



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

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The Concept of "Yielding" in Tai Chi.

Yielding is a concept which lies at the heart of using Tai Chi for defence and yet it is one which causes many people quite a few problems when they first come to try pushing hands or practise applications.

The notion of yielding is derived from early Taoist texts, most notably, perhaps, the *Tao te Ching*, which encourages us to

*"Yield and overcome,
Bend and be straight".*

Chapter 22

Whilst "*Bend and be straight*" is comparatively straightforward to understand in a Tai Chi context (where we store energy in the lower back before releasing it using the flexibility of the spine like a longbow), the idea of "yielding" to overcome is much more difficult to understand.

This is arguably due in large part to the approximations of translation.

The English verb "to yield" carries with it the connotation of "capitulation". Indeed, the Oxford Mini-dictionary defines "capitulate" as "to surrender" or "to yield". The three are synonymous and as such are inappropriate when describing a principle of self-defence.

This is not a case of playing with words. Since we are all sensitive to the subtle nuances of language, these overtones are, I believe, particularly significant. What we have here is nothing less than a fundamental misrepresentation of the idea to which the term refers.

Consider the definition of "yield" in the same dictionary.

Yield

Surrender, do what is asked or ordered; allow victory, or right of way, to another; be able to be forced out of the natural shape".

In a self-defence situation, "surrender" equates to defeat, whilst the notion of being "forced out of our natural shape" represents a clear violation of the Tai Chi principle of maintaining our centre. This entails preserving a sound, rooted structure where the whole body is able to work effectively as one single, grounded unit because deviation has been reduced progressively to the bare minimum.

These negative overtones can easily lead to our developing not only an inappropriate understanding of what we should be doing, but also a defeatist mind-set.

One solution may lie in using a term which is more suited to the practice of Tai Chi, irrespective of its linguistic match to the original Chinese word.

What is usually called "yielding" describes the skill of moving in such a way that we do not meet force head on with an opposing force. Even in the face of great force or pressure, we are able to preserve our structure and keep our centre supported in all directions and under control¹.

In doing so, we do not oppose directly, but rather aim to undermine the source of an opponent's power in such a way that they become increasingly weaker and more vulnerable. It is only once we have robbed them of their power that we counter, applying strength against weakness.

The aim, to put it simply, is to destroy their root and their structure and take control of their centre of gravity; the very opposite of "yielding".

Unfortunately, many people construe the idea of "yielding" as being an instruction to simply go backwards when pushed. This is ultimately ineffective as we can only go back so far before we either fall over or get trapped. We are then easily manipulated and unable to protect ourselves.

This does not mean it is wrong to go back, only that we should never go back without doing something else as well. The image of a rolling ball is apposite here. Only if you push dead centre and straight along the axis of the ball can you channel all your energy through it. The slightest deviation and the ball will roll, deflecting some of the force and dissipating the power; to a greater or lesser extent depending upon how far off the ideal alignment our push actually is. A spinning sphere will easily cause a pellet fired at it to ricochet.

In Tai Chi, possibly a better term than "yielding" would be "neutralising", when applied to an opponent's energy, "rendering it ineffective" to use the dictionary definition. This term is not only more accurate, it is also much more positive in tone, suggesting, as it does, action to combat an opponent's move.

Neutralising energy involves three key elements or skills:

1. Following
2. Sinking
3. Deflecting

¹ Please see also *Chen Xiaowang's 5 Levels of Accomplishment*.

1. Following

As we saw earlier, in Tai Chi we never directly oppose force with force. This we call "Yang against Yang" and it is one of the first instinctive reactions we have to lose through training. To do so involves not only overcoming an innate response but also the power of our ego. Psychologically, this is something everybody struggles with to some degree. Instead, we learn to follow incoming energy in order to absorb it before re-directing it to keep our own centre whilst capturing our opponent's.

2. Sinking

As we follow the force, we need to protect the *dantien*. In doing so, we have to maintain our root. We do this by relaxing, keeping good posture, and sinking into the hip *kwa*. The importance of this is hard to overstate, and it is critical when retreating that we do not just go back, but back and down at the same time.

3. Deflecting

Deflection ("turning aside" in the dictionary) potentially comprises two elements which may be applied simultaneously, depending on the context:

- **Turning**

Rotation in one plane around a fixed point, typically the vertical axis of the spine.

- **Spiralling**

Rotation along a horizontal axis or a moving pivot point.

The end result is a continuous re-direction, or changing of angle, whose ultimate purpose is to neutralise an incoming force by dissipating the energy, causing an opponent's structure to collapse and their centre of gravity to be displaced. It is about keeping control of ourselves whilst taking control of our opponent. "Yielding" will not achieve either objective.

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The Author

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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.



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