

UNDERSTANDING IN TAICHI CHUAN

*introduction and translation
by Christopher Kiely, 2023*

Knowing how to not know is the highest level.
Not knowing how to know is trouble.

Yet it is only through being troubled by trouble
that one can be without trouble.

The sage is untroubled
because they are troubled by trouble.

It is only through being troubled by trouble
that one can be without trouble.

Laozi 71

Way down deep at the beating heart of Taichi practice grows a very special kind of understanding. It is an understanding nurtured and developed through the entire process of learning Taichi Chuan and is so much more than simply a side effect of knowing what to do and how to do it. Just as elusive as it is evident, it plays a pivotal role in developing the transformative potential of the Taichi dynamic in all disciplines that make use of the Taichi worldview. But since there are just as many ways to understand this highly nuanced understanding as there are ways to misunderstand it, I thought it might be helpful to shine a bit of a light on it here with a brief introduction and selection of translations from the classical corpus of Taichi Chuan that discuss it in detail.

The “Taichi Classics” are a loose assortment of affiliated and interrelated texts written by a number of different authors from the formative period of Taichi Chuan. The cultural ground that gave birth to these writings was the highly fertile liminal space between the Daoist Internal Alchemy and Neo-Confucian Mystery traditions of the Tang and Song Dynasties in medieval China. Most sources agree that the birth of Taichi Chuan took place in this milieu. However since it has always been both a highly secretive and fundamentally oral tradition, the textual trail is extremely scant through the Mongol occupation, the rise and fall of the Ming Dynasty and the founding of the Qing. It really wasn’t until the end of the Qing Dynasty in the 18-19th centuries that the bulk of the texts were compiled and composed into their present forms and the physical practice of Taichi Chuan first begins to enter into the public record.

All together, these enigmatic writings carefully elucidate and illustrate the fundamental concepts and principles of Taichi Chuan and reveal the thinking of some of its most accomplished masters throughout the ages. They also provide a cultural context for understanding the practice and orient it properly within the much larger and older discussion of *taiji* as “the dao of yin and yang” and the central organizing principle of the spiritual and philosophical cosmologies of old China.

The exact text of the Classics varies slightly from lineage to lineage, much the same as the physical postures. The core writings themselves are for the most part undisputed across all lineages, but the precise point where scripture ends and apocrypha begins has not yet been universally agreed upon. For example, there are still several subtly different versions of the same basic writings currently in circulation that contain alternate, additional or omitted characters, and occasionally even entire lines. The particular versions of the texts translated here all come from the collection carefully curated by Master Tung Yingchieh in his 1948 book “Taichi Chuan Explained.”

The first of the texts translated below is probably one of the more famous and iconic of the Taichi Classics: Master Wang Zongyue’s “Taichi Chuan Treatise” or “Theory of Taichi Chuan.” Currently thought to have been composed sometime in the 18th century, it contains the earliest reference to “dǒngjìn,” or “understanding energy,” in the literature of Taichi Chuan. After this are a series of short pieces composed sometime in the following century that develop Master Wang’s themes and form the core of what is sometimes referred to as the “Yang Family’s Forty Verses.” Nobody knows for sure who originally composed these texts but they started to show up in the late 1800s as secret teachings being passed privately in hand-copied manuscripts to senior students in the Yang Family lineage streams. As is the case with so many of the esoteric traditions of the world, the texts themselves are no longer secret, but an understanding of the understanding they contain continues to be as elusive as ever to the uninitiated. Lastly, I have included a few quotes from Master Tung Kaiying, the grandson of Master Tung Yingchieh, from his 2012 book entitled “Learning Tai Chi Chuan” to show how a primary emphasis on deep and uncanny understanding still continues through the lineage into the present day.

From what I can tell, the Chinese term “dǒngjìn 懂勁 (understanding energy)” as a concept is unique to these Taichi Chuan texts and may have its source in the Taichi tradition itself. Regardless, the pictograph for dǒng 懂 shows the “heart/mind” radical on the left with the root character dǒng 董 on the right, which depicts “a sun rising up behind tall grass.” In addition to being the character for the surname of the very same Tung (Dong) family of Taichi Chuan mentioned just above, this dong is also a verb that means “to oversee, manage or direct; to supervise and guide like a chief or a governor.” But with the heart/mind radical added, it forms a new verb that gets at the heart of what is most necessary for the most effective directing and governing: “to understand, comprehend or grasp.”

However, adding the word jìn 勁 to this understanding changes it slightly. It vitalizes the understanding, turns it into something actionable and focuses it now explicitly upon the realm of energies. Now this understanding is not just a faculty of the mind or an attribute of knowledge, it is a kind of strength or power all its own. Specifically, it is the means for both generating and controlling one’s strength or power, however it manifests, within and without. According to the classical tradition of Taichi Chuan, the ultimate goal of training and learning is nothing less than spiritual clarity (shenming). But before this can happen, it is understood that one’s energy and power, or internal strength, must first be realized, focused and fully harnessed.

The basic premise presented in the Classics is that by being extremely careful with the inherent integrity of knowing, feeling, turning and moving while developing one's special skill (gongfu) of the "Eight Gates and Five Steps" (aka the Thirteen Postures of Taichi Chuan), one will gradually become more and more aware of conscious motion both in oneself and others and will eventually begin to develop an understanding of energy and ultimately, more and more spiritual clarity. Thus according to the Taichi Classics, an understanding of energy is the final step in the process of training before the attainment of spiritual brightness or illumination (shenming).

The logic is simple and the method is clear: the key lies in the understanding of energy. However it is important to note that this "jin 勁 energy" here is not the same as the more common word for energy in Chinese, qi 氣, though their meanings definitely overlap. The pictograph for qi 氣 is an image of "steam escaping from cooked rice" and it signifies that which emanates from active process. Qi is absolutely involved in the development and expression of jin, but jin refers to a slightly different aspect of the energy dynamic. If qi is energy, then jin is the coordinated movement of that energy, which necessarily expresses as a kind of strength, vigor, power, vitality, concentration or quality of spirit. Where qi is somewhat abstract and essentially theoretical, jin is palpable and highly practical. The character for jin 勁 is made up of the "tendon or force" radical next to the image of "water flowing beneath the earth." Compare this to the character jing 經 which puts the "silk thread" radical in front of that "underground waterway" image and is the word for both "the channel-networks that circulate and spread qi-energy throughout living beings (i.e. acupuncture channels)" as well as "the written records of the classical wisdom traditions of living cultures (i.e. the Classics)."

This idea of underground energy currents that originate within and express without is a seminal concept in the Chinese worldview and obviously the idea of tapping into hidden power and inherent strength is of clear interest to pretty much all schools of martial training, healing practice and spiritual development. Thus jin has long been a popular concept in the esoteric arts of China. In contemporary Taichi Chuan, the term is often used somewhat loosely to refer to the various skills one may be able to develop through training, such as pengjin (ward-off energy), tingjin (listening energy), fajin (releasing energy), dingjin (stabilizing energy), sungjin (loosening energy), huajin (turning energy), jindan (point of focus) and so on. But throughout all of the Taichi Classics, besides one single reference to fajin, the only jin that is mentioned over and over again is dongjin.

Unfortunately for us modern English speakers, the limits of both the act of translation and the inherent linearity of the English language itself do not allow for the full breadth of this concept of "dongjin" to completely express with a simple translation. In other words, an understanding of the English words "understanding" and "energy" does not necessarily translate into an understanding of what dongjin is. Perhaps seeing it in several different contexts may help to give a better idea of what it actually is, or at least lay a path to getting closer that can then be further clarified through practice and study. For starters it should be understood that per the rules of classical Chinese grammar, dongjin can be simultaneously read as "the understanding of energy," "the energy of understanding" and/or a sort of quality, virtue or skill called "understanding energy" that is generated through long-term Taichi practice. It is important that all these and potentially more layers of understanding be unified in the singular understanding of understanding energy in Taichi Chuan. Understanding is and has always been a multivalent phenomenon.

*from Master Tung Yingchieh's
"Taichi Chuan Explained" (1948)*

WANG ZONGYUE'S "THEORY OF TAICHI CHUAN"

The Greatest Polarity (Taichi) is born from the Absence of Polarity (Wuchi). It is the mother of Yin and Yang. In movement it divides and in stillness it unites.

Neither going past nor falling short. Meeting what extends and following what bends. When others are hard and I am soft, it's called "going along with." When I comply and let others lead, it's called "being attached." When the movement is fast, the response as well is fast. When the movement is slow and relaxed, then slow and relaxed is what follows.

Though transformation has more than ten-thousand fine points, the principle that links them all together is but a single thread. By making contact, staying connected and slowly getting more and more familiar, one gradually becomes aware of understanding energy. Through understanding energy, one gets closer and closer to spiritual clarity. But without consistently applying oneself over an extended period of time, it is not possible to suddenly open up and string that thread through.

With an empty and alert vitality lifting from the top of the head and the qi sinking down to the dantian, neither leaning nor projecting and with nothing out of synch, I can disappear and reappear in an instant. If the left gets heavy, the left empties. If the right gets heavy, the right goes dark. Looking up, it's ever higher. Looking down, it's ever deeper. Try to advance, I'm further and further away. Try to retreat, I'm closer and closer behind. Not a feather can be added nor a fly alight. Nobody can find me. Only I know where I am.

This is the way of the greatest and most peerless champions. But the development of this kind of skill has many side doors and diversions. There are of course important distinctions between the different martial art styles, but generally most are little more than the strong taking advantage of the weak and the slow conceding to the fast and that's about it. Those with strength beat up on those without it and the slower hand succumbs to the quicker one.

But this is simply people exercising the inherent natural abilities they were born with and has nothing at all to do with the kind of strength that can be acquired through learning. Think about how four ounces could be used to throw off a thousand pounds. This is obviously not about using strength to be effective. Or look at how some masters even at the age of 80 might still be able to defend themselves against several people at once. How could they be doing this by being faster?

Stand like a balancing scale and move like a wheel on an axle. When sinking is entire it leads to following and fluidity. When emphasis is divided (double-weighted) it leads to stagnation and stiffness. Any time you encounter someone who has sincerely and genuinely trained for many

years but is still unable to pivot and turn freely, then it is almost invariably their comprehension of double-weightedness that is the problem. Wishing to avoid this problem, the key lies in a knowledge of yin and yang.

Being attached is nothing other than going along with. Going along with is nothing other than being attached. Yang is not separate from yin. Yin is not separate from yang. Yin and yang mutually assist each other. The method for getting one's bearing here is called "understanding energy." Once there is understanding energy, then the more one practices, the more essential one's understanding will become. Quietly contemplate and carefully consider what this means and gradually you will arrive at whatever it is your heart desires.

The root of it is giving up the self to follow others. But so many make the mistake of abandoning the near to seek the far. It is said: "being off by a hair's breadth leads to an error of a thousand miles." Those seeking to learn must not be vague or approximate with the details.

This is the theory of Taichi Chuan.

SONG OF SKILLFUL USE

Light and spirited, lively and bustling,
 seeking to understand the energy.
With yin and yang both "already across,"
 without the trouble of obstruction.
It's like using four ounces
 to turn a thousand pounds.
Open and close, rouse and sway:
 Master's rule is certain.

METHOD FOR BUILDING THE SPECIAL SKILL OF THE EIGHT GATES AND FIVE STEPS

The "eight patterns and five phases (bagua wuxing)" are the complete expression of the innate goodness of human life. This is why it is imperative above all else to be absolutely clear in regards to knowing, feeling, turning and moving. These four words get at the very root: know, feel, turn and move. To become aware of conscious motion is to gradually acquire the energy of understanding. With understanding energy it is natural to be able to extend and connect to spiritual clarity. This is why in order to build the special skill of the "eight gates and five steps" it is absolutely essential to make knowing, feeling, turning and moving the first priority. It is very difficult to secure this innate goodness. Indeed, it is just as difficult for me as it is for you.

METHOD FOR RECOGNIZING INNATE CLARITY

So it is that a person comes into this life from the very beginning with eyes that are able to see, ears that are able to hear, a nose that is able to smell and a mouth that is able to taste. Colors and hues, sounds and tones, aromas and scents, the five flavors – all are inherently there. The whole world is like this, naturally knowing and feeling from the start, inherently sure and good. Likewise the hands can pose and the feet can dance. All together the four limbs are able. The whole world is like this, naturally turning and moving from the start, inherently sure and good.

Think about it. Could humankind really exist without being caused to exist? People are close to each other by nature and far apart only as a result of practice. Collectively lost and led astray from the inherent whole, one must work to return oneself to that which is already firmly established innately within.

There would be no martial if there were no root cause for turning and moving. There would be no civil if there were no fundamental basis for knowing and feeling. Furthermore, turning and moving directly relate to knowing and feeling: turning while knowing and moving while feeling. If no knowing, then no turning. If no moving, then no feeling. When turning reaches its peak then movement arrives. When feeling becomes full then knowing arrives. Moving and knowing are what is easy. Turning and feeling are what is difficult.

First seek knowing, feeling, turning and moving in oneself. Obtain an awareness of conscious motion in one's own body directly and naturally over time one will be able to perceive it in others as well. However when looking into others it is very important not to lose track of oneself. This principle is not something that can be ignored. This is how understanding energy comes about.

ATTACHING, CONTINUING, BEING ATTACHED AND FOLLOWING

Attaching means reaching out and raising regard.

Being attached means retaining affection and treasuring the bond.

Continuing means yielding the self without leaving it.

Following means responding to whatever moves.

The only way to know others is to become aware of conscious motion through knowing, feeling, turning and moving. But without first being clear on attaching, being attached, continuing and following, it cannot be done. Thus the special skill of attaching, being attached, continuing and following is indeed a skill of considerable subtlety and refinement.

GOING AGAINST, LEAVING, FLATNESS AND RESISTING

Going against means overdoing it.

Flatness means coming up short.

Leaving means disconnecting.

Resisting means taking too long.

It is essential to know that these are the four main causes of trouble. If one is unclear about attaching, being attached, continuing and following, then it's because one is unclear about knowing, feeling, turning and moving and has not yet become aware of conscious motion. But once one begins to study the "opposing hand" one can no longer afford to be unaware. Indeed one must not neglect to avoid trouble if one can. What is most difficult is attaching, being attached, continuing and following while at the same time not allowing oneself to go against, flatten, leave or resist. Indeed, this is not something that is easy to do.

ATTENDING TO OPPOSITION WITHOUT TROUBLE

Going against, flattening, leaving and resisting are all symptoms of neglecting to attend to opposition properly. They lead to what is known as "trouble." Neglecting to attach, be attached, continue and follow, how could one ever possibly become aware of conscious motion? Neglecting to become aware of one's own self, how could there be any hope for gaining an awareness of others?

Therefore, what is called "attending to the opposition" means not going against, flattening, leaving or resisting in regard to others. It is essential to attach, be attached, continue and follow while patiently attending to others. If able to do this, then it's more than just attending to what opposes without trouble, it's also about attending to the natural awareness of conscious motion just as it is. This is way to advance in the special skill of understanding energy.

DISCOURSE ON UNDERSTANDING ENERGY IN TAICHI

Understanding one's own energy means extending and connecting to spiritual clarity. One really should only attend to opposition after achieving a certain civility in oneself first. The center of the body has seventy-two "firing times" and without the right timing nothing can happen. But when yang gets its yin, when water and fire become "Already Across (Jiji)," when "Giving and Receiving (Qian and Kun)" are mutually flowing and intermingling, then one's inner nature and outer life will both be embracing the same reality.

Understanding the energy of others means watching and listening. It means following the edge of the encounter and changing and transforming accordingly, naturally navigating the winding road with sincerity and wonder. When form and intention are fully integrated, turning, moving, knowing and feeling all become effortless. When one's skill has reached this level and that which goes is at all times in balance, there will never again be the need to involve the churning of the mind.

DISCOURSE ON THE MAKING OF MARTIAL SKILL IN TAICHI

When it comes to the martial in Taichi, the outer wields softness and suppleness while the inner harbors hardness and strength. Over the long course of time one compounds this hardness and strength within. But this does not mean that the mind is what becomes hard and strong. No, the mind especially must remain soft and supple. This is the most difficult part.

It is essential to save and accumulate one's hardness and strength within and not expend it without. This means always meeting the opposition with softness and suppleness. It means using softness and suppleness in response to hardness and strength and causing that hardness and strength to exhaust itself and transform into nothing.

How might such a skill be obtained? Once one is attaching, being attached, continuing and following and has obtained a basic awareness of knowing, feeling, turning and moving, then one's bearing and process will acquire the energy of understanding and gradually one will grow closer and closer to spiritual clarity. This is why it is said that training at the peak of softness and suppleness brings one to the very peak of hardness and strength. When this energy is fully embodied there is no hardness that cannot be overcome.

from Master Tung Kaiying's "Learning Tai Chi Chuan" (2012)

- Consciousness is the master of the art. It pervades all activities. When consciousness is present, progress will be rapid. When it is not present, activity will come to a halt. In practicing Tai Chi Chuan one must raise one's consciousness.
- When learning Tai Chi Chuan, the first thing one should focus on is learning the correct postures. Next, one should drill for total familiarity. In this way, an understanding of how to interpret energy will come about gradually. Many students often make the mistake of talking about the interpretation of energy and its applications, yet neglect to drill on practice routines. There is a difference between knowing what to do and actually being able to do it. How can one ever gain a true understanding of interpreting energy without feeling it?
- After achieving complete familiarity with the practice routines, including push hands, one can begin to search in earnest for elastic force. In order to understand the various elastic forces, one must already be in the realm of conscious motion. To acquire this understanding by oneself is difficult. It is much easier to acquire it through practicing with a partner.
- In order to increase sensitivity and gain an understanding of the different kinds of energy, one must practice push hands. But if there is no partner to be had, then while going over the practice routines, one should imagine an opponent there and try to feel with the hands how one might cope with that opponent in each movement. Gaining knowledge of others is crucial for achieving an understanding of energy and its interpretation.
- True knowledge comes from studying Tai Chi Chuan. Total familiarity includes having a well-rounded response to every situation. The hands automatically do as the mind commands. When pursuing this practice, one should not inquire too much into theory. It will interfere with the practice. It is best to simply practice more. When theory interferes with concentrated drilling, one's progress will be hindered. In the discipline of boxing, we are most concerned with righteousness. The student should respect the master and uphold the principles. If you honor the master, he or she will be moved by your earnestness and will give all that he or she can to guide you. This is human nature. Those who wish to acquire true ability should not ignore this.