

## Some Basic Tai Chi Concepts

*Written Chinese is a language of images, and images engage a different part of our brains than words do. Since exploring a language is a window into how a culture thinks, getting familiar with a few of the basic terms of tai chi will give you a deeper understanding of the Chinese paradigm of health and well-being, as well as help you to explain tai chi principles to students and prospective students.*

氣

Qi

No term is more important in Chinese healing yet more challenging to define than the term qi. One good definition of qi is “the activity of all of life.” “Breaths” is also a good interpretation.

The lower part of the character means “grain,” such as rice, and the upper part means “vapor” or “steam.” Hence, qi is a picture of a pot of rice cooking, with steam coming from the top. The ideogram implies that qi has a fluid nature and can be dense like rice or immaterial like vapor. Everything is qi in varying degrees of materiality, from more material, such as flesh and blood, to less material and more refined, such as mind, emotions, and spirit.

The presence of qi throughout the universe ties the cosmos together into a vast web. All existence, therefore, is interconnected, and any human action reverberates throughout the cosmos, propagated by qi.

All of the activity within our bodies is a manifestation of qi. We are a network of animation. When we speak of qi in the body, we mean a phenomenon that is responsible for inducing life and keeping it moving. Qi cannot be analyzed in a test tube. Qi is a functional entity; **qi is what it does**. Qi is activation or movement. Qi transforms what we eat, drink and breathe in order to create our physical bodies. Qi keeps our bodies at a comfortable and stable temperature. Qi defends us against invasions such as illnesses. Qi is a force field that binds us together and keeps things such as organs and blood in place.

We can enhance this “activity-of-life”—this qi—in our bodies with interventions of the most simple and natural sort, such as a healthy diet, meditation, exercise, massage, acupuncture, and tai chi.

When our qi is deficient, too sluggish, or blocked, tai chi can help. When we practice tai chi, our mind directs our qi into our core and then throughout our body. Tai chi movements generate qi, circulate and unblock qi, help the qi to nourish us, and over time restore the qi in our deepest reserves to help maintain our health, spirit, and longevity.

Human beings are swirling coagulates of qi. When we die, our qi goes back to the Oneness. Claude Larre, who translates qi as “breaths,” notes how ephemeral qi is: “The entire universe is nothing but breaths....In people, life is a current of subtle and essential breaths. Guided by almost imperceptible elements, this current builds life’s structures, travels through it, maintains it, and in the end, abandons it.”

氣功

Qigong

The first character is qi, as above. The left side of the second character depicts an ancient carpenter’s square used to measure right angles, thus implying “work, skill, mastery.” The right side means tendon or ligament, thus implying “strength.” The two characters together can be read to mean “working with qi to become strong.”

# 太極拳

## Tai ji quan/Tai chi

The left character is a person standing with arms outstretched, meaning “large or great,” with a dot added to indicate “excessively great.”

The middle character includes a tree plus a picture of a mouth, a hand, and a person standing between the two extremes of Sky and Earth. This character means “reaching the farthest point.” The last character is a fist, implying a martial art.

Taiji (tai chi), the first two characters, is the name of the familiar yin-yang symbol ☯. In Chinese cosmology, taiji is the expression used for the Great Ultimate or Oneness, the primal state of infinite, undifferentiated potential from which yin and yang arise.

Thus, taiji (tai chi), or Supreme Ultimate, is a surprising and profound name for our practice. Professor Cheng Man-ching wrote, “The subtlety and marvelous applications of this art correspond at every point with the principle of the Great Ultimate (taiji).” Practicing solo form and partner work helps us to feel oneness within ourselves and unity with others. As well, tai chi perhaps allows us to touch the Great Oneness beyond ourselves.

# 丹田

## Dantian

The dantian is the cornerstone of tai chi practice. The character on the left is a picture of an alchemical stove with a bit of cinnabar in it. The reddish mineral cinnabar was the basic substance used by the Daoist alchemists who were searching for longevity and immortality. Hence this character is often translated as “elixir,” or “elixir of life.” The character on the right depicts a farmer’s field, the perfect place to plant and cultivate something that grows.

Hence, dantian means “the field where you cultivate the elixir of life.”

This area of the belly has many other names, and one of them is “qi hai,” or “sea of qi.” The dantian is in fact a bag of qi. One goal of tai chi practice is to allow your qi to sink to your dantian so that qi begins to accumulate there and be cultivated. After some time, enough qi accumulates that it can overflow and bring healing to all parts of your body and spirit.

# 鬆

## Song

How do we sink our qi to our dantian? Song, a basic principle of tai chi, is usually translated as “sink and relax.” The top of this character is a picture of loose untied hair or feathers, while the bottom of the character shows a pine tree. Thus, the character implies being loose, unbound and relaxed while also being as solid and rooted as a pine tree. This combination is a great image for what we are trying to achieve in tai chi: being both relaxed and rooted.

We tighten up to try to maintain balance (which doesn’t work), because we are afraid, or simply out of habit. In order to overcome our instinctive tendencies to tighten up, through tai chi practice we can take an inner journey of self-discovery to feel what and where we are holding, so that we can relax and release.

# 道

## Dao

Our path to understanding ourselves is called the Dao. The right side of this character consists of “self” plus “understanding.” The left side means “footsteps, road, path, or way.” You can read these images to mean “walking on the path using your head or mind.”

The idea of Dao isn't as static as the word “path” might suggest: the Dao is more like a journey or a course (like a golf course) or a curriculum. Dao is the way of harmony with nature and with society. Dao is the whole of the orderly movement of life of the 10,000 beings. Dao is the way to contemplate yourself so that you grow to understand who you are and where you are going.

# 神

## Shen

The most immaterial and rarified aspect of qi is shen. Our life goal is to transmute our essences into shen. This beautiful character can be translated as “spirit.” The left side depicts an influx of influences coming down to us from the heavens. The right side

shows the influx arriving into our center and radiating outward.

qi and is our connection to the Oneness. Our eyes and skin shine from this heavenly influx. Without healthy shen, we have dull eyes and no spirit for life. With healthy shen, we are alert, animated, and have a clear mind.

# 五行

## Wu Xing (Five Phases)

These are the characters used to designate the five movements of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. The character on the left means “five.” The character on the right means “to take one step and then

another.” This character certainly implies movement, maybe even dancing, so the common translation “element” is not true to the character itself. A more accurate translation of wu xing is “five phases” or “five movements.” Many aspects of the tai chi form and partner practices express the energetics of the five phases.

# 擠按

## Ji and An (Press and Push)

These are the characters for the movements in the form called “press” and “push.”

Press, the character on the left, consists of “hand” plus stalks of grain growing evenly, thus indicating

“even or uniform.” While it can mean “squeeze, press, or push,” the character suggests “steady hands(s).”

Push, the character on the right, consists of “hand” plus a woman at home under a roof, indicating “peaceful and tranquil.” While it can mean “press, push, restrain, or control,” the character suggests “peaceful hands(s).”

Both of these characters have an even and relaxed feeling, and we can create these moves in the form with that in mind.