

# Tai Chi Chuan

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YANG LU-CHAN  
*founder*



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*2nd generation*



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*3rd generation*



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*4th generation*



## Relaxing into Form

Looking Through the Lens of Science At  
The Ten Essentials of Tai Chi Chuan

Questions and Answers on Taijiquan

Perspectives on Ranking

# Relaxing into



By Serena Newhall

**T**ai Chi has a unique emphasis on resilient relaxation that cultivates internal strength. We are told, "Relax but do not be limp," but it can be hard to understand what this means without first feeling it. If we practice listening to the body, we can gain a greater understanding of relaxation without limpness. In this article, I explore some of the differences between stiff strength and internal strength with the aim of increasing understanding of the role relaxation plays in the development of internal strength.

In Master Yang Zhenduo's book *Yang Style Taijiquan*, he talks about relaxation with regard to "using the mind instead of force," in number six of the Ten Essentials:

*In practicing taijiquan, the whole body is relaxed, and there is not an iota of stiff or clumsy strength in the veins or joints to hinder the movement of the body.* People may ask: How can one increase his strength without exercising force? According to traditional Chinese medicine, there is in the human body a system of pathways called *jingluo* (or meridian) which link the viscera with different

parts of the body, making the human body an integrated whole. If the *jingluo* is not impeded, then the vital energy will circulate in the body unobstructed. But if the *jingluo* is filled with stiff strength, the vital energy will not be able to circulate and consequently the body cannot move with ease. One should therefore use the mind instead of force, so that vital energy will follow in the wake of the mind or consciousness and circulate all over the body. Through persistent practice one will be able to have genuine internal force.



# Form

We are all familiar with the stiff strength referred to above. Even if you are not entirely sure what is meant, you have certainly experienced stiff strength. This is the kind of strength typically used in arm-wrestling matches, lifting luggage, or carrying something heavy. Stiff strength is wooden in nature, neither nimble nor fluid, which is why people often get hurt when using this kind of strength. It's the kind of strength we use when our muscles contract suddenly and are held flexed for a period of time. It's hard for the blood and chi to circulate when this is the case. You will have experienced this constriction if you have ever had blood drawn. When the hematologist asks you to hold a tight fist, the blood cannot return to your heart and pools in the veins. The chi is likewise constricted in the meridians when the body is tense.

Muscle tension and stiff strength are related. Knots of tension in the muscles are a kind of stiff strength operating on autopilot. When you massage someone's shoulders, you can feel how hard the muscles are when tense. When we are tense we waste a lot of energy maintaining muscle tension. It's like driving around with the emergency brake on all the time<sup>2</sup>. In order to make the car go, you have to make the engine apply more force because the car is fighting itself. A car with the emergency brake on is balky and unresponsive. It moves in fits and starts. It is the same with muscle tension. The more we are able to relax, the smoother our movements become.

Once we have found the feeling of relaxation, it gets easier and easier to maintain. However, in the beginning it can be immensely difficult to allow tension to release

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itself. Many of us are accustomed to forcing our bodies to work harder, to do more. In this modern world it is commonly considered a virtue to push ourselves beyond the limits of our bodies, pushing hard to get the job done. When we do this, we drive ourselves into exhaustion while ignoring the physical discomfort that comes from stress and tension.

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One stumbling block that people run into when learning to relax is that the concept of relaxation seems absolute: black and white. Either you are relaxed, or you are not. Actually, it helps if we can think about relaxation as a continuum. The seeds of your relaxation are contained within your tension, just like the yin-yang symbol. Seeds cannot be expected to burst into fruit without passing through all the stages of growth in between.

Learning to relax is like learning the form. When we start learning the form, we learn it in pieces: first the footwork, then the arms. We receive many corrections, each seemingly unrelated to the last: hands like so, knees like this. We then spend months and years concentrating on the myriad details of the form. It begins to come together slowly. Eventually, we learn how to move the limbs with the waist. We learn to link the limbs together so that the pieces of each movement become part of a single application. Later we learn how all the applications flow together to make up the form. Eventually, even the form recedes and there is only

Tai Chi, the eternal cycle of yin and yang. High-level practitioners talk of relaxing into the form so completely that they do not experience themselves as separate from the universe for the duration of their practice.

Most of us, however, still have some fragmentation and tension in our form. It's the presence of this stiff strength that keeps us from being able to experience the resiliency of vital energy and internal force. But the seed of internal strength is there, and relaxation is where it grows. It actually makes sense to learn the feeling of relaxed wholeness the same way you learn the form: that is, in pieces, part by part. It's important to remember when practicing that eventually you will need to link together all the relaxed portions of your body so that you can be "one unit, linked together," as Master Yang Jun advises us<sup>3</sup>. Not only will the body be unified, but relaxation itself becomes a unified state of being.

There are many opportunities to improve your form and relaxation by simply tuning in and really listening to your body. Your body will tell you where the tension is. It will even tell you how to let go of it so you can relax.

When we begin to practice Tai Chi, we notice all sorts of new aches. A new student might think, "I thought Tai Chi was supposed to help me relax and feel less stress, but now I'm more stressed out and my shoulders hurt." The truth is, we are not always aware of the tension we carry. There are places in our bodies that have been screaming so loudly for release that we have learned to turn down the volume out of self-preservation<sup>4</sup>. Often the initial experience of discomfort when holding the postures comes

from paying attention to your body for the first time in a long time.

Listening to your body is one piece of getting to know yourself and is an essential part of becoming a competent martial artist. Master Yang Jun says: "Practice the form to know yourself. Practice push hands to know your opponent." We learn how to listen to our bodies in order to relax and access the full range of our capability. When we are relaxed our movements become smooth and effortless.

Your body will actually teach you about correct and proper alignment as you learn to relax. When you feel aches in your joints and muscles it means your body is improperly aligned or not sufficiently relaxed. We learn to let the pain guide us until it recedes. Eventually, your sense of your body will improve and you'll be able to adjust your form on the basis of what feels right.

There is a good reason why each posture is so precisely delineated. Each position is bio-mechanically designed to allow for the most natural and optimum chi flow for each application. This means that the closer we come to standardizing our positions, the more aware of "correct" and "not correct" we become because we can listen to the internal feeling of increased or blocked chi flow. The more we relax, the more the form teaches us about its nature and our own. We learn what we are capable of being and doing. The form is a container and the more we relax, the more it supports and holds us. We come to fill the form, becoming the thing that we do, with no separation between self, intent, and action. Mind, body, and spirit unite.

We must take care, however, not to relax so completely that we collapse to the ground. This kind of formless relaxation may be good for

sleeping, but in Tai Chi, we want our relaxation to be resilient and pliable, capable of springing back after some force has been applied. If we can maintain the idea of the form in the mind, then this will help the body keep its outward structure while relaxing on the inside. This helps us avoid the drooping fingers and limbs that come from being too relaxed. This is the limpness we are advised to avoid. The error here is in seeking relaxation without proper attention to form. We must pay attention to the particulars of structure in order to relax within a form and not collapse into limpness.

It's true that getting to a balanced and unified state of relaxed awareness can take a long time. Take heart though: remember that we can begin with something small and manageable. It's quite difficult to start the relaxation process with something that's been tense for decades, so I suggest starting smaller. Most of us have been carrying our tension around for years. It's a familiar annoyance, like the bulge of a wallet, or a too-tight waistband. We just don't really notice anymore. So I suggest that you don't start trying to relax with a part that has been tense for years. The tension may be so entrenched that starting there will only be frustrating and create more tension.

In Yang style Tai Chi, we start with the form, the shape of things, and learn how to relax on the inside so that the inside gradually comes to support the outside and not vice versa. The more we relax the body, the more the chi, or vital energy, will circulate naturally, expanding and filling your body. The chi will begin to circulate more smoothly to your extremities, strengthening them, and allowing us to develop internal strength.

What is internal strength? Everyone has a certain capacity for internal strength but it is often impeded by being bound or blocked within our muscular tension. As we relax more and more, the energy we release from maintaining tension will fill us from within. The resulting energy has a buoyant and expansive quality. This is one aspect of internal strength. Cultivating the postnatal chi through regular practice of the form can also augment internal strength. The more we relax during the form, the better our bodies will be able to incorporate fresh postnatal chi from the outside, whether through eating, sleeping, or breathing.

Internal strength can also be likened to the air within a tire. Imagine that the air is chi, and the tire is the body. When we are tense, it is as though the tire were filled with rocks. This throws off the spin of the wheel, and interferes with its function. When this rocky tension is dissolved, the air circulates freely and maintains strength in the tire that supports it from the inside. The surface of a tire is soft in that when it is deflated you can press on it with your hand and it will yield. But when filled with air, a tire is quite hard. It's the pressure of air inside which creates hardness, but the air itself is soft and formless, expanding to fill its container. During push hands, someone using this kind of energy will feel hard without feeling stiff or jerky.

Genuine internal strength means that the chi circulates freely, guided by the mind, and like air, it can fill a vacuum almost instantaneously. This allows for a very rapid response time when we are relaxed because there is space for the energy to move unhindered. But when we are empty of tension, this does not imply vacuity because the resulting emptiness gets filled with internal strength. This is why being

relaxed allows us to arrive first when we strike second—because when we stick with our opponents our energy is already there, faster than conscious thought.

As we practice more, we discover that relaxing one part of the body can have a domino effect, relaxing other parts in turn. When one part relaxes, it releases the chi that was bound there and the resulting shockwave radiates outward until it hits other areas of tension. Depending on the nature of the tension, the wave either ricochets off of areas that are not ready to relax yet, or shakes loose some other area holding tension, thus allowing for its release. We want to be very soft on the inside so that the energy we unleash doesn't damage our internal organs. This is one reason to practice slowly and expect gradual improvement.

I hope you'll find some of these ideas helpful. Although I have asked you to begin by paying attention to very small areas of tension, it's important to remember that eventually we must dispense with a limited focus on individual elements of tension. We are striving for a unified sensation of relaxation that dispenses with all distinction in order to allow the "vital energy [to] circulate in the body unobstructed." From the part, we seek the whole. Understanding the particulars of our tension can lead us into a balanced understanding of relaxation and internal strength that retains form without dissolution, and resiliency without limpness. ☯

1 Yang Zhenduo. *Yang Style Taijiquan*. Morning Glory Publishers, Beijing: 1996. ISBN: 7905404814.

2 Chuckrow, Robert. *The Tai Chi Book: Refining and Enjoying a Lifetime of Practice*. YMAA Books. ISBN: 1-889989-64-7. He used the parking brake analogy in his book and I suspect this is where I picked up the idea.

3 Yang Jun. Personal communication. Phrases in quotation marks are repeated often in classes and seminars.

4 Lowenthal, Wolfe. *There Are No Secrets: Professor Chen Man-ch'ing and his Tai Chi Chuan*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA: 1991. ISBN: 1-55643-112-0. Wolfe Lowenthal expressed a somewhat similar sentiment in his book and I wish to acknowledge this with gratitude. I have no doubt his book has influenced much of this article, although it had been many months since I read it.