

Taiji Practice in The Four Seasons

By Adrian Chan-Wyles

Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. All who practice traditional Chinese martial arts are often very well aware of the passing of the seasons, and the ebbing and flowing of nature, as light extends, reaches a peak and then recedes, drawing in upon itself and preparing for eventual re-newel.

The movements of Taijiquan appear to have been formed around nature's movement. The breath, drawn into the body, links humanity to the environment. Training throughout the day, as the sun moves across the sky, and night turns into dawn, carries its own challenges, with each challenge containing its own and unique implicit wisdom. Training outside opens the practitioner to the direct experience of nature and the transformation of qi in the yearly cycle.

The Five Phases Scheme.

The seasons progress and roll on, with light and heat increasing and decreasing. The five phases (wu xing), are used to describe the transformation of qi, as it manifests in all physical and spiritual content in the universe.

The five phases are presented as Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, in either a generative, or overcoming arrangement. That is,

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each distinctive phase has the power to create further phases of qi manifestation, or indeed, to prevent such phases from reoccurring.

For instance, Wood can act as fuel for Fire—thus creating and sustaining Fire, whilst Water can quench Fire, thus preventing Fire in the environment.

If Earth is taken as a centrality,



Adrian Chan-Wyles in Spring (Wood): White Crane Spreads Its Wings

that is, as the viewpoint of the human being always in contact with the ground, then the other four phases may be used to clearly represent the four seasons:

The movements of Taijiquan all share certain characteristics, such as roundedness, rootedness, alignment, and smooth transition. The Earth aspect of the Five Phases can be compared with certain internal Taijiquan stabilizing and strength building exercises, such as

zhan zhuang.

Zhan is written as a person standing straight, whilst zhuang is written so as to suggest a stake or post made from a tree. Standing straight, in this context, does not necessarily refer to a literal interpretation, but rather carries the meaning of standing correctly.

That is, to arrange the body so that the bones and joints are naturally rounded (like a tree), and that these rounded components relate to one another, so that each area of the body is aligned to the area above and below it.

This rounded alignment is crucial for the smooth transmission of qi energy throughout the body, and serves as the mechanism that facilitates the creation of the full and the empty in Taijiquan practice.

Zhan zhuang represents the essential core of aligned being, correct standing, smooth transition and power generation. When the body cavities are clearly defined and reside in a perfect placement with regard to one another, the inner organs, (and their functions) are optimized, and as a consequence, the health of the individual is enhanced:

The ability to accurately predict the changing of the seasons was very important in ancient and imperial China. Dynasties rose and fell on their ability to correctly regulate the year, and thus set the correct times for sacrifice to the ancestors, when to plant crops and prepare for the harvest, and when to pursue peaceful policies, or to go to war, etc.

The calendar, as a means of

bringing order to society, relied upon the exact prediction of the availability of light throughout the year.

It plotted the growth and decline of nature as a result, with Winter days shorter, Summer days longer, and Spring and Autumn acting as transitional mid-points, between the increasing and decreasing availability of sun light and heat.

Of course, air (qi) exists throughout the changing seasons of the year. Its characteristics, in the sense of its temperature, texture, color, smell, taste and physical manifestation—such as fog or mist—are defined directly by the season of the year.

The Taijiquan practitioner experiences all these differences as the air (qi) is breathed in and out of the body. These experiences change not only in a broad sense, throughout the year, but also, on a more specific basis throughout the day.

In a very real sense, the 24-hour cycle of the day, represents a micro-manifestation of the changing of the seasons.

Although the outer body may be covered in layers of clothing (to keep warm) during the cold times, and the layers of clothing removed during the warmer times, nevertheless, the direct connection to nature that the Taijiquan practitioner experiences by practicing outside, is mediated by the breath itself.

The climate of the outer environment is imbued into the inside of



Transition Into Spring: Fist Under Elbow. and Repulse Monkey

the body through the breath (qi), and its oxygen content distributed around the entirety of the body cells.

Oxygen content is greater in areas of tree and vegetation presence, as well as areas outside of urban centers, although, even with-

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in urban centers themselves, pockets of early morning, or late evening oxygen accumulation can be found.

This rich qi enters the body and merges with, and compliments the qi already present, as Taijiquan, when performed correctly, never diminishes inner force, but always seeks to enhance it, regardless of the time of day, or season of the year.

The transformation of qi is the essence of the changing seasons and the changing and flowing postures of the Taijiquan form in practice. The breath connects the outer environment with the inner environment and a continuous synthesis occurs. There is no

stagnation, as stagnation would mean a lack of

dynamic re-becoming, but instead, there is an ever repeating cyclic turning of events, that ensure a vibrant growth and dynamic presence.

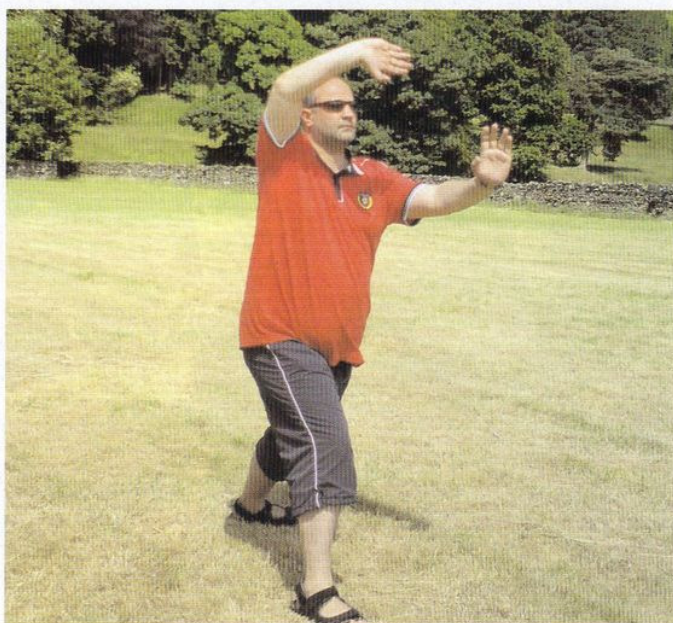
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The constant circling, extending, withdrawing, rising and falling of the specific movements of the body, are designed to augment a deep and full breath. In relation to these turning cycles of breath and movement, the mind remains calm and focused.

That is to say, the Mind serves the function of grounding the prac-



Summer: Taijiquan Practice In Summer (Fire): Parting Wild Horse's Mane.



Fair Lady at the Shuttles--Summer

tice, thus equating to the phase of Earth in the wu xing schematic. As all movements of the body originates within the Mind itself, the Mind, through its focus or will ensures that the body remains free of habitual tension, and that the Mind, as a distinct entity, does not lose its calm composure.

This special kind of awareness is referred to as yi. In everyday Chinese language usage, this word refers to an idea, or a mind cultivated through learning, that leads to profound and meaningful speech. This is because the ideogram is comprised of two distinct aspects. The lower particle (xin) depicts a heart or mind, whilst the upper particle (yin) shows an open mouth, with a tongue, as if words are emanating from it.

As one listens to hear the words, and that as a result of listening, the mind is thereby cultivated and developed, so the concept of yi is logically extended so as to refer to awareness and the intent to be aware.

Within Taijiquan practice, it is believed that yi leads the qi, or that intent guides energy. Through the practice of Taijiquan movement, awareness of the outer and the inner aspect of each movement, as well as the transition between movements, leads to a gathering of knowledge and an awareness of qi flow that is unique and specific to each movement, and sets of movements.

The movements themselves are not performed in a



Snake Creeps Down--Autumn



Single Whip--Autumn

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cuum which means that mind generated yi extends not only throughout the body, but also penetrates into the environment surrounding the practitioner.

Yi is all encompassing and is trained to read the subtle and coarse changes of qi manifestation, simultaneously, originating from within and around the physical body.

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The mind, through yi, mediates the inner and outer body, through the process of correct, deep and full breathing.

The ever changing seasons offer an opportunity for the refinement of yi, and the further develop of qi, through the practice of Taijiquan.

The practitioner is grounded on Earth,



Needle at the Bottom of the Sea--Winter



Cloud Hands in Winter

whilst the seasons, although directly effecting the Earth, occur due to the changes observed in the divine sky, or Tian.

The sky grows dark or light, cold or hot. This is related to the presence of the sun, or its apparent opposite, throughout the year.

This charting and measuring of light (and heat) gave rise to the notion of yin and yang, which in itself, has developed into a very sophisticated means of analyzing universal qi in all its many and varied manifestations.

A gathering of qi, by way of illustration, may be viewed as yang, whilst a dispersal of qi can be viewed as yin.

Along with the systems of eight trigrams developed in the Classic of Change (Yijing), known as the bagua, the ancient Chinese philosophers have developed the wu xing and yin yang and theories as a means to measure qi and predict its movements.

Regardless of which schematic is employed, it is exactly the same qi that is measured and exactly the same qi that the Taijiquan practitioner utilizes in his/her training as the year unfolds.

Through the Taijiquan movements, the human body is brought into inner and outer harmony with the four seasons. •