

Use the Mind: The Alexander Technique and Taijiquan

by Phyllis G. Richmond

Taijiquan¹ (T'ai Chi Chu'an) has been my Alexander Technique laboratory since 1998. I have studied the Old Yang style of Taijiquan with Ho Chin-Han in Arlington, Texas, for 10 years; traveled to France in 2004, 2005, and 2006 to study with Antoine Ly; and visited Taiwan in 2005, 2007, and 2009 to study with Su Chin-Piao and other teachers. I found the training in Taiwan to be intense, rigorous, demanding—as well as eye-opening and even mind-boggling. There was so much to learn, to digest, to understand, to accept. Studying this traditional Chinese internal martial art has provided an extraordinary opportunity to gain new perspectives on Alexander's discoveries. Some of my most profound Alexander Technique insights occurred while practicing Taijiquan.

My experiences with Taiji have forced me to think deeply about the Alexander Technique, about moving with qi (energy) and not muscle force, about down relative to up, about using the mind to bring about change, about the principles of the Alexander Technique in relation to the practice of Taiji as I understand both disciplines at this time. This last thought is important. I began studying Alexander Technique in 1981 and have been a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique since 1991, but I have been a student of Taiji only since 1998, with much still to learn. Every time I learn something deeper about Taiji, I find that also deepens my understanding of the Alexander Technique.

One hot and humid morning in November 2007, I stood in the sun, beginning my warm-up. I was in Taiwan to study Taijiquan intensively and was paying acute attention to the teacher, the other students, my own thoughts and sensations. I stood upright with my legs hip-width apart; hips, knees, and ankles flexed to 45 degrees, spine vertical with head over tailbone; weight dropping straight down towards the earth; arms hanging loose at my sides; just breathing and releasing tension.

Standing in this “wu ji” position for extended periods of time is a basic Taiji practice for learning to let go of tension, become quiet, develop balance and stability, and build internal power. After I had been standing in “wu ji” for several minutes, the teacher asked me to raise one arm not with muscle force, but with qi (energy). I felt stumped—what did that mean: “lift the arm using the qi”?

At an impasse, I thought, I can only use what I know: inhibition and direction. I stopped thinking about lifting my hand. I softened and quieted my body, released and rooted my legs and feet onto the ground, and allowed my back to expand. I “did” nothing but allowed myself to yield to gravity and let the

arm rise effortlessly. The teacher assented. This was a powerful lesson in undoing and non-doing and unified coordination, one I will never forget. I began to see that what Alexander had discovered correlated with the traditional requirements of Taijiquan.

Internal Martial Art & Mental Strategies for Changing Habits

In this paper, I will discuss important concepts common to both the Alexander Technique and Taijiquan: the Head, Neck, and Back Relationship; Inhibition; Direction; Rooting. But first, here is a little background.

Taiji is an internal martial art with exercises and *forms* (set sequences of movements) to practice and the Alexander Technique is an educational method for learning to change habits through intentional thinking with no forms or exercises to practice. What do a martial art and a series of mental strategies for changing habits have in common? They share principles concerning the coordination of mind and body in optimal functioning.

While the origins of Taiji are the stuff of legend, it seems to have developed gradually over hundreds of years both as a practice for enhancing health and

mental quiet as well as a method of self-defense. Taiji is an *internal* martial art, which means that while externally the body remains relaxed, soft, and yielding, potentially explosive internal power stems from judiciously taking advantage of principles of physics, mechanics, and the architecture of the body.

There are several different schools of Taijiquan (Yang, Chen, Sun, Wu, Cheng Man Ch'ing, etc.), each with its own version of the forms, but all based on the same fundamental principles. The Old Yang style form of 108 moves, which my school teaches, was codified in the 19th and 20th centuries, but some of the material we practice dates from the 16th century and possibly even earlier. New variations on the forms continue to be created today. For example, in China, a modern competition form of 24 moves was created, a form incorporating elements of several traditional styles. At present, Taijiquan is studied in China, Taiwan, and the rest of the world, as both competitive sport and health exercise. In the United States, simplified versions of Taiji that stress health benefits are more common than those that emphasize martial art aspects.

Studying Taiji involves learning, memorizing, and practicing daily a sequence of linked movements, usually ranging from 24 to 108 movements, performed slowly and in a flowing, relaxed manner. The Taiji student also practices qigong, warm-up, and training exercises that inculcate principles, stimulate and regulate the flow of qi, build internal power, and



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prepare for the form. Gradually over time, the teacher clarifies essential principles to deepen the student's practice. These principles are key, not only in the form, but also in daily life.

Once you have learned the form, you focus on incorporating the principles with increasing depth and subtlety over a period of many years. You might also practice *push-hands* along the way or learn weapons forms, such as sword, saber, staff, or fan. Traditionally it takes years to achieve mastery, and mastery is esteemed and considered worthy of dedicated, life-long study. You must practice the form 10,000 times, according to tradition—until the principles and movements become instinctive, deeply embedded in your body and mind, and you can then improvise with them and apply them in real life situations.

The Alexander Technique, in contrast, was developed by one individual who figured out how to change habitual ways of using your mind and body through intentional thinking. It is not a martial art or a method of exercise for health, and it has no form or exercises to practice. It imparts a specific set of strategies for changing habits, and once you learn the strategies, you can apply them to anything that you do. You study, practice, and develop the skill to live by these strategies over a period of years, until inhibition, direction, and primary control are an innate part of who you are and you function accordingly in any situation.

The Head, Neck, and Back

F.M. Alexander's personal experience of poor use led him to discover a basic principle of how the mind and body work together in activity. Through years of experimentation and exploration, Alexander found that the head, neck, and back relationship profoundly affects the coordination of the whole body.

If the head and neck are in a state of dynamic balance, then the muscles of the back have the potential to lengthen and widen, and the whole torso can stretch and expand. When the muscles of the torso are elastic—not rigid and stiff—the ribs can move more fully in breathing, and the joints can move more freely in movement. This elasticity, poise, and mobility facilitate ease and economy of movement in the performance of any activity. When collapse and/or excess tension are reduced, the innate righting responses of the body can function more easily, and it is easier to maintain an upright and centrally balanced carriage, with the head poised lightly on top of the neck. When the anti-gravity mechanisms are working well as described, the legs release the weight onto the ground, grounding the body in gravity. This is a neutral, relaxed, and balanced carriage that makes it easy for the body to be upright and to move.

This organization of the body corresponds to what is considered “correct posture” in Taiji. The carriage of the head is mentioned often in the *Taiji Classics*.² For example, the *Taijiquan Lun* by Wang Zongyue states: *xu ling ding jin*. This phrase is variously translated as “Empty, lively, head-top jin.” Or “Empty the neck, jin at the head-top.”³ This aphorism seems to be saying that if the head and neck are correctly coordinated, empty of undue tension and effort, the energy will rise to the top of the head.

According to Yang Ch'eng-fu in *The Ten Important Points of T'ai-chi Ch'uan*, “The Energy at the Top of the Head Should Be Light and Sensitive. ‘Energy at the top of the head’ means that the head should be carried erect, so that the spirit (shen) will reach to the very top. No strength should be used. If strength is used, then the back of the neck will be stiff and the blood and *ch'i* will not be able to circulate. There should be a feeling of light sensitivity and naturalness. Without this light and sensitive energy at the top of the head, the spirit cannot rise up.”⁴

The *Song of Thirteen Postures*, says “The Weilu (tailbone) is straight and the spirit connects to the head-top; the whole body is light and free-moving, the head-top as if suspended.”⁵ In particular “suspend the head-top” and “light and free-moving body” and “tailbone straight down” would seem to refer to the conditions of coordination characteristically brought about through Alexander Technique lessons.

In these quotes, note the emphasis that the neck should be “empty,” that is, not stiff or tight, but soft and relaxed, with no unnecessary tension, so that the blood and the chi can pass freely through the neck to the top of the head. Undue tension in the head and neck area interferes with coordination and comfort. When there is no undue muscular tension, the chi can flow freely from tailbone to top of head, the head can balance on the top of the spine “as if suspended,” and the individual can move with lightness and ease.

Alexander Technique teachers help the student release the neck so that the head can rest on the top vertebra rotating slightly forward at the atlanto-occipital joint, the balance point, so that the crown of the head is aiming in the lengthening direction of the spine, which corresponds to up away from gravity in vertical standing. When the head is so poised and the back muscles are engaged with appropriate tone, there is a chain of resulting consequences, including the extension of the whole spine, with the tailbone hanging towards gravity as described in the *Song of Thirteen Postures* quote above. The two directions—up of the head and down of the tailbone—and the resulting expanding stretch of the back muscles—are critical to the optimal functioning of the body in movement.



Phyllis Richmond, Su Chin-Piao and Ho Chin-Han

When these conditions of *use* establish the stance and coordination desired in the practice of Taiji, the Taiji student can utilize universal principles of physics effectively in movement. For example, when the muscles are functioning in an expanded structure in a released, lengthening, widening manner, they act like a spring. You can wind up the spring by spiraling the body to the right around the central axis of the spine against the stable base of the feet, then release the spring so that the body returns to the left with no muscular effort—like shooting a bow: Potential energy is stored in the stretch and springs into movement as kinetic energy on the release. As another example, you can swing the arms in a large vertical circle, like a pendulum—there is a momentary suspension at the top of the arc, when all the forces are in balance, then the arm falls downward, continuing the arc, releasing kinetic energy that allows the arm to rise up the other side of the arc effortlessly. This does not require a lot of muscular force—just enough to wind up the spring or set the pendulum in motion.

Practicing Taiji with poor use expends unnecessary and misapplied energy that interferes with performance. Practicing Taiji with poor use is incorrect Taiji. Correct Taiji assumes a good head/neck/back/tailbone relationship as the axis for movement—the central equilibrium to which one always returns, from which one can use the body like a spring.

Inhibition/Fang Song

Releasing unnecessary tension is a basic concept in Taiji as well in the Alexander Technique. The Taiji term, *song* or *fang song*, is often translated as “relax,” but means literally, make loose or loosen. It is mentioned often in the classic Chinese texts of Taijiquan, and in practice it is essential. All movement in Taijiquan stems from release of the muscles or *fang song*. You must relax the muscles to move from the qi, not from brute strength. In the expression of power, release is the essential foundation. Everything else follows.

Yang Cheng-fu’s *Ten Important Points* states: “In practicing T’ai-chi Ch’uan the whole body is relaxed. If we can eliminate even the slightest clumsiness that creates blocks in the sinews, bones, and blood vessels and restricts our freedom, then our movements will be light, nimble, circular, and spontaneous.”⁶

We need some muscle tension to do work—that is, after all, what muscle contraction is—but we want to reduce the tension to only that which is necessary, no more, no less. We want the muscles to release unnecessary tension so they are working most efficiently without any undue or excess effort in the performance of activity. For most of us, this involves a lot of letting go!

In Alexander’s experience, the unnecessary tension that caused his vocal problems began to build even before he began to recite, merely as a preparation for activity. He had to learn to stop reacting to the idea of reciting by creating the excess tension. He had to learn to “do nothing,” remain quiet, not tense his muscles, not respond in the usual way. When he learned to stop reacting the habitual way in response to the thought of reciting, then something new and different could happen.

A nerve can either transmit a signal to act, *excitation*, or not to act, *inhibition*. It can’t do both at the same time. To change coordination, first you have to stop sending messages along the familiar wrong pathways before you can send them down the right ones; for example, if you are walking upstairs but you decide to go downstairs, first you must stop walking upstairs before you can go downstairs.

Alexander wrote: “My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.”⁷ You can make the choice to do or not do, to channel energy either one way or another. You can say “No” to a habitual reaction in order to say “Yes” to a more constructive response. In other words, you have a choice in how you react.

How does inhibition relate to *fang song*? As we practice Taiji, we would like to relax the whole body top to bottom, inside to outside. We can make the choice to inhibit tension—*fang song*—as we move, loosening and softening muscles while they are working, undoing unnecessary tension that interferes with smooth coordination and mental quiet. This is “thinking in activity;” that is, engaging in not doing what we don’t want and promoting good use of the body as we go along in activity, not just before or after. Even in stillness, this activity of non-doing is going on. Undoing is an active process that creates the possibility of “emptiness” and allows the flow of qi. It is energized release, not passive collapse.

The ongoing release of unnecessary tension, effort, and control is a pre-condition for correct Taiji. All movement begins with release—let go, sink, and release energy into movement. There are constant subtle, tiny, ongoing adjustments, moment by moment; far too much is happening to be consciously micro-managed. Everything moves, like a flowing river, the water constantly changing shape, adapting to the environment it flows through. Letting go of micromanagement of movement requires non-doing, undoing, and allowing. Inhibition is the Alexander means for continually releasing unwanted tension in the body (*fang song*) during the

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Ho Chin-Han and Phyllis Richmond practicing push-hands

“The aim is to remain relaxed, light, soft, and yielding in order to neutralize and redirect the partner’s push....”

practice of Taiji. When the body is released, the energy flows better, and it is possible to move more efficiently and correctly without micromanaging the coordination.

In practicing the form, once you have learned the rules and can perform the sequence of movements accurately, the next step is to let go of excess tension and get out of the way, so the movements can flow smoothly in accordance with physical principles—gravity, momentum, the rotational movement at the joints, the wind-up tension/release of a spring. First, learn the rules of the form and understand thoroughly what you are doing and why. Then allow yourself to move freely, in accordance with natural principles.

Another way to improve your ability to release tension in activity is through the practice of *push-hands* with a partner. Working in contact with a partner gives you a more objective experience of how well you are releasing or tensing; and, in addition, your partner helps you assess and improve your skill.

For example, during one basic exercise, partners stand face to face, A's right foot forward and opposite B's right foot, with A's palm lightly touching B's forearm. The touching arms describe a horizontal circle between the two torsos. As A "pushes" B, A's palm touches B's forearm, B turns his/her waist causing the arms to circle and as the circle turns, it becomes B's turn to push with B's palm lightly resting on A's forearm. Inhibition is of the highest importance if one is to understand and master the art of push-hands. When A is leading by "pushing" B, B may tend to stiffen and resist, but this is not what push-hands requires. Instead of stiffening, B should yield to A's push, following the flow of A's movement without resistance, then, by turning his torso, B redirects A into harmoniously continuing the circle with B leading.

Push-hands is the first step towards Taiji as a martial art. The Taiji student practicing push-hands trains not to react with undue emotion, excitement, or resistance. The aim is to remain relaxed, light, soft, and yielding in order to neutralize and redirect the partner's push; ultimately, the aim is to be as insubstantial as air, so that when A pushes B, A cannot feel B, since B, while staying in contact with A, retreats, moves away, disappears as light as air. Partners help each other test and improve the ability to empty the body of unnecessary tension and undo habits of interference while engaging in this complex activity that involves the stimulus of working in tune with (or kinesthetically "listening to") another person.

While the Taoist idea of yielding—not to resist or fight with force, but instead to yield, neutralize, redirect—sounds easy, in reality yielding requires a great deal of inhibition; push-hands beginners often react instinctively by tensing and pushing back at the point of contact.

Taiji training can be seen as a challenging process of learning to apply inhibition in a practical situation so that movement can be in harmony with universal natural principles. Only by releasing unnecessary tension can we be nimble and light—ready to respond quickly and adjust, both physically and mentally, as circumstances require. Only by undoing can you allow principles of physics and biomechanics to work most efficiently in your movement. Only by undoing can you develop a "root."



Wu ji position
 "Standing as an exercise develops the root...."

Rooting

I have had the opportunity to place my hands on the backs of several Taiji masters. The first time I did this, in 2005, I was astonished. I had never felt such a powerful, non-doing, released downward flow of energy. It ran counter to my understanding of the importance of "up." Master Su Chin-Piao was going "up" but he was also very clearly going "down." This powerful "down" I understood to be the rooting so essential to correct Taiji practice. Now I have come to understand that rooting is as important as "going up" for effective use of the hands in Alexander Technique teaching. And yet we often do not pay as much attention to the direction that balances up: down.

One of the fundamental training exercises in Taiji is standing for extended periods of time in the basic positions that occur in the form. As you inhibit unnecessary muscular tension and allow your weight to drop through your bones yielding to gravity, the postural reflexes bring about enough tone to extend you up away from the planet easily. Standing this way helps establish a foundation of accuracy, understanding, stability, central equilibrium, strength, and internal power. Standing as an exercise develops the *root*—like the root of a tree—the ability to let gravity work through you effectively in any position or situation to maintain flexible stability, so you can move, shift, adjust, or respond without losing your central equilibrium and your connection to the ground. How do you develop a root? You "do" nothing!

The most basic standing exercise for developing a root is "wu ji," the exercise I described at the beginning of this paper. In wu ji, the legs are parallel and hip-width apart; hips, knees, and ankles are flexed; knees and feet aiming forward. This

position of the legs is called horse stance (*ma pu*)—like a rider mounted on a horse. The legs are bent either a few inches or until the thighs are parallel to the ground, making no more than a 90 degree angle with the lower leg at the knees. The arms are raised to shoulder height and rounded at the elbows and wrists so that the middle fingers meet in front of the sternum. The back is long and vertical, the chin down and the tailbone slightly tucked under to lengthen the back like a bow, the *kua* (hip joints) flexed or "folded." The top of the head aims up, the head aligns over

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the pelvis over coccyx, directly over the feet. The eyes gaze forward unfocused, the mind is quiet and empty. The student may be asked to stand in this position anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or so. The difficulty of this exercise is increased by standing lower and/or standing longer in position.

It is challenging to stay in this position for more than a few minutes and not tense the shoulders, low back, hips, and legs. The muscles—especially the leg muscles—want to stiffen in order to hold the posture. This stiffening of the muscles is painful, which distracts the mind so that it is focused on the pain, tension, and difficulty. In order to stand for extended periods of time without pain and injury, it is essential to release the musculature as much as possible, yet maintain the position.

Instead of struggling and forcing yourself to stay in place, you can say *no* to the tension and instead choose to release the neck, let the head go forward and up, allow the back to lengthen and widen, and the legs and arms to release out and away. This provides the centrally balanced, neutral posture and ease of movement that are fundamental to Taiji. When the body is released, the energy flows better, and it is possible to stand and move more efficiently and correctly and to free the mind to rise above the physical sensation. The release of unnecessary tension is a pre-condition for rooting, for the flow of energy, for mental quietness, and for the development of internal power. This is undoing in action.

We need gravity to pull us towards the center of the earth—so we don't float away in space—providing the stimulus for our bodies to extend up away from gravity. For these innate *upthrust* reflexes to function most efficiently, we must work with gravity rather than resist it, allowing our muscles to release, stretch, and lengthen to take us up rather than to stiffen and immobilize us so we cannot respond flexibly to the need or desire to move. The direction *down* identified as gravity pulling the body into the center of the earth establishes where *up* is in space, and it is a pre-condition for *up* in the body.

As Alexander Technique teachers, if we are not rooted, not going *down* efficiently, we cannot easily release our arms and hands *up* to give an expansive stimulus to a student. We must root and release the legs and feet into gravity and allow the back to expand and stretch open as we lift and place our hands in contact with another human being for the stimulus to be non-intrusive and effective.

These Taiji exercises provided a tremendously demanding challenge to my ability to release despite the desire to react to the distracting pain of maintaining the pose by stiffening and holding my muscles. But the holding caused the pain, and once I could release some of the tension, the pain receded—and I got much stronger. This is training by the overload principle: sink or swim, antithetical to our much gentler approach. But as Ho Chin-Han, my Taiji teacher here in Texas, likes to say, “There is something there. It is not nonsense.” I learned something profound from experiencing this rigorous practice, common in traditional martial arts training in Asia.

I think about this in my own Alexander teaching, for example, when I stay in monkey (Alexander's position of mechanical advantage) for extended periods of time. Teaching in monkey is a classic challenge to the powers of inhibition: it calls for releasing muscles, yet maintaining a posture, and meanwhile

putting hands on and paying attention to the student. The appropriate use of the body in monkey stimulates continued expansion and stretch of the muscles, facilitating the on-going hands-on effectiveness of the teacher.

Direction

F.M. Alexander defined *direction* as: “the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms.”⁸ By “mechanisms,” he was referring to all the anatomical structures and neurological connections required for any activity. In other words, you think and send energy necessary for the intention to happen. Mind and body are inextricably linked in activity. You think, intend, and project messages to yourself that allow and encourage freedom and harmonious coordination in activity.

For example, if you lift your arm, you must have an intention and energy and you must have bones and muscles. The way you lift your arm depends on how you think about lifting your arm. On the most basic level, the degree of tension and the kind of coordination you think you need to lift your arm determines how you perform

that act. As in Taiji, the mind leads and the body follows. You use your consciousness to monitor and eliminate unnecessary effort as you go along, taking care of *how* you are doing something as you go about doing it. You use the mind, not mindless strength, to bring about change.

It is stated many times in the Taiji Classics that the *xin*, the heart and mind together, through the medium of the *qi*, control the body. In Chinese medicine and meditation techniques, it is accepted that one can influence and direct the flow of *qi* by visualizing, imagining, or thinking it. Here are relevant quotes from classic Taiji literature:

“Use the Mind and not the strength.”⁹ (“Ten Important Points of T'ai-chi Chuan,” Yang Cheng-fu)

The Taiji Classics emphasize that we should not use brute strength to force something to happen, but instead that we should let the mind lead the body. We influence the flow of *qi* with directed thought. This is not thinking in the sense of rational discourse or of logical schemes of thought—but rather of intention or desire or simply direction of intention. The mind makes sure that you are not using brute strength to move, and monitors and empties out habits of self-created interference so that the body is free to follow the intention.

“By using the *xin* to move the *qi* and make it sink, it can then gather and permeate into the bones. By using the *qi* to move the body and make it compliant, it can easily follow the *xin*.”¹⁰ (“Exposition of Insights into the Thirteen Postures.”)

“First in the *xin*, then in the body.”¹¹ (“Exposition of Insights into the Thirteen Postures.”)

“Yi and *qi* are the lord, the bones and flesh are the subjects.”¹² (“Thirteen Postures Song.”)

Learning Taiji, we are developing latent abilities that depend on the correct functioning of the body working in accordance with natural principles. When we are fulfilling

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all the physical prerequisites for correct Taiji in terms of our use and coordination, then we can utilize principles of physics and mechanics—for example, momentum, gravity, potential energy, oppositional spirals—to move without interference. The mind keeps the body free, and guides and facilitates harmonious movement.

In Conclusion: Use the Mind

In conclusion, there are parallels between the Alexander Technique’s fundamental use of the mind to influence the body through inhibition, direction, and the head/neck/back relationship and the Taiji principles discussed above.

Inhibition

How to stop doing something. How to prevent something from happening. If you are turning Right and want to turn Left, first you’ve got to stop turning Right. If you are singing C and want to sing B, first you’ve got to stop singing C. You’ve got to stop doing things mindlessly and give yourself the opportunity and the time to make a change. This conscious undoing corresponds to *fang song*, to releasing tension and choosing not to react with inappropriate tension or mental or emotional excitement while practicing Taiji, even under duress. The release of tension is fundamental to the practice of correct Taiji. Only when the body is relaxed and energized and the mind is quiet and alert can we utilize gravity, momentum, and the spiraling, opening, and closing of the body to create power. Ultimately because Taiji is a martial art, the practitioner must remain cool under pressure, in order to respond appropriately in a situation requiring self-defense. If you stiffen, you lose. One teacher suggested that practicing the form in a shopping mall would be a good way to learn not to react with anxiety to a stressful situation. In this little experiment, you can test and train the ability to practice Taiji comfortably and normally whatever the situation.

Direction

How to consciously guide intention, attention, and energy during activity so that the body is elastic and responsive rather than collapsed or stiff. First you inhibit the habit—a mental process—then you choose to use the body better through *direction*. A direction is both an order or instruction and the course along which something is aimed—both an intention and a spatial direction. This kind of directed spatial thinking allows us to take care of ourselves while we are in action and corresponds to using the mind’s intent to free the body and allow the qi to move the body in Taiji.

Organizing the balance of the head in relation to the rest of the body

Alexander found that the relationship of the head, neck, and back is the key to good *use*. Alexander called this head/neck/back relationship the Primary Control, because it is the first requirement in a chain of events that culminates in better functioning or *use*. This corresponds to traditional correct posture in Taiji, which is not a static concept, but key to

organizing the whole body in dynamic central equilibrium around a stable axis of movement, that is both rooted and fluid, adjusting as necessary.

Yin and Yang

According to Taoist theory, the cosmic interplay of primary opposites *yin* and *yang* create the “ten thousand” things that make up the universe. *Yin* is soft, accepting, yielding, *Yang* is aggressive, hard, penetrating. Yin and yang are always in the process of transforming: yin is always becoming yang and yang is always becoming yin. For example, in the natural world, night becomes day becomes night; winter becomes spring, summer, fall, winter, and so on—infinity, continuously changing. Practicing Taiji is to be engaged in continuous play with the transformation from yin to yang on a personal level, from hard to soft, open to closed, stillness to movement, inside to outside, and continuously back again. The balance is constantly changing, shifting...everything moves, like water. This fluidity is only possible if the Taiji player is moving in a way that is not too yang, not too yin, not too hard, not too

“Use the Mind and not the strength.”
—Yang Ch'eng-fu

soft, and open to change.

Both the Alexander Technique and Taijiquan teach the student to find a balance between excitation and inhibition, between non-doing and doing, activity and stillness, yin and yang. The Alexander Technique emphasizes man’s supreme inheritance: the freedom to choose change, which makes mental and physical balance possible. The Alexander Technique provides a set of mental strategies that can be utilized to eliminate self-created interference and allow the development of the ease, relaxation, poise, and the mental and physical flexibility that support the development of good Taiji.

Taiji, a Taoist art, is about being in harmony with the Tao, the Way—the processes and principles that are the foundation for our universe. Taiji trains the ability to release and be quiet: to root, center, and balance; to utilize fundamental principles of physics and biomechanics in movement; to guide qi—and from that mix springs the martial art. Through practicing set sequences of movement, the Taiji student trains to take advantage of universal forces found in physics and mechanics.

Key to developing the ability to move in harmony with nature are: the optimal organization of head, neck, back, and tailbone; learning to release tension in activity; and the ability to direct energy.

Ultimately, on the most advanced level there is no need to think consciously about this—thinking is a tool: when you don’t need it any more, throw it away. The

individual who is in harmony with the Tao gets out of the way and allows the experience of harmony to happen. According to my teachers, this kind of awareness can only be understood through practice—the experience is the essence. As Lao Tsu, the Chinese philosopher, wrote in the sixth century B.C.: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.”¹³

When an actor performs Shakespeare, the words have been around for a long time and it is up to the actor to embody them, free them, and make them come alive as her own. Similarly, in Taiji the form is set. Through years of careful, disciplined practice and increasing depth of understanding, you learn to

embody the rules and make them your own, until you are free to move harmoniously and powerfully in tune with the physical principles that undergird our world. A lively spine and freely flowing energy link thought to movement. The student can act and react without the interference of unnecessary tension or mental chatter that obstructs smooth coordination in response to thought.

For one brief moment on that hot afternoon in Taiwan, I gave up struggling and simply was present, standing in wu ji, raising my arm without any force. It was easy. In Taiji this is called “wu wei,” effortless action; in the Alexander Technique, non-doing is simply the basis of everything.

太 Tai
極 Ji
拳 Quan

Traditional Chinese: 太極拳

Simplified Chinese: 太极拳

Pinyin: Taijiquan

Wade-Giles: T'ai Chi Ch'uan

Literal translation: supreme
ultimate fist

common earlier system was Wade-Giles, which dates from 1859. I have chosen to use pinyin in this paper; however, some of the quotes and references use other systems. For those quotes and references, I've used the spelling from that system. For example, the Chinese characters transliterated as Taijiquan in pinyin are spelled T'ai Chi Chuan or T'ai Chi Chu'an in Wade-Giles.

2. The Taiji Classics are the oral teachings and written manuscripts of the Taiji tradition passed down from teacher to students over generations. To the best of my knowledge, the Taiji Classics were first translated into English and published in the West in the 20th century.
3. Barbara Davis, *The Taijiquan Classics* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 2004), 56, 109.
4. Douglas Wile, *T'ai Chi Touchstones: Yang Family Secret Transmissions*, trans. (New York: Sweet Chi Press, 1983), 11.
5. Davis, *The Taijiquan Classics*, 146.
6. Wile, *T'ai Chi Touchstones*, 12.
7. F.M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living*, (1941; Long Beach: Centerline Press, 1986), 114.
8. F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, (1932; London: Gollancz, 1988), 35.
9. Wile, *T'ai Chi Touchstones*, 12.
10. Davis, *The Taijiquan Classics*, 79, 123.
11. *Ibid.*, 137.
12. *Ibid.*, 82, 138.
13. Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, (New York: Vintage, 1989), 3. There are many translations of Lao Tsu's work. This one uses less obscure language than many others that I have read.

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Endnotes:

1. Note on spelling Chinese words: The Chinese language is made up of more than 70,000 unique characters, each representing a word. There is no phonetic alphabet in Chinese. When you read a character, you cannot be sure of the correct pronunciation from seeing the character unless you have some basic knowledge of the language. There have been several systems devised for writing Chinese words in the Roman alphabet, so that westerners can read and pronounce the language without recognizing the characters. The most common Romanization system today is pinyin, developed in Mainland China in 1958; the most