



## *The 5 Levels of Competence*

*According to Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang*

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## *The 5 Levels of Competence*

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The term “*Kung fu*” (or “*Gongfu*”) is widely used nowadays to mean “*Martial Art*”. In Chinese, however, it really refers to a ‘*competence*’ or ‘*skill*’. By that token, driving a car or playing the piano is just as much “*a kung fu*” as is Tai Chi.

Grandmaster Chen has identified five levels of *kung fu* within Tai Chi which I refer to here as levels of ‘*accomplishment*’, since he outlines a progression in five stages from absolute beginner to grand master, explaining what will have been achieved at each stage as the student moves on through the levels, developing and refining his, or her, skills and capabilities as they go along.

The resulting road map can help to guide us in our daily practice and point us to those areas where we need to improve. It also helps to put what can so easily be an unclear, meandering path into some sort of context for us so that we can more clearly see both how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

Most of all, however, it paints an inspiring picture of what can be achieved with a receptive mind, competent instruction and sheer perseverance.

What follows is a précis of Master’s writings, starting with his introduction to learning Tai Chi Chuan.

### **Introduction**

*“Learning Tai Chi means to educate oneself. It is like slowly advancing from primary school to university. As time passes, more and more knowledge is gained. Without the foundations of primary school and secondary school, one will not be able to follow the seminars at university. Studying Tai Chi requires us to start at the very bottom, working our way systematically and step by step towards the more advanced levels.”*

### Level 1

#### Yin Yang Balance

10% Yin  
90% Yang



Level 1 begins with mastering the individual postures so that we can discover and understand the internal and external forces of the body.

At this stage, martial skill is extremely limited because individual movements are not very co-ordinated or systematic. Because the stances are not yet correct, the energy produced or the power developed is stiff, broken, weak or excessive. The Form appears empty and angular. The body does not work as one unified whole.

This level of *kung fu* cannot be used for self-defence.

If someone is capable of holding yin and yang at balance within himself, we call this “50% yin, 50% yang”; that person can make use of his full potential. This is the highest level of proficiency in Tai Chi.

### Level 2

#### Yin Yang Balance

20% Yin  
80% Yang



In Level 2 there is still too much rigidity evident during training, and the use of force is disproportionate. The movements are un-coordinated.

Resolving these imperfections provides an organic flow of internal energy through the body; there will be good co-ordination and the student should be able to easily perform each movement in accordance with Tai Chi principles.

However, he or she still lacks precision when executing each of the moves. It is hard to control and synchronise the different parts of the body. The principles of Silk Reeling are not incorporated properly into the form.

If the practitioner feels uncomfortable in the individual postures, they should correct the position of the legs and hips in accordance with the mechanics of Silk Reeling. The student should practise the form in a very determined way so that the entire body is aligned and the movements co-ordinated. Martial ability will still be quite limited.

### Level 3

#### Yin Yang Balance

30% Yin  
70% Yang



When practising the Form, one should pay great attention to the awareness.

In Level 1 awareness is focussed on learning the outward appearance of the Form sequence. In Level 2 awareness is concentrated on deviation.

By the time Level 3 has been reached, the goal is sensitivity not brute force. The movements should be soft and relaxed not “spongy” or floppy, heavy but not ponderous. The entire body should be very well co-ordinated.

At this stage, avoid concentrating on internal sensations at the expense of being aware of the world around you. Breathe naturally. Now a deeper understanding of the martial aspects of the system is needed.

Practise Pushing Hands and develop the ability to neutralise and issue energy.

By the end of level 3 martial capability, though improving, is still limited. Yielding or issuing power still requires too much effort and the body is still too rigid.

### Level 4

#### Yin Yang Balance

40% Yin  
60% Yang



Spiral movements become smaller. This is the stage where we are nearing accomplishment and the skill level is high.

The student understands the applications and martial concepts concealed within the movements. The whole body moves as one. Every movement in the Form should be connected with the idea of an attacking opponent. Martial capability is considerably greater than in Level 3. The practitioner can neutralise an attacking force and issue explosive power in a very targeted way. He can adapt to an opponent’s force and, in so doing, counter it effectively.

Level 5

**Yin Yang Balance**

50% Yin  
50% Yang



Small circular movements become smaller and smaller until they are invisible. Movements are flexible and gentle; the Form is relaxed and dynamic. Every movement incorporates unbroken, whole-body power. Every part of the body becomes a weapon, whilst the practitioner remains adaptable and agile.

A person on Level 5 is considered a good master.

*Abridged from:*

*The Five Levels of Taijiquan by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, annotated by Master Jan Silberstorff.*

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