



*Berkshire  
Tai Chi*

*The Concept of “Balance” in  
Tai Chi Chuan*

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# *The Concept of “Balance” in Tai Chi Chuan.*

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Members' Resources  
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## **The Concept of "Balance" in Tai Chi.**

*When we ask newcomers why they have decided to join a Tai chi class, many say it is because they "want to improve [their] balance".*

*Health care professionals may even have recommended such classes, inspired by recent research findings that regular Tai Chi practice can significantly reduce the risk amongst the elderly of falling. Berkshire Tai Chi itself runs a "Balance for Life" programme aimed at precisely these people, for whom the fear of falling is a very real source of anxiety, and it is certainly true that there are relevant benefits to be gained from regular practice, irrespective of the style studied.*

*However, "balance" is more than "not falling over". Indeed, a full understanding of balance is absolutely central to developing a better grasp of Tai Chi and to our skill development as practitioners.*

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To fully appreciate just how important the notion of "balance" is in Tai Chi, we have first to recognise the Taoist roots of this sophisticated martial art.

Taoism believes that everything in the world is predominantly either Yin or Yang. Yin and Yang are opposite qualities which complement each other.

This idea is represented by "the" Tai Chi from which the martial art derives its name; *Tai Chi **Chuan***, or "Yin/Yang **Boxing**".



**The Tai Chi**

*Yang is light and rises,  
Yin is dark and sinks.*

Since harmony is Yin and Yang in perfect balance with neither overpowering the other, an excess of either quality is considered harmful and must be avoided. However, the world is forever changing and so this balance between Yin and Yang is also in a state of constant flux; a dynamic balance not a fixed equilibrium. Sometimes, Yang will be in the ascendant, sometimes Yin. Given that excesses are a threat to the steady state, harmony can only be maintained if the natural order of things moderates the growing influence of Yang by increasing the power of Yin, and *vice versa*. If this situation does not regulate itself automatically (as in the case of illness), then there is a need for intelligent intervention.

This is the basis of all traditional Chinese thinking and is as relevant in the fields of politics and economics as it is in the visual arts and medicine. The true sage is the one who can read the signs of the times and knows how, how much, and when to intervene and, perhaps more importantly, when *not* to. *Wu wei*, or letting things take their natural course without interference or resistance - acting in accordance with the times when the tide of events is running in your favour and staying your hand when it is not - is a recurrent theme in Taoism. Ignoring the signs and acting at the wrong time, or inappropriately, is to court disaster.

Tai Chi Chuan is similarly governed by this duality. It has at its very heart the concept of "balance" in this broader sense, harmonising opposites on the physical, the mental, and the emotional level.

On the physical level, we seek to balance movement (Yang) with stillness (Yin), and power (Yang) with relaxation (Yin). We must learn to how to balance the following within each move:

- SPEED: fast / slow
- DIRECTION: up / down  
left / right  
in / out
- MOVEMENT QUALITY: hard/soft
- SPIRALLING: open / closed
- WEIGHT: full / empty

When we extend this idea to fighting applications, we have to balance not only our own energy, but that of our opponent; neutralising their attack and taking control of their centre. Yin against Yang, Yang against Yin.

But Tai Chi is an internal martial art where the mind guides the body. That is one important reason why we stand before practising the Form. When we stand, be it in *Wuji* or *Zhan Zhuang*, we are trying to improve our spatial awareness in order to balance the body so that it is plumb erect, leaning neither forwards nor backwards, neither left nor right. In this position, the *Dantien* is supported and the whole body is connected through correct alignment of the skeleton. The

muscles can relax, tension is dissipated, and we work with gravity to become more rooted. However, to achieve this state of equilibrium, the mind needs to be relaxed; present, yet not intruding. We aim to maintain a detached awareness of bodily sensations. This calls for a balance between internal focus (on the physical sensations at play) and an external awareness of the world around us. The classics tell us we should devote 50% of our awareness to the inner world and 50% to the sights and sounds which surround us.

Excessive focus on the internal stagnates the chi; we become overwhelmed by "noise" and unable to understand what is going on. Too many people try to control their posture, constantly shifting to try and find a better position. This is counter-productive, confusing the senses and disorientating the mind.

Excessive focus on the external, distracts us from our observation of internal sensations and robs us of sensitivity to the workings of our own body.

Dispassionate observation of our inner self calls for active listening; a balancing of focused engagement with passive observation, where distracting thoughts which intrude are not held but allowed to pass. At this stage, there is clearly a meditative quality to standing. It is at this level that there is a direct link to mood and the emotions; and through them to behaviour, since thoughts and feelings influence the way we act.

In a martial context, emotional stability is important. As the *Tao te Ching* tells us, "a good soldier is not violent, a good fighter is not angry". Clearly, a soldier exercises violence and aggression is a feature of fighting, but this is *controlled* aggression. It is not gratuitous violence, nor is the aggression indiscriminate. One has to know when to approach things tangentially, not head on; when to defuse a confrontation; when to decide it is unnecessary to exercise overwhelming superiority - therefore when to stop. A Tai Chi exponent should not injure someone when there is no need to, but equally he should not be afraid to demonstrate his ability to do so if it will lead to a peaceful resolution. As Master Sun wrote: "Those who render others' armies helpless without fighting are the best of all...One who is good at martial arts overcomes others' forces without battle.." Emotional balance equates to emotional health and leads to balanced actions in tune with the demands of the moment.

So, Tai Chi is about developing balance on many different levels. It is no coincidence that the highest level of accomplishment according to Grandmaster Chen is typified by being able to hold Yin and Yang in equal measure, with neither more dominant than the other.

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## **The Author**

### **Philip Larsson**



Philip has been practising Tai Chi Chuan since 1988 and teaching since 1995. In 1996, together with his friend and training partner, Trevor Priest, he set up Berkshire Tai Chi to spread traditional Yang and Chen style Tai Chi Chuan throughout the Royal County.

Since 1999, he has been studying under Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and, in 2002, he also began training with Grandmaster Chen's middle son, Chen Yingjun whom he co-hosts on Master Chen's regular visits to Berkshire.

In 2005 Philip went to study for a period in Chenjiagou, the birthplace of Tai Chi Chuan, becoming a full-time professional instructor three years later.

He is a regular instructor at various venues throughout Berkshire. In keeping with traditional Taoist principles, he is keen to ensure that Tai Chi Chuan is taught in a balanced way, with equal emphasis being placed on the martial and the health aspects of the art. He has designed and run in-house health and relaxation programmes for commercial organisations such as Nortel Networks and Henley Management College, as well as therapeutic classes for students with physical and mental health problems. In particular, he has experience of working with Parkinson's sufferers, arthritics and recovering stroke victims.

Private lessons can be arranged on request.

Besides his regular training with Grandmaster Chen and Chen Yingjun, since 1988 Philip has met, and attended courses run by, other leading Tai Chi teachers including Yang Jwingming, Chen Bing, Du Xianming, Ji Jiancheng, Chen Lei, and Mike Sigman.

In 2014 Philip received his certificate of proficiency from Grandmaster Chen.



# *Berkshire Tai Chi*

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