



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

Philip Larsson

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The Concept of "Flow" in Tai Chi.

To most people, mention of Tai Chi conjures up an image of gentle flowing movements and serenity; rhythmic, fluid motion with a meditative quality. It is this quality which actually attracts many people to Tai Chi in the first place. Consequently, when someone starts to learn a Tai Chi form by practising a series of discrete postures, one number at a time, many Beginners start to doubt whether this is "true" Tai Chi and often become disenchanted with the class in the belief that this is the opposite of what they should actually be doing because "it doesn't flow".

This is not so. The fault lies with their understanding.

The photograph on the right is of a piece of calligraphy Grandmaster Chen produced for us a few years ago which we have hanging in the office. The characters are translated as "*Chi flowing*"; a central theme in all Master's teachings. Herein lies the misunderstanding.

Put simply, we need to distinguish between fluidity of movement on one hand and flow of *chi* on the other. Both are central to Tai Chi thinking and are inextricably linked, one to the other. One cannot exist without the other, indeed *chi* flow is a pre-requisite for flowing movement. Flowing movement sustains and enhances *chi* flow.

If we look at this in more prosaic and practical terms, the point is a very simple one. A Form is merely a series of static postures linked by transitions. If the posture lacks structural integrity, this will have obvious consequences.

First, it will lack strength; the various parts of the body will not be properly connected and aligned, and so the root will be less substantial and power will not be conveyed smoothly through the body to, and from, the ground.

Second, tension will be created in the body as the muscles have to compensate for postural misalignments.

Third, if the initial posture is not optimal then it follows that the next transition will be impeded due to the weak root, tension, and poor co-ordination occasioned by the inability to link all parts of the body appropriately. In the chain reaction which is "the Form", the next posture will be compromised by the deficient transition.

Conversely, a lack of deviation in structure (that is, deviation from the optimal) will support increased fluidity of movement.

In Chinese terminology, the flow of *chi* will be better, the better the postural connections. It will also be encouraged and sustained by slow, continuous, and



"Chi Flowing"
Calligraphy by
Grandmaster
Chen Xiaowang

mindful transition from one optimal posture to the next, where the connections established in stillness are maintained during movement.

This flow of *chi* is experienced by the practitioner as an effortless movement accompanied by a sense of physical power. Effective practice also generates warmth throughout the body and they will quickly find their hands and feet become very warm and slightly swollen as the blood vessels relax and dilate.

Good posture, relaxed, co-ordinated movement, deep breathing, the engagement of multiple muscle groups throughout the body, continuous gentle rotation of the joints, and mental focus all bring benefits for our health.

The Chinese would, of course, explain this in slightly different terms but the end result is the same.

So, if you want to develop fluidity of movement, take time to stand still properly first.

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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

Website: www.berkshiretaichi.co.uk

Email: info@berkshiretaichi.co.uk

Tel.: 0118 966 3104

Mobile:



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