THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF TAI CHI CHUAN

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Bruce Frantzis demonstrates the “Single Whip” posture from Tai Chi Chuan in front of the Dragon Wall in China.
INTRODUCTION TO TAI CHI

Over 100 million people do the physical form movements of tai chi every day in China. This number indicates that more people practice tai chi than any other martial art in the world. Tai chi enthusiasts are growing daily throughout the West, South America, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

The growth of tai chi is mostly caused by the significant benefits it offers in reducing stress, overcoming illnesses, increasing mental and physical performance, and being a practical and effective tool for aging well, enabling people to bypass many of the more unpleasant situations commonly experienced after the onset of middle age.

As is said in China, “Tai chi can be done by anyone, male and female, young and old, strong and weak, intelligent and slow, healthy or ill.”

Originally, the practitioners of the martial art of tai chi became famous within China not for the health side of the art but for the exceptional fighting ability it imparts.

As one tai chi master was fond of saying, “Everybody wants to be healthy, only some people want to learn how to fight.”

Those who do want to learn how to fight using tai chi should be aware that
to be successful demands copious hard work. It also requires the willingness to persevere through frustrations and disappointments, both physical and emotional, just as is required of any successful high achiever in any competitive athletic, business, artistic, or intellectual endeavor.

There is a well-known maxim that sums up this situation: “Press on. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not—nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent; genius will not—unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not—the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”¹

¹ Calvin Coolidge, 30th president of US

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For those who are interested in developing the *energetics* of tai chi for health or for martial arts, this report can offer some useful insights into what is necessary to actualize tai chi’s pragmatic energetic abilities. The fighting ability of tai chi was originally proven again and again in challenge matches with all forms of martial arts in unrestricted combat, both empty-handed and with traditional weapons, such as swords and spears.

The internal martial art of tai chi chuan, usually shortened to “tai chi,” is composed of two separate concepts: tai chi and chuan. (Tai: big, a lot of; chi or ji: superlative, ultimate, best. Note that this chi is not the same as the word “chi” often used to denote energy.)

Tai chi is the Taoist philosophical term for that place of non-duality from which the specific opposing yin and yang forces of any modality exist in a potential undifferentiated state before they separate into some form of opposite (dual) manifestation: day and night, sun and moon, self and other, attack and defense, this and that.

Tai chi, then, refers to a philosophical idea about the nature of existence, but in addition it more pragmatically refers to the chi-based health and internal power aspects of tai chi chuan. It is the tai chi facet that heals and rejuvenates, not the chuan. Chuan means “fist” and, by extension, anything relating to the techniques, philosophies, tactics, or strategies of fighting.
**Tai Chi as a Martial Art**

As a martial art, tai chi chuan fused these two separate and distinct parts into an integrated whole, originally adapting them to an already existing extensive technical repertoire of the most effective armed and unarmed fighting techniques of seventeenth-century China. Each part contributed something unique to the mix known today as tai chi chuan.

The fighting techniques were derived from the military training manual used by a famous general to train his troops for battlefield success. Tai chi is essentially a hybrid that might be expressed in a word formula such as:

Taoist qigong + Taoist philosophical principles + Shaolin temple gung fu external martial arts techniques = China’s newly integrated internal martial art eventually called tai chi chuan.

The qigong added internal power and supercharged the martial art techniques. The Taoist philosophy and fighting strategies generated whole new kinds of fighting applications absent from the movements of the original Shaolin external martial arts. In varying degrees, the whole integration process changed the original fighting moves so they could conform to the sophisticated internal body movement rules of qigong.
For example, gung fu blows delivered with straight arms or legs changed to being executed with bent elbows and knees. This seemingly small change offered several martial advantages.

From the perspective of qigong, it allowed the opening and closing of the joints and spine to generate tremendous internal power; it incorporated the beneficial Taoist axioms of “neither doing too much nor too little” and “to go out is to return and to return is to go out”; and it resulted in an important martial safeguard, as bent arms and legs are significantly less vulnerable to limb-breaking joint-locks than are arms and legs held straight.

Another critical example is the tai chi core emphasis on circularity of physical movement, both within form work and fighting applications. This emphasis did not exist, or at the very least was significantly less, in tai chi’s parent Shaolin gung fu techniques. The concept of circularity is at the core of Taoist philosophy and is an essential component of the central operational principles of all Taoist qigong.

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The foundational principles of tai chi were written in a short treatise called the *Tai Chi Classics*. These pages were found in a corner of a salt store near the Chen village in China in the nineteenth century. Every tai chi master uses it as a primary teaching tool, referring repeatedly to its short cryptic phrases, each of which has many levels of meaning.

Nowhere in the classics, beyond the 13 postures, are the names of the multitude of tai chi martial techniques, movements, or Push Hands methods mentioned. We are only given generalized Taoist neigong principles, philosophical concepts, and military strategies and tactics.

Even the original 13 postures mentioned in the Classics are not presented as explicit how-to instructions; rather, they refer to general internal energy principles. It requires an adept to translate the specific ways to do the physical movements from the material in the Classics.

“The martial art of tai chi is based on thirteen principles. Five of these relate to the footwork methodology of tai chi…The remaining eight principles refer to how energy manifests in the body.”
THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF TAI CHI

Tai chi is based on using the one unified chi energy of the body, called jeng chi in Chinese. However, depending on the function it fulfills, this one chi is called by different names—the chi of this, or the chi of that. There are eight primary body energies used in tai chi. These eight are the foundation of every tai chi form movement and fighting application and are present in single or multiple combinations of every move.

The martial art of tai chi is based on thirteen principles. Five of these relate to the footwork methodology of tai chi, which is responsible for moving the feet and body’s center smoothly and with stability. These five are called step forward, step backward, gaze (that is, focus your intention toward and move) to the left, gaze to the right, and central equilibrium. The remaining eight principles refer to how energy manifests in the body.
These eight principles regarding internal energy are at the center of what makes tai chi a unique fighting art based on certain tenets of Taoist philosophy (the four sides and four corners). The eight principles concern how energy manifests in tai chi throughout every body part in all the postures and movements of the form, as well as the fighting applications of whatever kind, including Push Hands and sparring.

In application, it is assumed that these powers are used first at touch, and later done to the energy of the opponent before you both touch, or when you disengage after touching and before resuming contact. These eight refer to the nonphysical energies the body can emit. They do not refer to physical movements.

They are identified by standard Chinese terms and are translated into English as:

1. Peng or Ward Off (upward, expansive internal power)
2. Lu or Roll Back (backward or absorbing, yielding power)
3. Ji or Press Forward (straight ahead, forward power)
4. An or Push Downward (downward-moving power)
5. Tsai or Pull Down (simultaneously combines the yin energies of lu and an, moving in the same direction)
6. Lieh or Split (combines the yang energies of peng and ji moving in opposite directions from an originating point)
7. Jou or Elbow Stroke (focuses energy in the elbow)

8. Kao or Shoulder Stroke (focuses energy in the shoulder)

The first four refer to the direction energy is moving: up with Ward Off, back with Roll Back, straight forward with Press Forward, and down with Push Downward. The next two refer to combining energies: Pull Down simultaneously combines the two yin energies of Roll Back and Push Downward moving in the same direction, and Split combines the two yang energies of Ward Off and Press Forward moving in opposite direction.

“All movements in tai chi are composed of permutations of these eight building blocks as they continuously combine, separate, and recombine during each individual posture and transitional move.”

Each of these first four had a posture named after it in the Yang style of tai chi. However, their real meaning lies in the kind of internal power (called jin) that they represent.

All movements in tai chi are composed of permutations of these eight building blocks as they continuously combine, separate, and recombine during each individual posture and transitional move. In combat training, tai chi fighters must be able to change from one movement to the other in a fraction of a second, if they are to win, or at least produce a draw, without getting hurt.
ONE: WARD OFF (PENG)

Peng refers to energy rising or expanding from its source. It is the primary yang or projecting internal energy in tai chi, as well as all the other Taoist internal martial arts. It is equally defensive and attack-oriented in nature. It is the root of the yang energies in tai chi and can radiate energy from both the inside (yin) and outside (yang) surfaces of the body.

In its expanding phase, peng is often compared to the energy that causes wood to float on water or a car tire to inflate, or the blood vessels to fill. The term Ward Off pertains to the expanding nature of peng, which, if directed to the arms or any body part, allows you to create a buffer zone that prevents the first shock of an incoming attack from penetrating your defenses; that is, warding it off with either your arms, legs, or body, and possibly even causing a blow to bounce off your body.

Ward Off gives you the critical microsecond of neurological space to avoid being overwhelmed, before you begin your defense and deflect, absorb, or redirect an attacker’s power. Equally in the limbs or torso, Ward Off also creates an expansion that prevents an opponent’s force from getting past your skin and injuring you. This happens because peng directly develops
the body’s protective chi, called wei chi in Chinese. According to Chinese medical theory, wei chi prevents illness from penetrating the pores of your skin.

The author demonstrates Fa Jin

This expansive energy can also enable you to move an attacking man’s arms according to your will, by expanding past his strength and leaving him no choice but to move whatever body part or weapon you are touching out of the way. When your opponent hits your limbs, you can turn your peng on suddenly, and if your Ward Off is strong enough, your peng can cause pain or even severe damage to the attacking arm or leg.
Peng or Ward Off explains why the arm of an internal martial artist can be as soft as a baby’s in one instant and, in the next, become exceedingly hard without registering any muscular tension. The development of this energy is the internal equivalent of the external martial artist’s lifting of weights or striking the limbs against hard objects to toughen them up.

As an attack technique, peng can enable your arm to hit like a lead pipe or painlessly cause opponents to be sent through the air without damage, unless, of course, they are hurt by the force with which they hit a wall or the ground. In its rising phase, Ward Off is responsible for the ability to attack and uproot an opponent. Uprooting causes your opponent’s feet to leave the ground.

Peng or Ward Off is a yang energetic force. The original Chen tai chi manual states that peng is the source of all the other postures or internal energies in tai chi. It is not exactly unique to tai chi, being utilized as much or more in bagua or hsing-i, in which it is also called peng for the exact same reasons. It is peng that enables an internal martial artist to hit opponents and cause them, as the Chinese like to say, “to fly away.” To achieve the power of Ward Off, a practitioner must have the ability to sink chi energy to the lower tantien (that is, drop energy from the upper body into the lower belly). This skill is absolutely required.
**TWO: ROLL BACK (Lu)**

Lu refers to the ability to energetically absorb and/or yield to counter an incoming force, often with circular physical movements so tiny as to appear invisible. Its primary energetic direction is backwards; however, it can also be done going downwards, forwards, and upwards by fairly advanced practitioners. Roll Back is primarily defensive in nature, although it does have some use in attack. It is the primary yin energy in tai chi, and absorbs energy both on the inside and outside of the arms and the back of the hands.

The natural advantage of Roll Back is that it allows you to melt away, to release your own internal resistance to the power of your opponent’s techniques. This kind of releasing causes opponents to lose their center of balance.

It may be compared to the situation where a man rushes shoulder first to batter down a door, and the door is opened, causing him to fall. Normal expectations have been reversed. The man you are fighting expects his force to be met by your force, and when it is not, his force projects forward, often taking his center with it; consequently, he loses his balance.

“**Lu refers to the ability to energetically absorb and/or yield to counter an incoming force, often with circular physical movements so tiny as to appear invisible.”**
In the second or less that exists between your opponent losing and recovering his balance, he is in effect existing in a state of defenseless suspension that creates the optimum conditions for a counter-attack, which is tai chi’s specialty.

If the Ward Off of a tai chi player is strong enough, it can be used to defend against someone of equal or slightly superior power. Roll back, however, is the primary technique that tai chi practitioners rely upon to defend themselves against a clearly superior force or during that fraction of a second when they may be using an unworkable fighting angle. Roll Back is the defining characteristic of tai chi chuan. As an internal martial art, tai chi specializes in this energy above all others.

Roll Back is what underlies the quality of “softness” in tai chi. The value of yielding to a superior brute force is self-evident to a matador as he yields his position and moves his body and cape out of the path of a charging bull’s horns.

From the perspective of the internal martial arts, power can be either intelligent or stupid. “Intelligent” power is measured exactly, with sensitivity, and has the ability to change in a flash, according to the nature of the force with which it is dealing. “Stupid” power goes off in a direction with little or no ability to adjust to circumstances. Stupid power is like a bullet on a set trajectory it cannot control.

Intelligent power can adjust its force and direction microsecond by microsecond between the beginning and end of a technique. Each of these
types of power exists in both defensive and attack-oriented martial art techniques. Fighting angles, for instance, employ intelligent power.

The Roll Back technique, in its energetic and physical execution, allows a tai chi practitioner to successfully defend against the superior force of a skilled individual. If one person in a fight possesses superior brute force or speed and the other is skilled in fighting angles (like the bull and the matador), the knowledge of fighting angles can defeat the brute strength. However, if both individuals comprehend fighting angles equally, their knowledge will neutralize advantages on this level. The dominant position will then revert to whoever has the most power or speed, unless Roll Back enters the martial equation.

Roll Back’s commingled qualities of yielding and absorption creates a certain kind of amalgamated softness. As dedicated tai chi martial training progresses, one would expect this soft power to grow in the same way that weightlifters gradually increase the weight they can lift. It is the practice that increases the power, not merely the understanding of the mechanisms involved in Roll Back.

Many tai chi practitioners mistakenly believe that, because Roll Back is an intellectually superior concept about how to handle overt force, it will
automatically work physically against a person of superior strength. Nothing could be further from the truth. The mastery that comes with constant practice is the key.

From a martial art point of view, power is power. It matters not whether the power is “soft,” or “hard,” “external” or “internal,” only that it is present or absent. The brilliant advantage of Roll Back’s soft power is that it can be relatively less than the power projected toward it and still win the day. However, the soft power of Roll Back cannot be dramatically less or a stronger “hard” power will defeat it. This case is especially true the more your opponent is rooted, as are many top-of-the-line martial artists, both internal and external.

It is always easier to develop any single skill if you focus on it to the exclusion of other agendas. Of course, if you do concentrate on learning multiple skills over time, you can end up with a superlative product when they eventually dovetail. This integration certainly holds true for martial arts.

For example, during and before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, martial artists trained long hours with life-and-death seriousness. They worked with the intensity of top competitive athletes. In the hierarchy of

“According to classical tai chi tradition, ten years was the minimum amount of training time tai chi players needed before they were fully prepared to successfully challenge martial artists of all kinds under lethal conditions.”
internal martial arts of that era, tai chi, based on battlefield performance, ranked as a higher level or superior martial art to hsing-i. Yet, then and today, most hsing-i people will normally defeat most tai chi people in actual fighting.

This situation may reverse itself when the tai chi practitioner has accrued ten years of experience. According to classical tai chi tradition, ten years was the minimum amount of training time tai chi players needed before they were fully prepared to successfully challenge martial artists of all kinds under lethal conditions. What accounts for this seeming contradiction?

Both hsing-i and tai chi share the same internal technology for developing hard internal power. Hsing-i, because it initially places less relative emphasis on yielding, focuses exclusively on developing hard, yang internal energy and efficient fighting angles. Hsing-i has a simpler agenda; thus, it turns out more winners sooner.
Tai chi, on the other hand, has to fulfill not one or two, but three agendas. **First**, its specialty, the “soft” energy of Roll Back; **second**, its “hard” internal projecting powers, including Ward Off, Press Forward, and Split; and **third**, the complex multiple agenda of seamlessly melding the two, called in the tai chi classics gang rou hsiang ji or “hard and soft combine together.”

This third, complex agenda empowers practitioners to smoothly and instantaneously shift back and forth from hard to soft. These shifts occur with an absolutely smooth changing of gears in the tai chi fighter’s mind, physical technique, and emotions, during which changes many other martial artists often get “stuck.”

These critical microseconds occur in combat when a fighter becomes physically unable to move or is mentally disoriented, not knowing where, when, or how to move next. Because tai chi has a more complex agenda, fewer people learn it totally, but those who do really achieve something. However, for those who do hard or external martial arts, even mild exposure to tai chi and its Roll Back technique tends to increase the physical speed and smoothness of all evasive tactics.

It takes a lot of serious training to actualize the potential of Roll Back in tai chi. It is helpful to bear in mind two things about Roll Back. This “yin” internal technique requires a willingness to delve into the more subtle levels of the mind.
The level of power of your yielding and absorbing has to be considerable if it is going to defeat an opponent with significant power and speed. Many undertrained tai chi proponents with insufficient Roll Back power fantasize that they can defeat a karate, gung fu, or boxing fighter because they hold their art to be superior—until, that is, they are soundly defeated.

Weak opponents can be handled with mediocre Roll Back skills; strong opponents require superior Roll Back, which is why, in push hands, Roll Back is the hardest and most essential skill to develop.

True, Roll Back is used mostly for defensive purposes in tai chi and is the reason why tai chi is often considered to have a noncompetitive flavor. Nonetheless, Roll Back is also, in its absorbing aspect, used for attack. Roll Back’s attack phase strongly uses the closings of the body to suck energy like a vacuum cleaner.

If the closing action is connected to the edge of your hand, palm, or the back of your fist, it can cut through an opponent’s flesh much like dragging the edge of a knife through a thick steak in order to cut it. This technique prevails using the fist, hand edge, and palm techniques throughout the Chen style with its strong circular slicing hand motions, and can easily be seen in the Yang style in the Chop with Fist, Pull Down, and Descending Roll Back Palm techniques.

Since Roll Back is a specialty of tai chi, it would be useful to look at the progression of its training, from the point of view of both the physical body mechanics and the energetics involved.
Mechanically, a physical turning or twisting action will deflect an incoming force, just as a whirling fan blade will throw off a pebble tossed at it. This principle works equally well if applied to the human torso, arms, or legs.

The progression for learning the physical aspects of the Roll Back technique is:

1. Focus on turning your waist and hips smoothly. As is often said in the Orient, “Hips as stiff as iron need to become hips soft and flexible as tofu (soy bean curd).”

2. Your arms and legs need to twist in coordination with the turning of your waist.

3. Your arms need to relax and soften until they offer minimal resistance to an aggressive force.

4. The opening and closing (as well as a deep relaxing) of all your joints needs to develop sufficiently in order for the joints to move unimpeded within their optimum range of motion in response to the slightest pressure from your opponent.

5. The twisting of your arms and legs needs to be established and sufficiently stabilized in order to amplify energy and bring it to the exact point where opposing bodies touch, which is most often at the forearm or hand.
Now the serious study of fighting angles using Roll Back begins. To be fully effective, this phase requires mastery of all the foundational skills learned in steps 1 through 5.

During the early stages of learning Roll Back, your movements will be large and obvious, both in your joints and in your waist. Over time, however, as your physical movements become more refined and circular, they can become extremely small, so tiny, in fact, that they are virtually invisible to the eye of someone untrained in observing subtlety of movement.

The progression for learning the energetic aspects of the Roll Back technique is:

1. You develop a sense of absorbing energy with your whole body.

2. You absorb energy on a line from the point of contact with your opponent, to beyond your body, either out from behind your back or out from your feet into the ground, preferably to the end of your aura, where it connects to the energy of the earth (that is, your energetic root).

3. You absorb and redirect your opponent’s power at the exact point of contact, causing your opponent to seem to be suspended in space for a microsecond.
4. You extend the ability to absorb energy, pulling it from your opponent’s body, which causes your opponent to lurch in the direction of the pull. Usually, this action happens without your opponent’s perceiving a cause and effect relationship, which induces a disbelief along the lines of, “This can’t be happening.” This process is often likened to reeling in a fish, which causes the fish to land wherever you direct it.

If you can master all of the above, your hands become so soft that your opponent literally can neither feel them nor what they are doing.

**Roll Back and Sticking**

Intimately tied into Roll Back is the basic tai chi technique of Sticking, or adherence. Sticking is done both empty-handed and weapon-to-weapon. The focus here, however, will only be on bare hands. Sticking skin to skin is used after you have intercepted an aggressor’s limbs or body with your own limbs or body. If a man attacks you and you keep bodily contact with him, you can stay with and control him, prevent him from harming you, or move him into position for a counterattack. Each progressive stage of training requires that you be able to interpret your attacker’s force in ever-finer gradations.

There are four clear progressive stages of Sticking, each one of which requires a higher level of skill, chi, and ability to intercept an opponent’s force.
1. Yielding

Yielding (called jan in Chinese) You yield by retreating from an attacker’s force with great precision, staying just ahead of the attacker’s power, thereby negating the ability of the oncoming force to reach or impact you. It is important that you let your attacker’s force go wherever it wants to, without attempting to impede it; rather, you encourage it. This technique causes the attacker to feel that you are just within reach, if only a little more effort is made. The following three situations convey the essential “feel” of this procedure.

Attempt to punch a feather floating in the air. As your skin touches the feather, it recedes just slightly ahead of the force of your fist, avoiding any damaging impact.

As the bull’s horn touches the matador’s cape, the matador moves the cape just slightly ahead of the force of the horns. This action prevents any shock returning to the matador via the cape or stops the bull’s horns becoming entangled in the cape, which could get the matador killed on the next turn of the bull’s head.

Push your fingertips through water. You can feel some pressure from the water, but the water itself always recedes just ahead of your fingers, no matter how fast or slowly you go, and no matter how much power you use.
2. **Merging**

Merging (called lan in Chinese) Next, you merge with the force of the man attacking you, so that at no point is your power and contacting body surface either ahead or behind his contacting body surface, regardless of what kind or how much speed or power is in play. When this merging occurs, the attacker does not consciously or subconsciously feel any resistance or difference between himself and you, which often subliminally causes him to lose the motivation to really go for it.

At this moment, you can gently lead his arms or legs (or weapons) where you want them to go, just as a toy can easily and precisely be led around by a string that is neither too loose nor too taut. In the Tai Chi Classics, this activity is called bu diu, bu ding or, “neither leave the opponent, nor oppose him.”

3. **Sticking**

Sticking or adhering (called nien in Chinese) You now do two things simultaneously: Apply very subtle pressure to your attacker’s fascia just below his skin to stick to his muscles, and literally pull his energy from his body into yourself and through and past your body. If this is successful, when you move you will pull his body with you, by surface skin contact alone, without any use of grabbing. You can then move his arms or legs wherever you want, because they are stuck to your hands or legs like glue. This technique can be likened to three commonly experienced phenomena.
Wet your finger. Applying only gentle surface contact, you are able to move a piece of paper with your wet finger, just by the stickiness of the moisture, without the need to press down hard or exert pressure.

Put a piece of adhesive tape on a sheet of paper. Observe how, when the tape moves, it takes the paper along with it. If your chi is really strong, the situation is similar to that where your hands are filled with static electricity. A piece of lint will move along with your hand, even though it barely seems to be physically connected.

4. **Magnetizing**

Magnetizing (called suei in Chinese) The first three sticking methods (yield, merge, and adhere) presuppose that your opponent is moving and that you have some momentum to work with according to the laws of physics. The fourth method—magnetizing—seems to go beyond these laws, as we currently understand them.

In method four, your hand magnetizes the attacker’s body, allowing you to lift him off the ground just as a large industrial magnet lifts a heavy metal object off the floor. There is no momentum involved. You are purely controlling the chi of the attacker’s body in a way that seems to negate laws of gravity.*
THREE: PRESS FORWARD (JI)

Ji is the internal energy that projects forward from its source, on a straight line, along whichever angle you direct it: up, down, sideways, diagonally, or straight ahead. It is the primary attack technique in tai chi, and radiates energy on the outside of the arms and the back of the hands.

“Ji is the internal energy that projects forward from its source, on a straight line, along whichever angle you direct it: up, down, sideways, diagonally, or straight ahead.”

Ji or Press Forward is done in four different, progressively more powerful ways:

1. With a simple straightforward punch with one hand. Using this method, you simply put the power and weight of your whole body behind the strike.

2. A simple straightforward hit with one hand, where you project a straight line of chi energy up from your feet through your legs, hips, torso, and spine to the part of your arm or head that is hitting the opponent. If you are kicking the opponent, the same thing applies. Again, you project a straight line of energy from your supporting leg
and spine to the part of your kicking leg that is targeting the opponent. You should be able to generate tremendous internal power in this and the following two methods without any use of body weight to create momentum. (Obviously adding the use of body weight to this technique will enhance the power.) Methods 2, 3, and 4 allow tai chi, as well as hsing-i and bagua, to generate full power from only a half inch away from an opponent and even closer, right to the point where skin has already touched skin.

3. One hand hits or touches the opponent, while the energy of the opposite arm and hand augments and amplifies the power of the blow. This is method is done whether the non-hitting hand touches the opponent or not. Usually, when a person first becomes familiar with this technique, the non-hitting hand touches the actual hitting hand or forearm. Later, however, this progresses to just mentally projecting energy from the augmenting hand to the striking surface of the contacting hand or arm.
4. Energy from both arms is first focused at a point in space beyond the actual striking surface. The energy is then projected forward from that spot, which is usually deep inside the internal organs or brain or on the opposite surface of the body. For example, if you touched someone’s chest, the focal point would be the spine, or even a point in space beyond the spine. Yang-style postures such as Step Forward, Parry and Punch, Press Forward, Shoulder Stroke, and Fan through the Back, typify this energetic technique.

**FOUR: PUSH DOWNWARD (AN)**

An creates a downward movement of energy. It is a yin internal energy that can radiate energy from both the yin and yang meridians of the arms and hands. It is equally attack-oriented and defensive in nature. To get a sense of what Push Downward is and how it works, try one of two things. In a chair with arm rests, sit down with your palms firmly on the arm rests and raise your body off the chair by pushing downward with your palms. Or, sitting on the ground, lift your buttocks off the ground by pushing down on the ground with your palms. In both cases, you have applied the downward action of Push Downward.

“**An creates a downward movement of energy. It is a yin internal energy that can radiate energy from both the yin and yang meridians of the arms and hands.”**
Push Downward has three primary defensive functions:

1. It directly counters the upward expansive energy of Ward Off, preventing your opponent from controlling the upward movement of your arms or body against your will.
2. It enables you to prevent your opponents from raising their arms or legs.
3. It can cause an attacking man’s center of gravity to be energetically forced to the ground, making him feel as if a huge sandbag had been dropped on him.

For attack, Push Downward has two primary functions:

1. It tends to make your hands incredibly heavy, so that they crash through your opponent’s body, like steel through tin.
2. It can send a powerful wave of energy downward through an attacking man’s body, down to the boundary of his energetic aura beneath his feet. This action can sever your attacker’s energetic root. This downward wave can spark an ascending energy wave, which, when it moves upward, causes him to be uprooted — his feet leave the ground.

Push Downward can be compared to the downward energy exerted on a basketball during a dribble. This energy ultimately causes the basketball to bounce up in the air.
Many shorter tai chi masters from Yang Lu Chan to Cheng Man-ching to Liu Hung Chieh favored this Push Downward technique, especially when they added a little rising Ward Off energy once the “basketball” (the opponent’s body) was already bouncing upward, to make it go higher. Ward Off, Roll Back, Press Forward, and Push Downward Are Both Obvious and Hidden

The first four martial principles of tai chi just described (Ward Off, Roll Back, Press Forward, and Push Downward) comprise the core of all tai chi movements and fighting applications. The next four techniques (Pull Down, Split, Elbow Stroke, and Shoulder Stroke), represent various combinations of the original four.

“There are both overt and covert aspects concerning how the four basics are done in forms and applications.”

The form movements of the main branches of the diverse schools the general public knows collectively as tai chi (that is, the Yang, Wu, Chen, Hao, and Combination Form styles) can look quite different from one another. They are all, however, composed of the same four fundamental moves. Most people have trouble grasping this point because they focus on external physical movements, and not on what the nonphysical energies behind the movements are manifesting.
There are both overt and covert aspects concerning how the four basics are done in forms and applications. The obvious ones are virtually self-explanatory; the hidden elements involve the use of intent, and are usually part of the “secrets” that require you to find a tai chi adept willing to teach them. Such adepts are the only people who know the covert aspects thoroughly.

**The Overt Level**

In studying any tai chi form on its obvious level, you can experiment and often figure out which energy is at play by noticing how your hands move. In Ward Off, your energy will rise from your feet up your body and expand away from your body as your hands move upwards, away from your body at any angle, including vertically. In Roll Back, you will be pulling energy from the air, from your fingertips through your arms to your spine, as your hands withdraw toward your body from an extended position in space.

In Press Forward, the exact opposite of Roll Back, your hands move from being close to your body to extending straight ahead, as your energy moves from your spine, through your arms to your fingertips.

In Push Downward, which is the opposite of Ward Off, you move energy from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet, as your hands move downwards at any angle, either toward or away from your body or vertically downward, as in the movement called Play the Lute/Guitar. What has just been described here, however, is only the visually obvious part of the story.
**The Covert Level**

In the internal arts, chi energy is manifested not primarily by body movement, but through intention and the Heart-Mind. If a movement is to be effective in fighting, there must be a direct intent of what kind of power you want to manifest in specific types of situations. Like the thought behind the design of a modern stealth bomber, the ideal in combat is not to let your opponent know you are coming, or, at a minimum, to deceive your opponent about your plans and intentions.

Obvious physical movements alone carry minimal deception. Virtually all external martial artists have experience of hands moving up, down, forward, and back, and have developed tactics to counter and defeat such moves. However, they often have little or no experience countering the subtle energy movements of power at touch. Such techniques may not be present in their particular martial art system.

In many specific tai chi movements, the energy work is quite hidden. This is less the case in the original Chen style than in the Yang, Wu, Hao, and Combination Form styles. The cliche, “things are not always what they seem,” applies to a significant number of internal martial art moves.
THE COVERT ENERGIES: EMBEDDED WARD OFF, ROLL BACK, PRESS FORWARD, AND PUSH DOWNWARD

In some motions, as your arms are moving downward, either toward or away from your body, Ward Off energy can be projected from the outside of your arms toward the ground, causing an opponent to be bounced off your arm, as well as being simultaneously forced downward. For example, in the Yang style, this energetic projection occurs from the bottom hand in the Roll Back, Brush Knee, and Twist Step maneuvers.

Using the energy of Roll Back, but not its physical motion, you could be absorbing your opponent’s energy as your hands are advancing forward or moving upward. This technique is sometimes referred to as “stealing your opponent’s power.” For example, this technique is executed in the first half of the upper hand of White Snake Sticks Out Its Tongue, before you stab your opponent’s throat in the second half of the movement.

The energetic action of Press Forward, as well as going forward, is also present in many movements where the hands are returning to the body in a physical action that resembles Roll Back. Only here, as you are absorbing energy with the inside yin surfaces of your arm, you are either sequentially or simultaneously projecting energy from your elbows, along the outside of your arms, for a backward elbow strike.

The energy of Push Downward is often embedded and actively radiating along the underside of your arm, while your hands are moving straight ahead or upward. For example, in the Yang style, this radiating energy
occurs in two (among many) clear places: (1) in the upper arm of the Brush Knee and Twist Step posture, as your hand moves forward, and (2) as your arms are rising and going forward when performing the basic Push Downward posture. In the basic Push Downward posture of the original Chen style, the meaning is not so hidden, as your hands move physically downward to face the ground at hip height.

**FIVE: PULL DOWN (Tsai)**

Tsai or pull down simultaneously combines the two primary yin energies of Roll Back and Push Downward, in the obvious, hidden, and embedded ways in many postures. Pull Down, for example, fuses these energies together moving in the same direction. You simultaneously yield to and/or absorb an attacking man’s force while moving him downward, gradually or suddenly.

The sudden variety is sometimes used to cause an attacker to fall to the ground, suffer whiplash, or dislocate a joint. The movement is most obviously seen in the posture Pull Down between Play the Lute and Shoulder Stroke, just before White Crane Spreads Its Wings.

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Lieh or split is the opposite of Pull Down. It combines the two primary yang energies of Ward Off and Press Forward. In this move, which requires turning the waist, the two yang energies do not join together but, rather, from a common point of origin, move apart in opposite directions. This creates a tremendous release of energy, just like a bomb exploding.

“Lieh or split is the opposite of Pull Down. It combines the two primary yang energies of Ward Off and Press Forward.”
Split can be done two ways. Your hands and arms could be moving in opposite directions or one hand can remain fixed in space while the other pulls in the opposite direction. Split can be performed either forwards, backwards, sideways, or up and down. You could be combining two Ward Offs, two Press Forwards, or a combination of one Press Forward and one Ward Off. This method can be externally seen in the separating hands of the moves White Crane Spreads Its Wings, Fan through the Back, and Single Whip.

**SEVEN/EIGHT: ELBOW STROKE (Jou)/SHOULDER STROKE (Kao)**

Both Elbow Stroke and Shoulder Stroke are directly related to and commingled within the methodology of the Snake and the Crane in tai chi. According to one of the main legends, tai chi was created by watching a long fight between a crane and a snake. Now whether this happened or not, it metaphorically describes the two main processes from which all tai chi applications are constructed.

The first six basic energies (Ward Off, Roll Back, Press Forward, Push Downward, Pull, and Split) primarily focus on fighting applications that end in the forearms and hand, and are associated with the crane.

The last two, Elbow Stroke and Shoulder Stroke, are concerned with the snake. These movements use the elbow and the shoulder in some way. However, there is more to the story than the obvious implication that you
are striking your opponent with your elbow, as you do in external martial arts like Thai boxing, or with your shoulder, as you would in a shoulder block in American football.

In the solo forms of the later styles of tai chi (Yang, Wu, Hao, and Combination Forms) the majority of the elbow and shoulder techniques are not physically shown. In their solo forms, the full covert range of the techniques does clearly exist; however, in order for them to be understood, they must be taught with full explanations at the level of mental intent. Only in two-person fighting application practice does the full range of elbow and shoulder methods have physical expression.

The situation becomes clear, however, if you examine how the movements of the original Chen style are structured, where that which is hidden in the Yang style is made overt. In the original Chen style, you will see clear elbow movements with visibly powerful discharges of energy and shaking of the elbow, as well as clearly defined large circular shoulder movements that rotate in every direction.

During these overt elbow and shoulder moves, you will often see a hand that was distinctly moving cease its large movement and hover in space, making a tiny circle that follows the larger, emphasized shoulder or elbow movements.

Like the undulating motions that happen in a snake, you may also see mini-sequences that powerfully flow through an overtly clear shoulder and then elbow movement before culminating in a hand technique. In other

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variations, the shoulder, elbow, and hands will move together in a smooth, fused flow that is totally seamless and connected, like that of a crane flapping its wings.

ELBOW AND SHOULDER STROKES RELATE DIRECTLY TO THE CRANE AND THE SNAKE

The crane, which symbolizes unified movement, is an image that pertains to those techniques where there is a direct line of energy originating from the foot and lower tantien that completes itself in one clean movement culminating in the hand. This motion is said to mimic that of a crane flapping its wings to hit or block an attacking snake’s head.

The crane is an exceptionally graceful bird, a beautiful inspiration to watch as it languidly flaps its wings in slow, gently hypnotic, rhythmic waves. But it also can be fearsome. Indeed, when roused, it moves its wings at blinding speed.

In traveling over terrain, a snake undulates. It coils to store energy before it strikes, and it strikes rapidly, unfolding itself like a whip as it does so. Some snakes also coil defensively to wrap their attackers or to constrict prey to death. In the defensive stage of tai chi, if the hand is not enough to deflect an opponent’s force, the elbow takes up the slack and, if that fails, the shoulder comes into play. Or you use various combinations of the multiple folding of the arms to pull the opponent’s limbs, torso, or head closer and closer to your body.
In the attack phase of tai chi, a snakelike unfolding of the whip is expressed in a sequential series of rapid machine gun-like movements. A shoulder technique completing becomes an elbow technique, which becomes a forearm blow, which becomes an open or closed wrist and/or hand strike which, finally, becomes a finger thrust that finishes the opponent. If one technique is insufficient to do the job, you switch to the next. If one technique is partially impeded or completely countered, you move into the next with continuously connected rapid speed and fluidity.

This method allows you to slither around and circumvent your opponents, who may at any given instant bring more power than you to a specific contested fighting angle. In the attack stage of tai chi, you do not resist superior power, but flow around it like water, using different joints, until the next good opportunity presents itself. Your undulating whip sequence could possibly consist of a hit, throw, or joint-lock.

As mentioned, snake techniques are more overt in the original Chen style, and more hidden in the Yang style. The easiest place to witness this machine gun-like movement in the Yang or Wu style forms is in the transition sequence from right Shoulder Stroke to right White Crane Spreads Its Wings.

In Shoulder Stroke, you could obviously be hitting someone with your shoulder, usually to break the sternum or ribs and/or knock the wind out of the opponent by hitting the solar plexus. Next, you would hit the opponent in the torso with your elbow, usually with cutting action, then a back of the
wrist and hand strike (anywhere from the groin upward) and, finally, a finger strike or slap to the throat, face, or eyes.

In a second basic usage, you come up under an attacking man’s body, grab his right leg with your left hand (or his left leg cross-body, if you can get the angle) and with your right shoulder press into his body attacking and sticking. Then slide your arm over until you have a good attachment on his right side, the soft part of his midriff, his ribs, or his armpit. You are now in position to throw him. Before turning to the left to complete White Crane, you first turn to the right, beginning the raising of your elbow and hand.

At this time, you pull whichever leg you are holding to your left hand (ideally, checking his left leg with your right leg, if your left hand is holding his right leg) and, with the turning of your waist and the rising of your right elbow, throw him sideways to your right in an up/down cartwheel-like manner. If this throw is done well, both his feet should leave the ground.

On this way down, the side of his ribs initially faces the ground, however, people often twist in midair. He will land on his back or face depending on the kind of torque you have applied. During this whole procedure, your right hand does not touch his torso, only your right elbow and upper arm.

In the original Chen style, elbow movements are overtly shown at virtually every angle of a rotating circle: up, down, left, right, all diagonals, with the elbow both coming toward and moving away from the body. Beside serving as smashing and cutting strikes with the elbow tips, these elbow movements are also part of numerous joint and elbow locks.
The outward and forward downward movements away from the body are used more, but not exclusively, to lock the opponent’s elbows, knees, and kwa. The inward movements are used more, but not exclusively, to lock the wrist, ankles, hands, feet, and especially fingers.

The shoulder and elbow movements done together are also used to throw people on their backs, faces, and sides, when the front, side, or back of your own body is facing the opponent. These throws could occur in several ways.

The shoulder could be the contact point for the throw, being accomplished by using fa jin from the shoulder. Or if the contact point shifts from the shoulder to the upper arm to the elbow, the impetus for the throw would begin in the shoulder, but the throw itself would be completed by the elbow. Or the elbow contact point would break an attacking man’s balance, getting him onto his toes. Once he is in the air, your hand would grab him or stick to him, and with circular arm motion he would be launched up and out, away from your body, and also possibly downwards.

The striking movements of the shoulder follow all the figure-eight rotations of the elbow, and originate in the shoulder blade. Especially for body blows, and specifically to the heart, shoulder strikes can implement more damaging blows than elbows. They perform another very important function, and that is defense against being grabbed and held by one person, while another hits you.
A primary goal of muggers, wrestlers, or joint-lockers is to compress your body sufficiently so that your body and/or limbs cannot move. In essence, they want to put you in a straightjacket, so you have no room to wiggle or break free. In the worst-case scenario, you are held fast by one attacker, so you cannot defend yourself as his cohorts hit you. Here, shoulder movements are used to counter in three basic ways.

The first is to apply tai chi’s shaking power to discharge the continuing force away from your body. If you are held in the upper body, having a strong sudden Ward Off energy in your shoulder blades as you move them is necessary for success.

A second way is to use less Ward Off, and expand your shoulder blades away from your spine, causing your shoulders, back, and ribs to either round forward or expand sideward, as your chest hollows. This action increases the surface circumference your opponent is grabbing, thereby giving the illusion that you are squeezed tight, when in fact you are not. Keeping the arm circumference steady, you then shrink your body and create a first physical gap of wiggle room with which to maneuver and create an advantageous angle.

When you next shrink the circumference, a second little gap is created. This second gap then allows your arms to move again for a brief moment of time, which, if you are agile enough, is all you need to counterattack, first with an elbow and then a hand, often to the groin.
The third way is to shift whatever surface of your body an attacking man is holding by a rapid shoulder or hip turn or rotational movement, so as to create a gap of physical space. This created gap prevents your body and/or limbs from becoming immobile by compression, so you can break free during the gap that exists between his having touched you and his grip having settled in and accomplished its task. Rapid rotational shoulder movements here allow you to get the attacker to commit, and yet give you enough time to be gone when he arrives. In the internal martial arts in general, the tighter this gap, the more powerful and effective the counter.

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