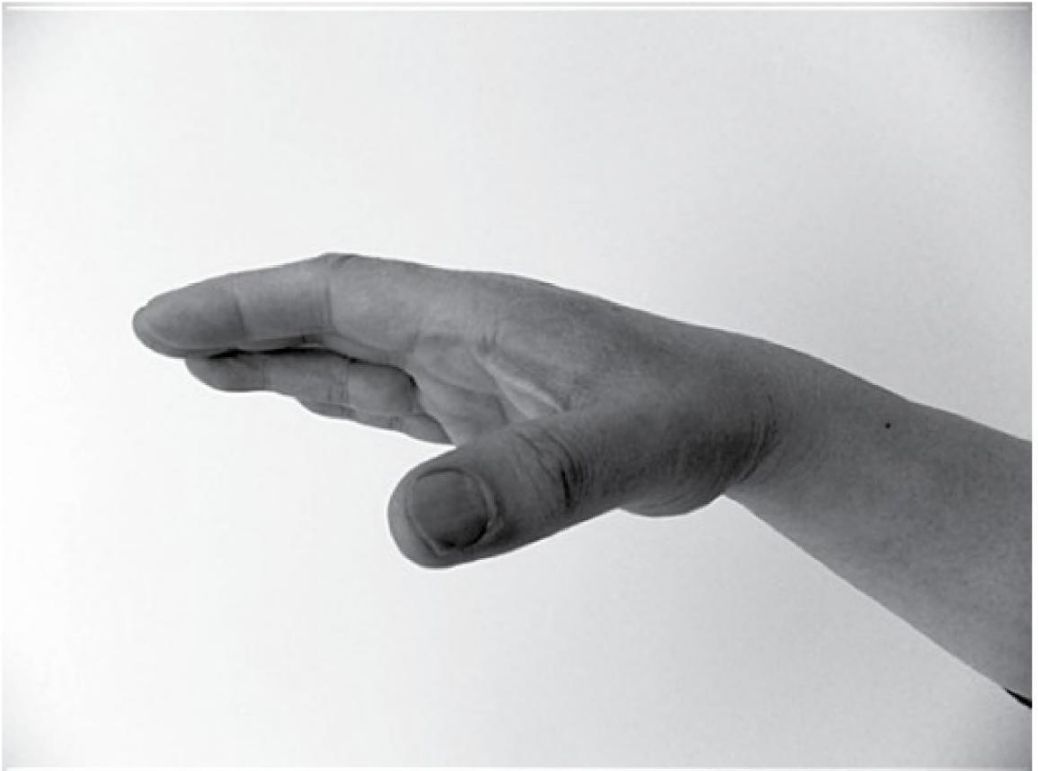
relax your elbows and keep your shoulders down while performing the movements, you should feel the connection of your arms through the point centrally located between the shoulder blades at the midline of the back.

19. Elbows never straight, point tips down and connect with the knees.

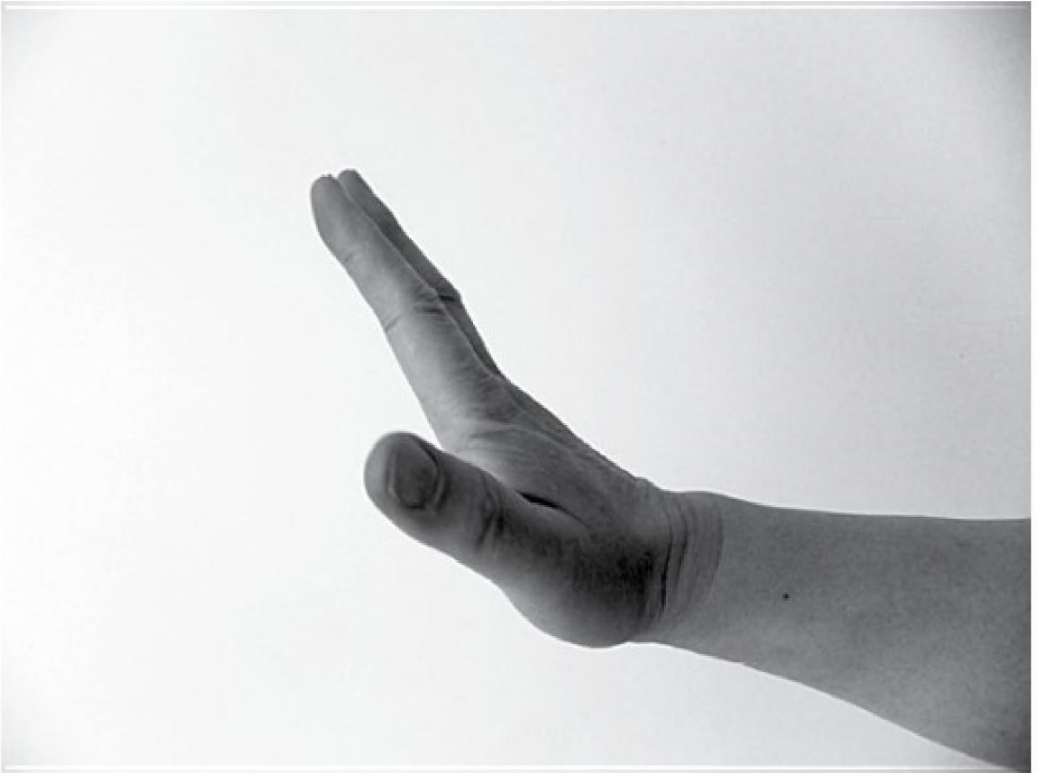
As was noted previously, the relaxation of the shoulder is enhanced by sinking the point of the elbow towards the ground or floor, in all movements. I cannot stress this enough. Sinking the elbow extends the reach of the arms and increases the power and flexibility of the muscles. Mentally, there is a connection between the elbows and knees. There should be a feeling of the elbows dropping to the knees at the same time the top of the knees rise to meet the elbows.

20. The wrists should be open and extended.

Never overly bend the wrist so that there is a pronounced angle where the hand and arm connect. (See Figure #4) Rather smoothly curve the wrist, turning slightly outward like the ankles to provide strength and power through the arm to the hand. (See Figure #3)

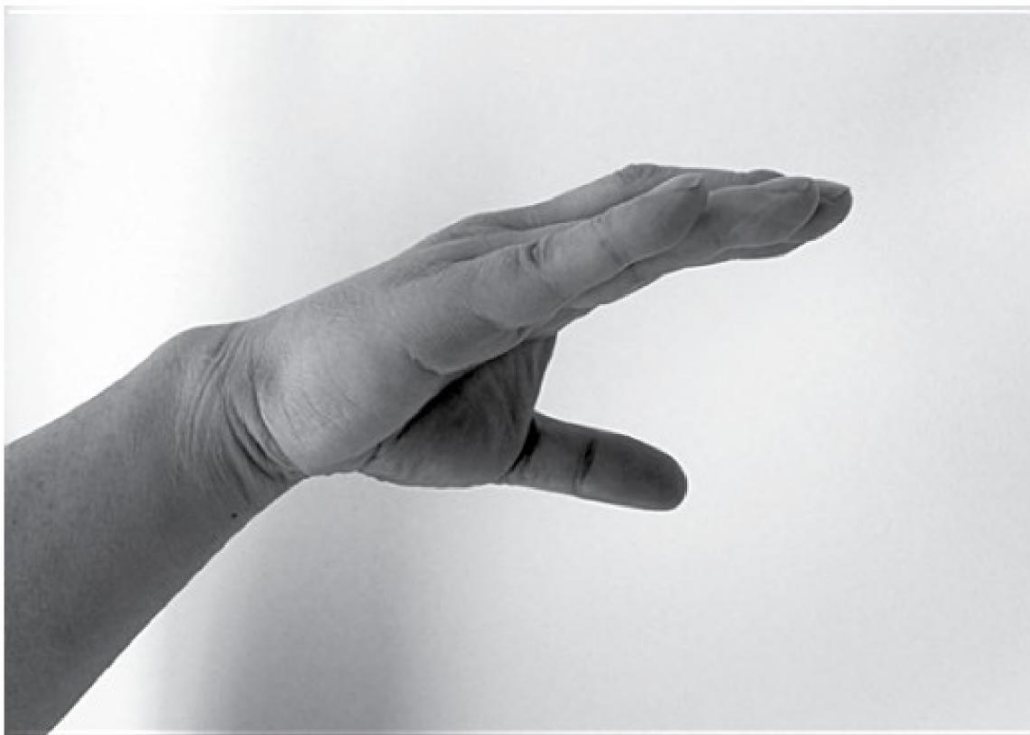


**Figure 3: Hand Extended, Wrist Open and Relaxed**



**Figure 4: Incorrect Positioning  
Wrist over-extended and bent**

21. Hand & fingers have a slight smooth curve; palms feel open, hollow and slightly flexed.



**Figure 5: Positioning of Hand - Mouth of the Tiger**

The hand should feel as if a soccer ball is lightly resting in the palm of the hand. The hand and fingers are always relaxed and flexible, never tense or rigid.

22. You should have a space between the each finger.

The fingers should never be held so closely that they are touching against each other. The relaxation of the hands allows internal power to flow through to the tips of the fingers and prevents injury to the hands.

23. The joint between the thumb and hand is open. (See Figure #5)

The space formed between the thumb and index finger is referred to as the “Mouth of the Tiger”. This space must be open and relaxed in order to allow Qi to flow through the hand.

24. The middle of your palms feels absorbent, opposing palms & fingertips feel connected together. The fingers feel as if both hands are connected together at an imaginary point in the front of the body to form a circle.



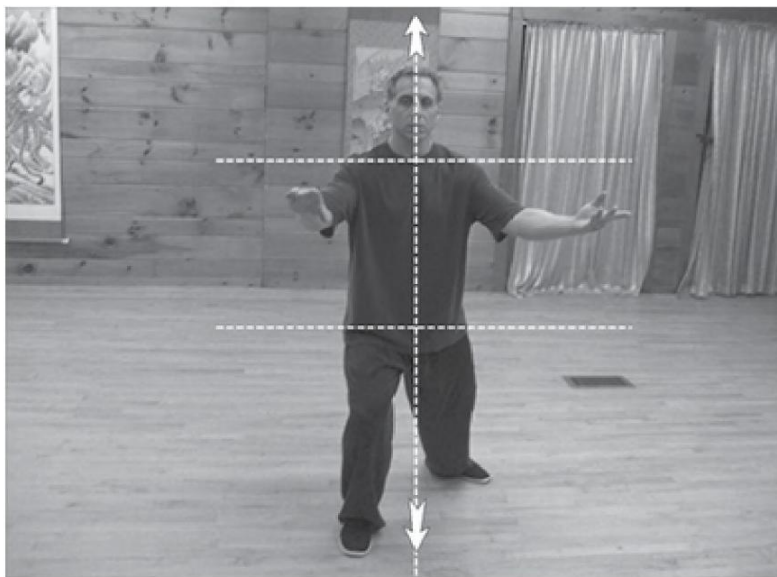
I should note here that most actions culminate with our hands. They are capable of delivering great power and strength, but in order for Qi to be able to flow freely to the fingertips, you cannot allow any tension to be present in the hands. Tension in the hands will transfer tension into the arms and ultimately to the rest of the body. When the hands are relaxed, they will be much more sensitive and resilient, resulting in further relaxation throughout the whole body.

Using the principles of posture set forth in the “24 Musts”, we continue on to the Five Connections, Three Bows and One Circle.

## Five Connections

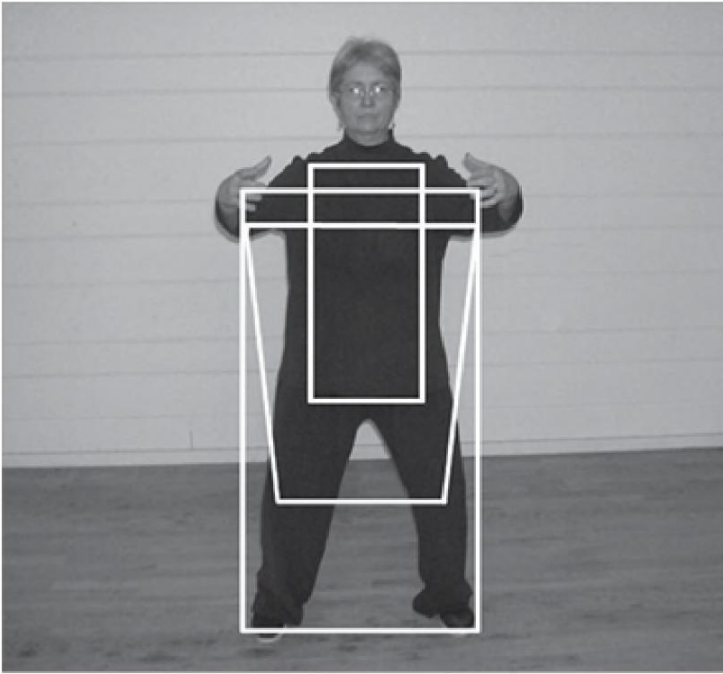
### 1) Shoulders / hips (See Figure #6)

The shoulders always coordinate with the hips. Whenever the hips move, the shoulders follow the same angle and direction. If you draw a line through the axis of the shoulders, it would exactly match a parallel line drawn through the hips. Keeping the shoulders and hips in the same line of rotation maintains the center of gravity with the vertical line between the nose and navel. In addition, because the movement of the shoulders follows the hips, the entire body posture is more unified, stable, and comfortable.



**Figure 6: Shoulders and Hips level - Nose is connected to the Navel**

### 2) Elbows / knees (See Figure #7)



**Figure 7 Essential Connections**

The elbow and knee always move together. In order to maintain this coordination, we visualize the elbow sinking to the knee; the elbow should feel as though it rests upon the knee. At the same time, the knee feels as though it extends upwards to connect to the elbow.

In order to achieve the coordination of the elbow and knee joints, the toes slightly grab the ground so the knee feels as if it rises to meet the elbow. The knee and elbow moving together give the body unity, flexibility, and power.

It is important to remember: in Tai Chi, coordination is as much a mental exercise as it is physical. The knee does not literally connect with the elbow, the elbow does not actually rest upon the knee, however; the awareness of these connections is essential all throughout the movements.

### 3) Fingers / toes (See Figure #7)

The hands coordinate with the feet: the fingers and toes connect. The toes lightly grab the ground like a cat walking, mimicking the lightness and agility of a cat's movements. The hands are open as if they have a soccer ball resting on the palms. The curve of the feet and toes echo the curve of the hands and fingers. If the hands are tense and inflexible, not only will the energy be