

The Yin and Yang in Tai Chi — Chief Instructor Brett Wagland

“Tai Chi is born from wuji and is the mother of yin and yang. In motion they separate, in stillness they combine.”
– *Tai Chi Classics*

When you begin learning Tai Chi, you hear a lot about the term yin and yang. However, how do yin and yang apply to this art and how can they be used to improve our skill and understanding in our practice?



Traditionally, the Taoists say that Tai Chi is born from Wuji, a state of no-thingness (non-duality). Once movement arises, yin and yang become distinguishable : light and dark, soft and hard, left and right, internal and external and so on. The interplay of yin and yang generates various forms. In stillness, yin and yang once again become indistinguishable.

The Taoists thought deeply about the nature of the world. They wanted to know the reason things change. Through their investigation, they discovered that **everything is in a state of constant flux** : summer changes to autumn, night to day, life to death and so on. Through their observation, the Taoists discovered a principle that explains these changes and they called it yin yang, the interplay of opposites. Although they appear to be opposites at first, they are in fact intimately related, like two sides of a coin.

In our Tai Chi classes, yin and yang are introduced in the very beginning, first as the intangible component of training the mind and then as the tangible aspect of regulating the body. Mentally, we learn to calm the mind. We replace the many discordant thoughts with one thought or image. This has the effect of **slowing the activity of the brain waves from the more active beta waves to the more relaxing alpha waves**. Within the alpha frequency range, we begin to experience stillness gradually uniting yin and yang. The deeper the state of stillness, the less separation there is between activity and inactivity. When we begin to move in the Tai Chi form, the difference between yin and yang becomes greater and more noticeable. In the higher levels, stillness is ever present while we are moving through the form.

For most students, learning to relax can be quite challenging. It is something quite foreign to us. We spend our whole lives doing and trying to achieve, so it is rare for us to look at quietness or relaxation. For some of us, it is almost a sign of weakness. We all carry **tension in our bodies**. This means that there is **an imbalance of excess**

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Launceston St, opposite Eddison Park



yang. So, in order to return to balance, we need to know how to relax. We do this by learning to calm the mind and loosen the body. Nowadays, it is quite common for athletes to practise meditation or progressive relaxation techniques to enhance their on-field performance. This is different from Tai Chi. We learn to combine relaxation and stillness while doing the Tai Chi form. Once you learn Tai Chi, you will begin to realise just how beneficial this state is to your health and well being.

At first, we do not realise how tense we are. Only once we begin to move do we feel our tension and awkwardness. When we see our instructors demonstrating, the movements appear easy and we may notice how fluid their movements are compared with ours. At workshops, I adjust students’ posture, enabling them to feel the difference between hard force derived from tension and strength from relaxation with structural integrity. **Learning to relax is a process that takes time and practice**, so be patient and don’t try too hard to relax. This will then become another form of tension.

Understanding the yin yang principle in Tai Chi helps you relax and achieve the most balanced mental and physical condition possible. Tension is yang, relaxation is yin. If the body is too yang, it will be stiff and blood flow will be restricted. If it is too yin or soft, you lose your structure and your movements become too empty. When yin and yang are balanced, it is truly Tai Chi. **Balance is not a static state**. It must constantly adapt to the changes around it and from within. The human body is always trying to achieve this. However, if we continuously put too much stress on the body, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, negative thinking, late nights, etc., we will push the body too far, making it harder to come back into balance.



To understand and apply the principle of yin yang, we **need awareness** and the ability to feel or sense what the body is doing. If you cannot feel your body, you will not be able to apply the yin yang principle. In

our Tai Chi classes, there are exercises, beginning with the warm-up, to help you to become aware of how you use your body. You learn to relax and adjust your shoulders, elbows, wrists, even your fingers, spine, waist, hips, knees and ankles. The deep relaxation Fa Soong Gong movements (such as Balancing Yin Yang, Palm Press, Pouring Energy from One Palm into Another) are invaluable tools for enabling you to learn to move the body in an effortless way. The practice of Qigong (energy cultivation) develops deep states of calmness and enables you to sense the flow of energy (qi) through the body. These experiences have a **very beneficial impact on the nervous system**, leading to greater degrees of awareness. **Being able to sense changes in the body early enhances our ability to self-adjust.** We can detect the rising of tension before it becomes embedded in our muscles or organs. We become more aware of our environment and how certain things affect our state of well being. This also helps us to adjust to change. By practising our Tai Chi regularly, our whole body-mind-energy will become more robust and less affected by pressures.



It is through the practice of the Tai Chi form that we really become familiar with the principle of yin yang. **We learn to separate solid from empty from the very beginning of standing still getting ready to do the form.** When most people stand, they are top heavy. This is a sign of tension held in the upper body. It causes their breathing to be in the chest and their knees are usually locked. When you practise the Qigong exercise of Lowering the Qi, you are learning to relax your upper body. The resulting relaxation lowers your centre of gravity and causes the breathing to go down to the lower abdomen. You will feel your legs and feet heavier and more grounded. This is already allowing you to experience yin and yang as the lower body becomes more solid (yang) and the upper body lighter (yin).



In order to move in the Tai Chi form, we separate yin and yang by transferring our weight to one leg which becomes solid, so that we can move the other leg which is empty. In other words, the supporting leg is solid (yang) and the stepping leg is empty (yin). Once we place the empty leg down (by landing the foot with the whole heel first), we gradually transfer the weight into this leg. **Being able to transfer the weight gradually from one leg to the other is also noticing that yin and yang are connected (instead of being separate).** Yin is becoming yang and yang is becoming yin. Just as in the yin yang symbol, the seed of yin is within yang and vice versa. This constant alternating of yin and yang strengthens the body and eventually produces an elastic type of strength called jin. Untrained strength is called li which is similar to a piece of wood that is hard and yet brittle. On the other hand, jin is strong

yet flexible, like a refined steel or bamboo. The more you practise with feeling and awareness, the more you will understand the subtlety of the interplay of yin and yang and so the greater your enjoyment and benefit.

As a martial art, Tai Chi uses softness to overcome hardness or a lesser force to overcome a greater one. To achieve this, we need to learn Push Hands, a two person exercise that teaches us to apply the yin yang principle in self-defence. This training develops sensitivity and a strength called pung jin (ward off power). **Ward off** is a tempered strength which is more like a strong spring. It develops in you a special type of strength that is difficult for an opponent to handle. Practising with a partner allows you to learn to adjust your own strength according to your partner's force (interplay of yin and yang). Gradually, you develop a higher degree of sensitivity called ting jin (listening energy).



In the Tai Chi Classics, it says that one is so sensitive that a fly cannot alight. When one stands, one is like a balanced scale that even a feather will set in motion. This refers to the ability to change from firmness to softness, depending on the opponent's force. With such skill, your opponent will find it very hard to control you. It is like a snake that can move very fast or a fish that senses movement in the water. Another term used to describe a high level of skill in Tai Chi is **dong jin** (understanding energy). At this level, you are able to sense any minute change in the opponent's body and therefore you are able to take advantage of it. It also means that you can change from yin to yang endlessly, giving a feeling of smoothness and constant pressure on your opponent while in motion. In internal martial arts, we say, "You are alive!" If you use force against force, it is dead force – stuck and cannot change.

Applying the yin yang principle in your practice will lead to a state of **dynamic balance**, that is, Tai Chi. This balance is important in all aspects of life. Once we get stuck in our emotions or thinking, we will suffer. **Practising Tai Chi enables us to regulate the body-mind, helping us adapt to changes and ultimately making us more resilient and stronger.** Even though we are constantly changing, we learn to BE in the moment. We learn to be happy in our own skin, accepting ourselves no matter how many changes there are. This gives us a great feeling of freedom!

