

Welcome to T'ai Chi Ch'uan!

T'ai Chi Ch'uan (pronounced tie-jee chwen) is a time-honored Chinese martial art which weaves together meditation and self-protection with the wisdom of Chinese medicine, to create a marvelous health exercise.

We are studying the Yang style short form of T'ai Chi Ch'uan simplified by Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing.

Originally, T'ai Chi Ch'uan consisted of thirteen postures, but over the centuries the sequence was expanded; today the traditional Yang family form has over 100 postures, and takes about twenty minutes to complete. Professor Cheng simplified the form, making it more practical for modern life-styles, yet preserving its integrity.

Within Professor's form there is a "mini-form," a set of seventeen postures which concludes in the same way as the full form, and which is itself complete. We refer to this mini-form as the "First Third," and that is the place to begin. After beginners learn the First Third, they often elect to progress to the Intermediate level and learn the remaining postures.

- More important than memorizing the sequence of the form are 1) knowing how to stay safe and 2) the principles.

Staying Safe

The Classics tell us that our bodies must be stable and comfortable.

Stable, including healthy alignment in the legs and torso Relaxation requires stability, and since, in humans, stability is gained through mobility, it is engendered by relaxation. Our stability comes from our mobility within a comfortable, sustainable range. Healthy alignment involves feeling connected with balanced tone from your toes to your head top. "Knee above toe" is a saying you hear repeatedly in T'ai Chi. If your patella is in line with the center line of your foot, and if, in a 70/30 posture, it never goes beyond the toes, you probably have good balanced alignment all up the leg, and all should be well.

Comfort Part of a teacher's job is to nudge you ahead, but always listen to your own inner teacher a bit more than any external one. It's your job to listen to your body and not to do too much, go too far, or push yourself too hard. We don't use force in T'ai Chi Ch'uan, and that includes not using force on ourselves! Force invites injury; exploring your limit within your own comfort zone promotes healing.

The Principles

The principles are distilled from the T'ai Chi Classics, a collection of written wisdom handed down and refined by generations of T'ai Chi proponents. These principles guide our practice, but are also useful in daily life. We aspire to be:

Relaxed Relaxation engenders flowing energy that does not hold, grasp or strain. Relaxation is at the sweet spot between being strained and being flaccid. We can let go of all excess tension while occasioning a vitality of wholeness. We aspire to achieve the condition of open awareness and concentrated attention embodied by a baby with its fingers around a toy. As

we go through the form, if we feel ourselves getting hard or tight, we can gently encourage a softening, opening and releasing. When we notice places of under-engagement, we can wake them up.

Aligned There's another sweet spot, as gravity pulls us both down and up (and yin flows to yang and yang flows to yin), wherein we are suspended between heaven and earth. We can find the balance through relaxation. The spine is an energy pathway for our ch'i. We want the numberless conduits of ch'i throughout us to be open, so that flow can be balanced and regulated.

Centered Mind and spirit abide and dwell in our physical center, inside the tummy. This point is known in Japanese as hara, in the yogic system it's a chakra, and in Chinese medicine it's the lower tan t'ien. I think of it as the place where you get a gut feeling or butterflies in your tummy: the wisdom of the belly. The center moves smoothly, continuously flowing yet grounded as the rest of the body moves in response to its impetus. Everything comes from, and connects back to, our center.

Aware The Classics ask us to be mindful of the differences between substantial and insubstantial. Yin and Yang are the dynamic complementary states of being (receptive and creative, earth and heaven, pull and push, in and out, compression and expansion, etc.) which oscillate, flowing into and out of one another. Thus we attune to differences in our bodies, initially by shifting our weight from one leg to another, developing conscious awareness of the changes natural to being alive, including feelings of empty and full.

Open Six meridians run through each of our arms with ch'i flowing through many gates in the wrists and hands. Our hands are in front of us a lot of the time, and we work with them constantly. This makes hands and wrists ideal starting points to notice excess tension and holding patterns, and to soften, open and transform. Eventually this openness extends everywhere; hands are an easy place to start.

Through these and other principles of the practice we become more connected, integrated, nimble, supple, springy, light, alert, awake, comfortable, coordinated, innervated...

Style and Lineage

Yang Lu-ch'an, originator of the Yang family form, was born around 1800 and was in charge of self-defense for the Imperial family of China. He taught the form to his sons, one of whom was Yang Chien-ho. Yang Chien-ho in turn taught his sons, one of whom was Yang Cheng-fu. Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing learned the Yang style form from Yang Cheng-fu. Professor did not want T'ai Chi Ch'uan to die in the fast-changing modern world, and he wanted people to be able to learn T'ai Chi Ch'uan more quickly, so it would be more accessible. With support from his T'ai Chi "family," he shortened the Yang form to 37 postures, inside of which is an even shorter, mini-form, known as the "First Third."

For more recommended reading, see [Resources and Articles](#)