

Keep Practicing

The South Puget Sound Tai Chi Newsletter

Empty Step Tai Chi Association

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Wearing the Moon

Our fourth Tai Chi principle is usually stated as 'Keep the back straight and the body upright.' More colorfully rendered as 'Wearing the Moon on Top of Your Head.'

This principle is to be followed throughout the 37-posture Yang Short Form, and provides the connection between the base of the stance established by 'rooting' and expression of the postures in the arms and hands (for example, PUSH).

While this upright posture is accomplished by straightening the spine and 'stacking' the vertebrae one atop the other like sections of a column, the Tai Chi Classics frequently encourage us to visualize this in the opposite direction. We are asked to hold ourselves as though we are suspended by a wire from a point on the ceiling to the top of our head. This image has the added benefit of promoting and encouraging relaxation while maintaining an upright posture of the body. This 'suspended head top,' along with the suggestions to 'relax' and to 'root,' help us to achieve the vertical orientation of the body without any tension associated with trying to artificially or superficially 'hold' ourselves upright. We can relax and let ourselves 'hang' in the correct position.

Another conceptual image that comes to us from our tradition is that of the Three Jewels, their relation and orientation. The Three Jewels are three points on the body, one at the crown of the head, one at the base of the nape of the neck and the third at the base of the spine (the coccyx or tailbone).

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Another beautiful day in the park; the Empty Steppers perform Professor Cheng Man Ching's Tai Chi Double Edge Sword Form..

Sword Practice

By Gary Wessels

This past summer we were really fortunate with our outdoor sword class at Titlow Park. With the extended clear weather we were able to have classes into October. This nice weather also encouraged more people to come to this class. By extending the class season we were able to present the entire form and have several weeks just for review.

It was during one of the last review classes that an interesting exchange occurred. After answering a question about one of the moves and then making corrections, I further clarified my corrections by reminding the students "to remember that this sword form is **tai chi** sword. You are doing **tai chi**, not just waving the sword around." The next week the student who had initially asked the question came up and thanked me for that clarification. It seems that in the rush to learn the specific moves of the form it hadn't been clear in his mind what he was really supposed to be doing. Basically,

he couldn't see the tai chi through the form. Oops! To use the popular vernacular, "That's my bad!" As the teacher I should not have let my goal of presenting the entire form during the time available get in the way of always having the basic tai chi principles at the center and core of the class. So that's what this article is about, TAI CHI SWORD.

The sword form varies from the open hand form in some interesting ways. The most apparent difference is that we are holding a sword in our hand. While being obvious, this does change the way we move. While we are controlling the sword, there is a momentum inherent to the movements that comes from this weighted object being moved around. Because of this momentum the foot work varies significantly from the open hand form. There are times when the feet do a kind of shuffle that never occurs in the open hand form. Also, on many

occasions, the weight is shifted very quickly from one foot to the next. We often go very quickly into and out of one legged postures. The important thing to remember regarding this (not forgetting that this is tai chi), is to pay attention to our root. Where is it? How does it establish and disconnect? Just because the movements and weight shifting is fast doesn't mean that the moves are not rooted. How do we shuffle the feet and have root? Good question! I can't directly give you a verbal answer. But the answer is available in your practice. I've often thought that one of the biggest benefits of the sword practice is directly linked to this 'learning how to quickly establish and disconnect our root.' Start playing with this and you will see a change in the rooting in your open hand form also.

The other biggest challenge in the sword form is not any specific move or posture, it is how we hold the sword. Almost uniformly I see students holding on too tightly to the sword. Most people use a white-knuckled death grip on the sword. Relax! This is tai chi, remember? Don't forget to keep a handle on the sword by forming the fingers into a loose ring and using the other fingers to keep the sword in balance and position. Reposition and re-grip the sword in virtually every move. Don't think of this re-gripping as a single action in a move, but as a continuous action that is ongoing throughout the form. In the sword form the function of any move is fairly obvious. (This is one of the fun things about the form.) The only times we need to have a firmer grip on the sword is at those times when the sword would actually be

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Sword Practice

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connecting with an opponent- either a stabbing or slicing motion. At all other times, the grip- while never losing control of the sword- does not need to be tight or firm.

We discussed briefly that the sword imparts a certain momentum to the form, but this does not mean that the sword controls the flow of the movements in the form. We, not the sword, still control the flow and direction of the movements. Where do the movements come from? Another trick question! Since this is still tai chi, the movements come from and are controlled by the waist. But you already knew that answer. While there are many times in the sword form that the sword is moved up or to the side of the body, in much of the form the sword hand stays in a central, mid-body position. This is essentially out from the dan tien. If the sword consistently floats out from this central position, you've lost control of the sword, and the sword is moving you, not you moving the sword. To move the sword, move the body. To move the body, turn the waist. To turn the waist, rotate on the root. It really is that simple.

Of course there's more that could be said, and each of the above items could be explained in more and more detail. But here's a better idea: Grab your sword and get in some practice!

Hope to see you next summer at our outdoor practice at Titlow Park! ☺

Wearing the Moon

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These three points are associated with internal energy (Chi) nexus points along the major meridians in the body. To promote proper circulation of Chi, it is suggested that these points be aligned vertically as we move through the various postures of the form, allowing our internal energy to flow freely. The use of



the Three Jewels conceptualization becomes another way to help to achieve an upright posture as we practice.

The generation and optimization of Chi flow in the body as we practice Tai Chi directly relates to the benefits we hope to access as a result of this practice. If we accept the view of Traditional Chinese Medicine that illness, injury or disease result from either an excess of Chi, a lack of Chi or an imbalance of Chi, it is evident that improvements in the generation and flow of Chi are key. If you are not convinced of this relationship derived of the thousands of years of empirical observation and evaluation, look to your own experience for confirmation of this. Practice every day, and begin to notice the general state of your well-being over time. If you are practicing diligently and correctly, the positive effects should be self-evident, which can then encourage greater dedication and commitment.

From a purely martial standpoint, keeping the back straight and the body upright accomplishes two important things. First, it prevents leaning. Leaning forward, backward or in any direction induces tension in the body as it cannot support itself without muscular intervention. So, one cannot relax completely if one is leaning (Try this! Lean in one direction and hold that lean over several minutes, . . . in short

order you should begin to receive the complaints of those muscles that are being asked to maintain such an imbalanced posture). Leaning is also a martial fault as it allows our opponent an opening to exploit by using our imbalance against us. Secondly, an upright posture allows us to maintain the widest field of view of our surroundings. With our head suspended as though from the ceiling, the eyes can take in all that is in front of us to the limits of our peripheral vision. If the body is not upright, or is tilted down, the amount we can see is reduced. So 'Back Straight, Body Upright' has martial benefits beyond the energy considerations discussed above.

It should be mentioned that there are a couple places in the form where the body is NOT upright as a result of the posture being performed and the martial application being executed. The two examples that come to mind are Snake Creeps Down (also known as 'Squatting Down') and Low Punch.

In Snake Creeps Down, after shifting the weight into the back foot, we are asked to sink down, or squat down as much as we can before shifting the weight forward, the left hand traveling along the left leg in a blocking movement before squaring the hips and shoulders, turning in the rear toe, and then going into either Golden Pheasant or Step Forward To Seven Stars Of The

Dipper. As we squat down, there is a bending at the waist that can occur as the left hand moves to protect the left knee. In this case, the back is not literally upright, BUT the admonition is that we keep the Three Jewels aligned. So, we are not strictly vertical, but by keeping the Three Jewels aligned, we can preserve the orientation that maximizes chi flow.

In Low Punch, we are in a 70-30 posture, but the back 'rolls over,' with the spine rounded as we punch. In this instance, the momentary relief from the overarching principle to keep the back straight and the body upright is necessary to briefly meet the martial obligations of the counterattack on our imaginary opponent (perhaps it is helpful to think of this in the same way as we do bending the wrists in the Introduction posture as a momentary breach of the principle of 'Beautiful Ladies' Hands).

Each of the principles we have examined interacts with each of the others to result in a way of moving that is at once, integrated, soft, controlled, open and deliberate. Relax, Separate Yin and Yang, Turn The Waist, and now Wearing the Moon on Top of your Head, all have deep connection to both the physicality of the movements we practice as well as the energetic flow of Chi which underlies all our movements. ☺

Empty Step Tai Chi Association

Upcoming Events

- Feb 14 – Advanced Class
- Mar 14 – Advanced Class
- Apr 11 – Advanced Class
- Apr 25 – World Tai Chi Day

For more information, find our website online at www.emptysteptaichi.com or call us at 253-973-7887.