

# Travelling with Tai Chi

When I first started T'ai Chi Ch'uan in my home town in South Africa, my instructor told me that he taught the Yang style of T'ai Chi, which he said was the most popular world-wide, so that his students could travel and study T'ai Chi internationally.

Sure enough, almost a year later, my travels have brought me into contact with many Yang schools of T'ai Chi, with classes held in school halls, gymnasiums and fitness centres, martial arts colleges, community and religious halls.

My first discovery was that the Yang styles within the Yang style were as diverse and different as the venues in which they were held, and the instructors who were teaching them. I discovered as many styles of Yang T'ai Chi as I did Yang T'ai Chi instructors.

Certainly there are similarities. Short and long forms aside, the moves follow more or less the same sequence, and each move has more or less the same name. Be it golden rooster or golden chicken or golden pheasant, pat the horse high or high pat on horse, needle sea bottom or needle at the bottom of the sea, cloud hands or wave hands like clouds. I could recognise and name the moves performed by each of the schools. However, my imperfect personal performance was hard put to try and adapt to the different variations I encountered.

It was through this exercise that I discovered that to progress in T'ai Chi, I had to change my attitude. I was attached to my original Yang within Yang style because I had personalised and experienced it, and in my own limited way, understood some of it. Because of that I believed it was THE way - but I did eventually learn that there was no particular correct style, and that each instructor was leading you via their own personal path, with their own personal skills and weaknesses, to the best of their ability. But more importantly, I came to realise that

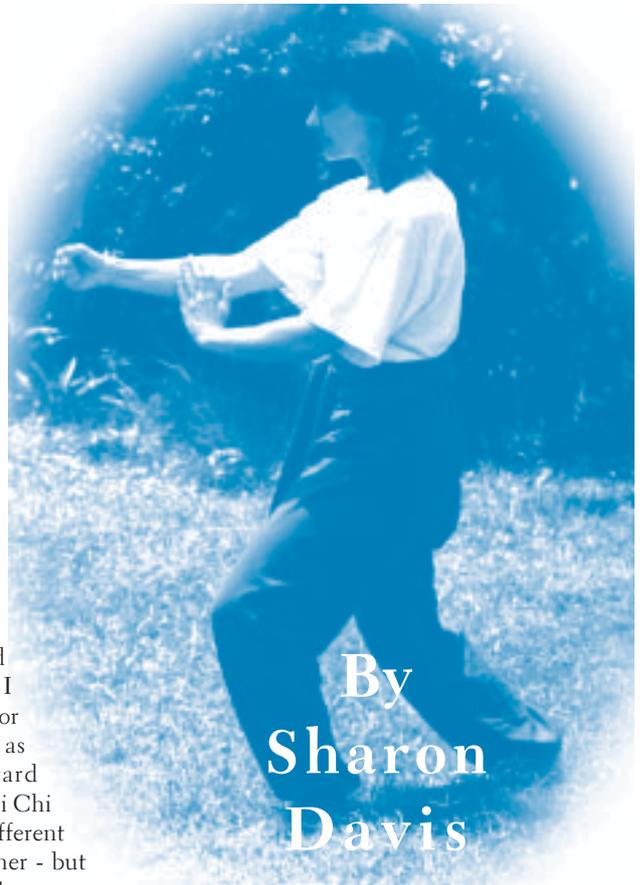
each of these variations had something to offer me. If I were open to it, each instructor could teach me something - as we were all heading toward greater understanding of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. The route there is different for each and every practitioner - but the intended destination is the same.

Regrettably this enlightened attitude only developed over time, and after a number of encounters with instructors, who I labelled as uninformed, incompetent, and followed that with many other unfair judgements. When in fact it was my ignorance that made them so, and only in my eyes.

It was a humbling experience to come to terms with the fact that there are many roads to the T'ai Chi experience. As soon as I learned to look past the differences, and stopped comparing one variation to another, I realised I had so very much to learn. Suddenly in the broader scope of T'ai Chi it didn't make a difference whether your back foot was at 45 degrees in fall back and twist like monkey or straight, and it mattered even less if you called it simply repulse monkey. It didn't matter if your style instructed you to turn and look back during the move or to continue to look unwaveringly forward.

Putting those variations aside I discovered for myself the most important breakthrough in my understanding of T'ai Chi - the similarities. These similarities translate into the basic principles of T'ai Chi. The underlying cornerstones of our art - no matter whether it is a Yang variation, Wu, Lee or any other style you are looking at - the principles are the same.

To relax and sink. To move the limbs and body in unison, ending at the same point. To direct the movements from the waist. It suddenly became so clear. A good flowing performance of my original style was not



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T'ai Chi - it was exercise, but not necessarily T'ai Chi. I was awakened to the need to go back and double check my style - not the intricacies of what angle my foot was at, should I be looking north or north-east - but was I doing T'ai Chi, or going through the motions of a stylised exercise. The burning question was, had I lost T'ai Chi in my quest for form and understanding.

As I am relatively new to T'ai Chi I do not feel that it is my place to elaborate on the principles and how to apply them. It is also not my intention to imply that the variations in styles are not important. Certainly, they make an interesting study and often reflect new concepts that can be brought into your own style and add further dimensions. However, I do wish to emphasise that the similarities in style - those things that point to what T'ai Chi really is, is what is really important. To go back to the basic fundamentals of posture, movement and thought - is to re-discover T'ai Chi anew.

Most accomplished T'ai Chi practitioners list 13 basic principles of T'ai Chi. I have taken the liberty of reproducing a couple of such lists - with the intention once again of highlighting the similarities not the differences. As well as providing a reference to concentrate upon on our individual travels toward the discovery of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

The first is from my notes made from reading: *The Chinese Art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan* By Chee Soo - 1984 Aquarian Press  
*I hope this will assist fellow travellers on the road to T'ai Chi, no matter how far along*

### **The Golden Principles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan**

1. Keep your body erect without stiffness
2. Everything about you should be completely relaxed, especially the mind
3. Maintain the heel and toe principles for all foot movements
4. Co-ordinate the movements of the upper and lower halves of the body
5. Harmonise the internal and external physical aspects of the body
6. Ensure that there is continuity of movement at all times, and that movements follow a curve or circular form. Movements are never straight lines in T'ai Chi Ch'uan
7. Study the many Taoist breathing exercises
8. Learn to breath deeply through your lower abdomen, and keep your tongue against the roof of your mouth
9. Extend and let your vitality flow on all outward movements
10. Recall and relax your vitality power flow on all inward movements
11. Live the Ch'ang Ming way (Taoist macrobiotics)
12. Study the laws of life within the realms of the spiritual path (Tao).
13. Study the use and harmonisation of the vitality power and macro-cosmic energy, which are the internal and external, physical and spiritual energies

*A constant appraisal of ones performance in the light of the basic principles should be part of ones training routine. No matter how accomplished a T'ai Chi practitioner you are you can still improve on your technique - and that will invariably stem from concentrating on the 'basics'. To avoid merely exercising or sighing away your time, I have included The Song of the Thirteen Postures as a gentle reminder of the importance of the basic tenants that can be found in almost every style or form of T'ai Chi world-wide.*

### **The Song of the Thirteen Postures**

Never neglect any of the thirteen postures.  
The source of will is in the waist.  
Pay attention to the slightest change from full to empty.  
Let the Chi flow through the whole body constantly.  
Stillness embodies motion, motion stillness.  
Seek stillness in motion.  
Surprising things will happen when you meet your opponent.  
Give awareness and purpose to your every movement.  
When done correctly all will appear effortless.  
At all times pay attention to the waist.  
With the abdomen loose and light, the Chi can be activated.  
If the coccyx is erect, the Shen rises to the top of the head.  
The body should be pliable.  
Hold the head as if suspended from a string.  
Be alert and seek meaning in the purpose of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.  
Bent and stretched, open and closed,  
Let nature take its course.  
Beginners are guided by oral teaching.  
Gradually one applies oneself more and more.  
Skill will take care of itself.  
What is the main principle of T'ai Chi Ch'uan?  
The mind is the primary actor and the body the secondary one.  
What is the purpose and philosophy behind T'ai Chi Ch'uan?  
Rejuvenation and prolonging of life beyond the normal span.  
So an eternal spring.  
Every word of this song has enormous value and importance.  
Failing to follow this song attentively, you will sigh away your time.

*This list was the list I received from my first teacher, with some of my own elaborations.*

### **Guidelines for Practice**

1. Relax - there should be no tension in the muscles
2. Sink - lower weight to tan tien and learn to root
3. Erect sacrum - tuck bum in to straighten out spine
4. Head straight and as if suspended from above
5. T'ai Chi Hand - straight but not stiff
6. Slumped shoulders
7. Depressed chest - shoulders slightly forward and chest rounded
8. Knees bent - not beyond toes
9. Move slowly, gracefully and continuously
10. Lead movements with the mind, direct them from the waist (tan tien)
11. Breathe slowly, and deeply into the tan tien
12. Avoid double-weightedness - keep most of the weight on one leg
13. Mind to be calm but alert

*This list is taken from the notes I took on reading Yang T'ai Chi Ch'uan by John Hine 1992 - A&C Black Publishers Ltd ISBN 0 7136 3576 2*

### **How to Practice T'ai Chi**

1. Use the conscious mind to guide the movements - mind to lead the movements
2. Relaxation - do not slump, but use only enough energy to perform the movements correctly
3. Mind and body co-ordination - unite the body and the mind in intent to perform moves
4. Weight distribution - The T'ai Chi form is in constant flux between empty and full steps. The foot which has most weight upon it is said to be full, the one which carries least weight is said to be empty
5. Breathe and move from the tan tien
6. Hold the head as if suspended from above, and move it in unison with the body
7. Shoulders should hang without bending upper spine
8. The chest and abdomen should be relaxed and allow the breathing to sink to the tan tien
9. Keep the spine straight and relaxed. The lower back should be straightened by gently tucking the bottom under
10. The arms should not touch the sides of the body, and maintain a fist gap under the armpit. The elbow should hang down and never straightened completely
11. Perseverance - practice every day.
12. Movements should be slow, smooth and constant
13. Always keep your knees bent, and keep the same height

*that road, in realising the importance of the fundamental principles, the basic path we all try to follow. Happy travelling with T'ai Chi, and I look forward to meeting many of you along the way.*

### **Request for information on health benefits of Tai Chi**

*While I am well aware of the martial application of Tai Chi, I also want to use my knowledge to help others, the majority of whom are more motivated by potential health benefits than by protecting themselves. I am looking for information - either references to books or tests conducted on the health benefits of Tai Chi to assist me in a programme I will be starting in South Africa in 1999.*

Please send information to: [wushin@mweb.co.za](mailto:wushin@mweb.co.za)  
or by post to:- PO Box 5193, Durban 4001, South Africa.  
I would be obliged if you would help me to help others.

**Sharon**