

BREAKTHROUGH IN TAI-CHI CHUAN

by
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PART II

NOTE: During the offsetting of Part I of this article, a paragraph was deleted from the description of the torso method. This portion of the article is printed here in its entirety as the beginning of Part II.

Torso Method: The Second Stage. The hallmark of the second stage is the use of the torso method. Torso method is characterized by use of the body, specifically the waist and spine, to initiate and empower the movements of the arms and legs. That is, the torso learns to lead all movement. In the first stage, muscular dynamics and independent movements generate force. In this stage, suppleness, connectedness, inner movements such as breathing, and the spiral motion pictured in the Tai-Chi diagram unlock the power of innate energy, or chi. What do torso method

movements look like? No parts of body move independently; the movement of any part is contingent on the matched motion of all other parts and all parts are continuously alternating between the extremes of yin and yang. Only those who reach this stage can truly be said to be practicing Tai-Chi; yet these are few indeed. Most Tai-Chi players are working on the principles that define the torso method, but the breakthrough that marks mastery of this stage is elusive. It is easy to deceive yourself about progress at this level. Tai-Chi forms can appear very graceful and connected, especially when performed by a player with long experience. Careful study, however, will reveal hands and other parts moving independently, or stagnating and failing to change as weight shifts and the waist moves.

Mind Method: The Third Stage. Finally, there is the mind method. It is difficult to talk about this third stage, as I myself have not reached it and I have not yet met anyone who has broken through to this level. The classics attest that it is possible and there are tales of masters whose feats sound as if they had attained this level. In mind method, all movement has been absorbed into the body. Techniques formerly executed with the extremities now begin and are consummated within the energy of the individual. Where previously the torso led, now it is the mind that leads, the energy which follows, and the player's intention is accomplished with little or no external action. In this third stage, physical energy, ch'i, has been transmuted into psychic or spiritual force, called "shen". Tales tell, for instance, of masters who could neutralize the attack of a tiger simply by reflecting the tiger's fierce energy back at him in a concentrated glance.

It is one thing to say that a breakthrough is necessary to move from stage to stage, but how can we each work toward breakthrough in Tai-Chi Chuan? Imagine the course of your development to be like an endless corridor. If development were merely a function of effort over time, then the corridor would look like a ramp angled upward to the vanishing point. But it is not. The corridor is uneven and interrupted by a series of locked doors. Advancement within each passage comes with patience and perseverance over time; but without a key, the next passage is inaccessible. With effort, you can maintain your skill at the level of the door; but if you become complacent or have no key, you will only remain there without making progress.

Breakthrough is not the automatic result of the passage of time or an accumulation of experience on a particular level. Years of practice will result in smoother technique, but the habit of performance is external. Internal concentration and change are necessary to breakthrough in Tai-Chi Chuan. Think about the history of automobile design. The

first cars were essentially a chair or a couch mounted on four wheels. For years, designers allowed these features to dictate what cars looked like on the outside and produced only variations on the theme. The exterior was simply a casing for the interior. For a breakthrough to occur, someone had to adopt an entirely new concept. Aerodynamics provided the key. As designers began to pay attention to the flow of air outside the vehicle rather than to the furniture inside, their designs began to change radically. While it is a simplification, this provides an insight into the nature of a major breakthrough. It is not just a slight improvement on an existing idea; it is a jump to a new arena of creativity made possible by recognition of a different fundamental concept. This is what must occur between each major stage in Tai-Chi development.

I believe the answer for those who wish to go forward is twofold: never be satisfied and always seek diligently for keys to further progress. Let me consider each of these ideas in turn. First, how can Tai-Chi players avoid the pitfall of self-satisfaction, which tempts us to settle for where we are rather than pursue loftier aims? One way is to pay close attention to the reasons we play Tai-Chi and the goals we think we can achieve by practice.

Goals organize energy. They help us use our time and effort more efficiently. Goals are most effective if they are made conscious and meaningful. What is your goal for yourself in Tai-Chi Chuan? One day, if you have achieved skill, what do you think you will do with it? Try to be specific in formulating your goals. For example, "to be healthy" or "to be able to defend myself" or "to feel relaxed and happy" are vague. Vague goals, even if they sound good, will not focus your energy nor inspire you to employ effective means of realizing them. Challenge yourself; sharpen your goals so that they are a reflection of your will to make real progress and to breakthrough. For example, "I want to be healthy" might become "In six months I will be twenty pounds lighter

and will be able to walk up to my apartment without breathing hard." "I want to be able to defend myself" might become "In one year I will have learned both sides of the sparring form" or "I will demonstrate in X number of sparring or push-hands matches that I can neutralize my partner without hurting him." Specificity helps focus your will and strengthens your belief in your own potential. Focus on something you really want, not just something that sounds nice. The fervor of your desire makes the difference between a fond hope and a goal which empowers your pursuit of it.

Empowering goals are magnetic. They attract energies in your life that contribute to their fulfillment, and repel things that might distract you. Once you have such a goal for Tai-Chi Chuan, you must begin to discriminate between things that contribute to its fulfillment and those that draw your energies away. Do late hours keep you from daily practice? Do you spend too much time in front of the TV or in idle reading? Do you often seek companionship instead of valuing time with yourself? You must be willing to push distractions resolutely from you and do what is necessary to accomplish your goal. Your goal, for instance, must compensate you for getting up early each morning for practice!

Let us assume that your Tai-Chi is good. You've worked hard for a number of years and you feel you're on a par with your peers. Other people are better than you only because they have been at it longer. This is a treacherous place. You are losing your "beginner's mind" and you face choices that are critical to your future development. Even after twenty years, if you think "I'm good enough now" or "I'm happy just running this Tai-Chi studio," then you are finished; you will stop there and never breakthrough. If you want to breakthrough to the next stage you must never be satisfied. When you attain your goal, or see beyond it to something higher, the principle of change suggests that

you adjust your sights toward that loftier vision of self-fulfillment. Only your hunger for greater achievement will impel you to breakthrough.

Now let me return to the second concept mentioned above: the importance of seeking diligently for keys to further progress. Where are such keys to be found? I believe that if we sincerely desire breakthrough, keys can be found beneath the mat of the most common experiences of our lives. We must cultivate intuition, however, to discern them. One method of finding keys to breakthrough in Tai-Chi Chuan is to think deeply about things other people take for granted. Accepting other people's answers at face value, for whatever reason, can block progress. For instance, when I first began studying Tai-Chi, I wondered why there was so much variation among the major styles. Other players told me it was because of differences in the personal styles of the masters, or that the variations were random, or the result of faulty transmission, or that they represented alternative martial applications. I sought my own answer by studying three of the major styles and concluded that the Chen, Yang and Wu (Hao) styles define a continuum, purposefully designed to lead a player from hand method to mind method, from form to formlessness, from the limitations of action in the external world to freedom of action in the internal world. I assure you it would repay your effort to investigate this for yourself as I did.

Another way of finding keys to breakthrough is to relate as much of your daily life and your knowledge of the way things work to the practice of Tai-Chi. Ask continually "how is this like Tai-Chi?" This classics and tales from the lives of earlier masters also will repay your consideration. However, ideas in books or from any source other than yourself must be personalized in the crucible of your own practice. In the earliest classic on Tai-Chi, Chang San-Feng says that Tai-Chi is learned from the movement or orbit of the sun and the moon. Clearly, he watched their

movements and related them to his own life. When I first heard this I thought it was superstitious. How can they be related? Then one night, as I practiced Tai-Chi Chuan, I saw the crescent moon rise. Suddenly, I understood the connection Chang San-Feng had made: the back of the hand is yang, the palm is yin. As the hand turns, a crescent of yang appears. We have two hands, so they must match one another like the relationship between the sun and the moon. This breakthrough became possible because I was willing to open my mind and admit that this old story might have something to say to me. From this I was able to recognize that the pa kua, representing eight phases of cyclical change, is the key to the torso method in Tai-Chi Chuan.

Suppose you have set yourself a goal to move from stage one to stage two - from hand method to torso method. How might you do this? The hand method rule was to practice a repertoire of techniques over and over until you could execute them smoothly and forcefully. Now you will need to adopt a higher concept: do not move your hands. If the hands cannot move independently, then the body must begin to move in order to cause the hands to approximate the positions you have learned in the form. So to practice torso method, your body must learn to move more and more, as you strive to move the hands less and less. Try this exercise: Stand with your arms at your sides, palms facing to the rear. How can you move the torso so that your palms face outward? If you are not allowed to move your hands, then you must combine the sinking of the body and the use of breath and inner movement to effect a movement in the extremities. As this becomes possible for you, you are on the verge of discovering the difference between Tai-Chi and all other forms of "chuan": every posture in every Tai-Chi form in all styles should be executed with the same inner intent and outer stillness.

Let's carry this exercise a step further. How do you

move from torso method to mind method? If you move from hand method to torso method by reducing the movement of the hands and increasing the movement of the torso, then you might expect to move from torso to mind method by reducing the movement of the body and increasing the activity of the mind. This is an advanced concept. To practice torso method, we strive to lead the hands with the body; but what leads the body? The mind - and this will show in the eyes. If we comprehend this, even as we practice at lower stages, we can begin to cultivate the rudiments of mind method. As the mind thinks "I want to move the hand," the eyes lead by looking slightly ahead of the movement. By analogy, when you read aloud your eyes are scanning the text ahead of your voice. This is known as the "eye-voice span." If your eyes focus only on the word you are saying, you comprehend less of what you are reading and your voice loses the appropriate expression. Good readers have larger eye-voice spans than poorer readers. In Tai-Chi, if the eyes focus on the hand, the mind will follow the hand and allow it to lead. If the eyes focus slightly ahead of the hand, the hand will learn to follow the energy of the mind, and the mind might begin to learn from the hand how to act effectively in the world.

Confucius once said every phenomenon has its causes and its effects; every event has its start and its conclusion. If you know what comes first and what follows next, then your actions can be close to the Tao. This highlights another important concept related to breakthrough. A student at the beginning of study has no background. He doesn't know Chen style or Yang style, he doesn't know what to work on first. If at this point he only wants to work on the application of postures and he thinks "I'm right, I'm ready," he'll never get breakthrough, because he is unaware of the requirements of process in his own development. At every stage, there is specific work to be doing that cannot be skipped if you wish to make progress. The instructor may suggest routes that have led consis-

tently to greater expertise, but each student must strive to accept responsibility for her own development - to acquire sensitivity to the flow of her own unfolding and her specific weaknesses and needs.

Have confidence in yourself. If the old masters did it, you can do it. Give up negative habits of thought. Excuses will drain your energy and ruin everything. When confronted by a difficult move in a form, such as a jump in the Chen second routine, if you say "oh, I'll never be able to do that jump," then in fact you will never be able to do it. Now, as you read this, sit up straight - lift your spirit and relax inward toward your center! Remember your goal: to acquire mastery. There is certainly some truth in the old adage "you are what you eat;" but how much more true that you are what you think. Our assumptions about ourselves and who we are - what we look like, what lobs are possible for us - create an inertia in our lives. To varying degrees, we are all engaged in this inertial thinking. Who are you? The more often you think of your goal, the more it shapes your reality. Once a week is better than once a month, once a day is better than once a week. Frequency is important and so also is the intensity of your mindfulness. As often as you remember, ask yourself "If I were indeed a master, how would I act in this situation? How do I act with this person from the space of mastery? How does the master sit? How does the master eat?" Remembrance is the greatest key, linked to the cultivation of your will and the power of your imagination.

Daily practice of Tai-Chi Chuan is simply an exercise in remembering who you truly are. If you can remember your goal and yield to the possibility of change, you will indeed breakthrough and begin to live at higher levels of energy and consciousness. In his classic on Tai-Chi, Wang Tsung Yueh asserts that the energy generated by continuous practice, Tong-Chin, leads to a sudden illumination or godlike stage. He states that the key to this stage and to Tong-Chin is understanding the relationship between Yin

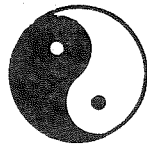
and Yang and thereby interpreting energy correctly. He promises all Tai-Chi players: "Comprehend the Tong-Chin and the more you practice, the more wonderful will be your development. You understand in silence and experience in feeling until you may act at will." Of course, the opposite of this is that if you do not understand, no amount of practice will be of any use!

My purpose in writing this article is to encourage all Tai-Chi players, both students and teachers, to open their minds and strive to adopt the philosophy of Tai-Chi, expressed in the principle of change. Unfortunately, some players are sidetracked by the belief that their teacher is the only teacher. In the attempt to follow only one way they lose sight of the principle of change and of the richness of Tai-Chi Chuan. You probably were led to your teacher to learn certain personal lessons you might not have learned with someone else. This was a gift to you; but if it fosters an attitude that excludes rather than includes, one that encourages mockery of other people and ideas, you will very likely shove away the keys to your own breakthrough. Be open to the lessons hidden in all that comes your way. Remain flexible and see what works for you. Do not be afraid to change your practice, to learn another style, or to incorporate new ideas into your form. As you change -- as it changes, you change.

I am not advocating change for its own sake, nor am I suggesting that individuals should modify the choreographies of standard form. The traditional forms within the major styles have been carefully crafted by great masters to accomplish most efficiently the aims of the art. However, individuals must use these forms as personal proving grounds for the classic principles of Tai-Chi philosophy. Forms may change in emphasis as long as the principles are not violated. These principles permit a wide range of physical interpretation, and require you to experiment creatively with movement and energy in your quest for breakthrough to greater levels of mastery.

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If you live near Tai Chi Farm, you may want to attend regular classes held on the weekends by Master Jou Tsung Hwa. The classes focus on the Master Key to Tai Chi Chuan, understanding the Eight Trigrams in the hands and the Five Elements under the feet. This foundation can be applied to any Tai Chi form. The course fee is \$30 per month or \$5 per class. The schedule is:

Saturday 8:00 - 10:00 AM
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Editor's Note

Dear Tai Chi Player,

In our efforts to keep you updated on the proceedings of the Tai Chi Farm sale, we must inform you that the initial offer to purchase the property has been cancelled. Because of the current status of the real estate market, it appears that we will remain at the farm in Warwick for at least another year or two. In spite of the change in plans, our intentions remain constant to establish a Tai Chi college and resort and to erect a memorial in honor of Chan San Feng. Our goal remains in the spread and development of Tai Chi.

The last newsletter contained the schedule for this year's Chang San Feng Festival to be held June 3, 4, and 5. Anyone who attended last year's festival will remember the exciting Lion Dance! This event has sparked curiosity and interest, so one feature of this year's festival will be to provide participants with the opportunity to play the Chinese cymbals and drums and to try on the costumes and masks. You'll want to bring your cameras to record this once in a lifetime opportunity!

The Tai Chi Farm needs a caretaker for the spring, summer and fall of this year. Responsibilities include helping with maintenance and security of the farm, and assisting to organize the summer's workshops and activities. The caretaker needs to be self-sufficient financially (at least \$200.00 a month to meet personal expenses), because this is not a paid position. In exchange for their services, however, the caretaker receives free lodging, and free enrollment in local weekend classes and summer workshops. Anyone interested in applying should write a letter describing their skills and interests and listing two references to the Tai Chi Farm (address on cover), attention: Jorene Proper.

In April the postal rates are increasing, bringing additional costs to the mailing of the newsletter. Because of this, the mailing list needs to be updated, and readers are asked

to confirm their subscriptions. If your subscription has expired, please send payment to help to cover the postage fees. As always, please inform us if your address changes, or if you wish to discontinue receiving the newsletter. Please take a moment to fill out this form and help us to update the mailing list. This year the Tai Chi Farm is offering fewer workshops, yet we hope to improve the quality of the newsletter for our readers.

Sincerely,



Jorene Proper

P.S. Here is a reminder about the upcoming workshops at the Tai Chi Farm:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
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| 2. Master Jou's Workshop. | |
| a) Masterkey to Tai Chi Chuan | 6/24 - 6/26 |
| b) Chen First Routine | 6/27 - 7/1 |
| c) Chen Second Routine | 7/11 - 7/15 |
| d) Yang Long Form, Push Hand | 7/18 - 7/22 |

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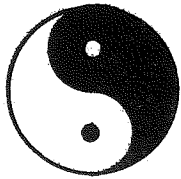
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