

Yang Chengfu's Ten Guiding Principles

(杨澄甫太极拳术十要)

1. Light and insubstantial energy at the top of the head (虚灵顶劲)

To enable *shen* (神) to rise to the top of the crown, the head must be upright. Do not use strength. Although your head can be upright if you use strength, blood and *qi* cannot flow smoothly. So although there is the will to let *Shen* rise to the top, if it is forced, there is no *Shen* rising, and you will not attain mental clarity.

2. Contain the chest and Pull up the back (含胸拔背)

The chest is drawn in to enable the *qi* to sink gently down to *Dantian* (丹田). Do not expand the chest. If you do, then *qi* will rush to your chest resulting in “top heavy, bottom light”, and your heels will float up. Raising the back means *qi* focusing on your back. If you can raise your back, you can emit internal strength from your spine, enabling you to be victorious in combat.

3. Loosen the waist and kua (松腰胯)

The waist is the commander of the whole body. Loosening your waist enables your feet to be strong so that your stance is stable. All the variations and interactions of empty and solid are executed from the waist. Thus, there is the saying, “The will of life has its source at the waist.” Those who fail to acquire power in their combat should remedy the situation at the waist.

4. Distinguish empty and solid (分虚实)

Differentiating between empty and solid is the first fundamental of Taijiquan. If the whole weight of the body is over the right leg, then the right leg is solid, and the left leg is empty. If the whole weight is over the left leg, then the left leg is solid, and the right leg is empty. When empty and solid can be differentiated, movement becomes agile, as if effortless. If not, then your movements become heavy, and stances are unstable and can be easily exploited by the opponent.

5. Sink the shoulders and drop the elbows (沉肩坠肘)

Sinking shoulders means that both the shoulders are relaxed and dropped down naturally. If the shoulders are not sunken, but raised, then *qi* rises and the whole body will lack power. “Drop the elbows” means that both the elbows are relaxed and dropped naturally. If the elbows are raised, the shoulders will not sink, and the flow of *qi* will not be far-reaching. This weakness is similar to the weakness in external kung fu known as “interrupted power”.

6. Use mind intent not strength (用意不用力)

The Taijiquan classics say: “All this means use mind and do not use strength.” When you practice Taijiquan, your whole body must be relaxed. There must not be even one ounce of strength in the sinews, bones, and blood vessels, or it will result in self-restriction. When you have attained complete relaxation, you are able to be flexible and agile in your movements. You will be able to move freely any easily.

Some people may wonder: “How can we develop power without using strength?” This is because our body possesses meridians, just as the earth possesses ditches and channels. If the channels are not blocked, water flows smoothly. Similarly, if the meridians are not blocked, qi flows harmoniously.

If the whole body is tense with strength, qi and blood flow are blocked, and movements become awkward. Even if you pull a hair, the whole body moves.

If you use mind instead of strength, then wherever your mind directs it, the qi will follow. Thus, you must have your qi and blood flowing smoothly every day, all over your body, without interruptions at any time. If you do this persistently, then you will develop true inner strength.

The Taijiquan classics say, “When you are extremely soft, then you become extremely hard and powerful.” The arm of a Taijiquan expert is like iron wrapped in cotton and is extremely powerful and solid. For those who are trained in external martial arts, they are powerful when they use strength, but light and floating when they do not. Using strength without using mind easily results in instability, which is not a complete art.

7. Upper and Lower body follow one another (上下相随)

The meaning of coordination between top and bottom is revealed in the Taijiquan classics: “The root is in the feet, released through the legs, controlled by the waist, and materialized in the hands and fingers.” From the feet, to the legs, to the waist, the action is complete “in one qi”. Hand movements, waist movements, leg movements, and even the eye movements — all are in one unified movement. Only this can be said to be top and bottom coordination. If there is one movement lacking, if there is any interruption, the unified movement becomes disorderly.

8. Inner and Outer are united (内外相合)

The focus of Taijiquan is the training of *Shen*. Thus the phrase: “The Shen is the commander, the body is the agent.” When the *Shen* is trained, movements and actions become naturally light and agile. Taijiquan patterns are none other than movements of solid and real, opening and closing. By opening is meant not only the hands and legs are extended; by closing is meant not only that the hands and legs brought back — but also that the mind and will are brought back. If the internal and the external can be united into one qi, it means there is no separateness in the cosmos.

9. Move with Continuity (相连不断)

In external martial arts, power is the result of brute force. Thus, there is beginning and completion, continuity and then interruption. When the old strength is spent, and new strength has not been generated — that is the instant to take advantage of them. Taijiquan uses mind, not strength. From beginning to end, it is continuous, without any break. After each cycle it starts again, circulating without end. The original classics say that it is “like the continuous waves of the Long River”, and that the circulation of power is like “drawing silk from a cocoon.” The above conveys the idea of stringing the movements together into one harmonious qi.

10. Seek stillness in movement (动中求静)

External martial arts stress leaping and bouncing as desirable. Much strength is expended, thus the exponents pant for breath after training. In Taijiquan, stillness controls movement. When one moves, there is also stillness. Therefore, while practicing Taijiquan, the slower the movement, the better. When the movements are slow, breathing becomes deep and long, and the qi sinks down to Dantian. Naturally, this keeps the pulse from elevating. If the student practices carefully he may be able to comprehend the meaning behind these words.