



THE
TAI CHI
SPACE

HOW TO
MOVE IN
TAI CHI
AND
QI GONG

Paul Cavel

with illustrations by
Sophie Manham

THE TAI CHI SPACE

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How to Move
in Tai Chi and Qi Gong

A Pictorial Guide

Paul Cavel



The Tai Chi Space

Aeon Books

Safety note: The practice of internal energy arts such tai chi and qi gong may carry risks. The instructions and advice that follow are not in any way intended as a substitute for medical advice from an appropriately qualified physician or healthcare provider. Consult a professional before undertaking any movement, health or exercise system to reduce the chance of injury or harm. If you experience too much discomfort or pain, stop exercising immediately and consult your healthcare provider. The creators and publishers of this book disclaim any liabilities for loss in connection with following any practices, exercises or advice offered herein.

First published 2017 by
Aeon Books Ltd
118 Finchley Road
London NW3 5HT

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-90465-898-6

Editing and project management: Heather Cavel

Cover and interior artwork: Sophie Manham

Cover design: Sarah Lim-Murray

Edited, designed, and produced by Communication Crafts

Printed in Great Britain

www.aeonbooks.co.uk



Photo by Jackie Smith, www.unseenstream.com

*I dedicate this book to my primary teacher, Bruce Frantzis,
without whom I could never have understood
the depths and complexity of nei gong.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the people who made this book possible:

My primary teacher, Bruce Frantzis, for opening my eyes to the world of nei gong, giving me the tools to initiate my personal healing journey, and for allowing me to join his bagua classes in California in the early 1990s, which changed my direction in life.

My wife, Heather Cavel, for editing, project managing and educating me in how to communicate through the written word. Without her relentless encouragement (badgering even!), this text would never have come to fruition.

Sophie Manham, the artist of the cover and interior illustrations, who put in a monumental effort to help me begin creating a visual lexicon for our internal arts peers.

Michael Mettner, who not only wrote the foreword, but whose friendship and guidance has been a continuous source of inspiration.

My good friend and fellow tai chi teacher, Jackie Smith, for his perspective and humour, and for making training a pure joy. He's taken many photos of me practising over the years, including the preceding one of my teacher Bruce and me, which I appreciate.

Oliver Rathbone for believing in me and giving me a platform to share my methodology with my internal arts peers.

Elena Moreno for inspiring the visual aspect of this pictorial lexicon, or at least the beginnings of one.

Klara and Eric King, Communication Crafts, for copyediting, interior design and production, Sarah Lim-Murray for the cover design, and the team at Aeon Books.

And to all those who have supported me and offered comments on the text, with special thanks to Jason Roberts, Sebastian Heyer, Mir Ali, Colin Hughes, Chris Binns and Nancy Maher.

FOREWORD

Michael Mettner

Our world is becoming more and more complex and is changing rapidly. Globalization and Technology are taking their toll. We are overloaded with information that we are no longer able to digest properly. Often we cannot distinguish between what is true and what is false. Our world is also becoming more and more virtual. As a result, we are losing contact with our body and with nature, nature that we are essentially a part of. All this is causing irritation, insecurity and stress.

Adding to this, many people suffer from high workloads, which today are mostly mental in nature and hence their nervous systems are burdened with stresses for which human beings are not designed. In our modern world we often experience ourselves as being helplessly exposed to circumstances we cannot change. We feel like we are losing control of our lives. All this paves the route to all kinds of stress-related disorders and illnesses, including burnout and depression.

What can we do? What would be a viable answer to these challenges?

There are many possibilities from which to choose, some more useful than others. A proven and reliable path is to learn and practise an art like tai chi. Essential aspects include relaxation, gentle movement to counter stagnation in the body, being present and becoming more and more aware of the body and its signals and needs. In this way tai chi can help practitioners heal the separation between mind and body, and reconnect to nature.

The internal arts, at least the ones solidly based on unbroken tradition, offer unique methods that can be perfectly adjusted to the needs of people. That is because Taoists, the scientists of ancient China, designed these exercise systems to enhance and coordinate the workings of mind, body and soul. Their methods of deep investigation into human existence are as of yet unparalleled by modern Western science.

Although many people practise tai chi or qi gong, it is not easy to grasp the essentials and to really reap the benefits of these internal arts. I have encountered many people who have practised tai chi for years and only regard it as some kind of “meditative” movement, without having implemented the internal principles that are essential to training.

For many years now I have worked to help executives and key players in industry leave behind burnout and stress-related illnesses, wherein the energy work of the internal arts is an important pillar. From my perspective, wasting time and effort in this way would be an inexcusable fault for my clients: when neglecting the inner principles in the internal arts, it would be better to leave them alone and just take a walk in the woods.

In this text, Paul Cavel has carved out the essential principles that make a real difference and to find appropriate ways to teach these to Westerners. He has 30 years of experience in Taoist internal arts – qi gong, martial arts and meditation. He studies with renowned teachers, the most important and inspiring being Bruce Frantzis, a Taoist Master who emphasises the Water school of the internal arts – unparalleled in the West.

For many years, Paul has been a Senior Instructor in Bruce’s system without this holding him back from developing his own individual approach to training and personal development. He has taught qi gong, tai chi, bagua and meditation to thousands of students, being sensitive to the needs of individuals and always on a quest to discover the main challenges facing Westerners trying to learn Chinese internal arts, and to find even better ways to transfer his knowledge to them.

Having been Paul’s student for nearly two decades, I appreciate his clear and precise style of teaching combined with a playfulness that makes learning a pleasurable experience for his students. Wherever appropriate and possible, Paul uses metaphors and pictures from everyday experiences to transmit the message.

There is a saying: “A picture tells more than a 1,000 words”. That means, if chosen well, you are able to transfer an immense amount of information with a picture, unencumbered by the linear mind and providing a much clearer basis for understanding than words alone.

Metaphors, images and symbols are the language of our subconscious minds. They help to convey meaning to our consciousness and hence store in the memory quite easily and naturally. If they are chosen well, they are able to penetrate the deeper layers of our consciousness and trigger the deeply imprinted wisdom of our body. The images Paul offers can shorten the process of transmitting information, enhance our learning and awaken our bodily intelligence.

This way of teaching requires a very deep level of understanding of the material and, indeed, of human nature itself. Paul obviously has both.

The principles that follow allow the inner components of tai chi (and qi gong in general) to manifest and develop in your forms. The principles plant seeds in your mind, seeds that will be watered by practising the arts. Only then can the knowledge come alive.

This book is inspirational and a pleasure to read, and makes it easy to implement the principles, one after the other, into your internal arts practice. I recommend it to beginners as well as advanced students because, by following the instructions in this book, you will build a solid foundation for internal arts training, make your practice a lot more efficient and avoid hitting a so-called "glass ceiling" in your progress. For tai chi practitioners who want to make the best use of their valuable practice time, their lifetime and their life force, this is the book to read and to put into practice.



Dr Michael Mettner is an Executive Coach, Systemic Counsellor, Naturopathic Practitioner, Hypnotherapist and Internal Arts Instructor. He has more than 20 years of experience in qi gong, martial arts and various approaches to meditation. He practices near Stuttgart in Germany. www.drmettner.de

THE TAI CHI SPACE

Introduction

The allure of practising internal arts like tai chi conjures up images of a great master performing fantastic feats of speed, power and agility, one who, in all his glory and dominating force, is a virtuous sage fighting for good on his path to enlightenment, unrelenting in overcoming challenges in body, mind and spirit. Indeed, tai chi and other energy arts have been cultivated in China for millennia to produce internal power for martial arts, health, healing, and personal and spiritual development – albeit with real-life training being somewhat more pragmatic and mundane than the vision. Tai chi, an offshoot of qi gong, which fuses Taoist nei gong with Shaolin battlefield techniques and which came into being several hundred years ago, has more recently received wide acclaim in the West as an alternative approach to exercise and wellbeing.¹ When the fundamental internal content that drives and gives shape to tai chi and qi gong forms is active, both internal arts offer an effective, revitalising, slow and relaxed dichotomy to the push, force and strain mentality germane to many mainstream forms of exercise.

All Forms Are Not Created Equal

***Systems** are ideologies or schools of thought that underlie internal arts training and which make use of several to many different internal art forms.

Forms are defined by the choreography of a set of sequential movements that serve as containers for internal content to be expressed; there can be one to many different styles of any given form.

Yet anyone who considers taking up tai chi or qi gong soon finds that there are dozens upon dozens of systems, schools, forms and styles available.* The differences are not well understood in the West, where internal arts are relatively new and remain mysterious.² Many students train systems that have limited potential, not knowing what could be gained for the same effort and practice time simply by selecting better systems and forms to achieve their

desired results. For example, most people decide to learn tai chi because of the growing body of research that supports its stress-reduction and health claims, rather than to learn how to become a skilful martial artist or to become spiritually enlightened. Martial training can indeed create a healthy body, but more as a by-product than as the prime directive of repeating fighting applications; whereas entering into the realms of meditation for spiritual development – or even just personal development – entails training that is vastly different from learning martial techniques with a relaxed or pensive state of mind, and requires a healthy body, at least to some degree, from the outset. If you take the road to Milan with the intent of going to Madrid, the journey will be much longer than necessary, or you might not reach your destination at all; likewise, training techniques should specifically and directly develop the skills that target desired results at each stage of your development.

First and foremost, it is the internal content* that is responsible for the health, healing and power-generating benefits associated with tai chi and qi gong practice – *not forms per se*. You would not buy a car solely on the basis of outward appearances without considering the mechanics under the bodywork, and forms should not be selected in this manner either. From the perspective of internal arts, like buying a car, what really counts is what happens inside the body. The ultimate aim of all energy arts training, whether you are a casual or a dedicated student, is to engage and move your insides – something that just about anyone who can stand up and walk around can develop the skill to do.*

* **Internal content** is the health and power generation techniques that energy arts, such as tai chi and qi gong, are made of.

Even still, in more than twenty years of teaching, I have been surprised time and again by the shocked responses I get from students when I demonstrate internal motion: that is, targeted, refined and controlled movement beneath the skin – whether moving fascia, ligaments, joints, bodily fluids, specific organs or the spine. The same bewildered looks emerge when I demonstrate how internal motion in one part of the body can transfer, connect to and move another part some distance away – in a student's body or in my own. Even long-term practitioners are often taken aback by the range of motion if not the depth of internal movement possible within the various forms of tai chi and qi gong.

*And if you do want to be able to fight, you will need a healthy body as injury has taken many a seasoned professional out of the game. When their internals are active, tai chi and qi gong can keep you healthy, so you can fight another day.

This astonishment is the result of two self-reinforcing reasons. First, the degree to which forms are internal has been seriously downgraded in nearly all systems in the West. They essentially amount to dance choreography and yield little more than standard external exercise, which lacks the fundamental internal connections that deliver deeper health benefits. These systems are called *Wushu*³ in China and are considered performance arts – not health or martial arts. Second, when learning a discipline from a foreign culture, there is a massive gap between how words translate and their actual meaning.⁴ Unfortunately, many early teachers in the West have done their students a great disservice by being either unwilling or unable to teach real-deal internals, leaving lineage teachings vague and imprecise as they are passed down from one generation to the next. This is one reason why dedicated practitioners are highly concerned with lineage lines and titles: it matters who teaches you, because a person cannot share what they do not have, know or genuinely wish to transfer. As it stands, the deeper benefits associated with practice remain, by and large, elusive in the West, and the more advanced techniques that any reasonably high-level practitioner can demonstrate on demand are generally regarded as myth or fantasy.

In the early days of my training, I recall my teacher, Bruce Frantzis, demonstrating kidney breathing.⁵ He allowed students to feel the movement in his lower back, as the kidneys receive a firm massage from the physical motion of the diaphragm. This basic breath-

*Often referred to as "Old Taoism", the **Water method** is the school of thought described by Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* 2,500 years ago; it is contrasted by the younger Fire method, often referred to as "Neo-Taoism", which was propagated in the Third and Fourth Centuries.

ing technique is fundamental to Water method arts training* since, in Chinese medicine, the kidneys are regarded as the battery pack of life, either revitalising or downgrading health and life-force energy, or what is known as *qi* in the East.⁶ Comments from students ranged from amazement to disbelief. Those who

rejected the exercise being possible, deeming the clearly visible movement as a trick or some sort of deception, created a self-fulfilling prophecy on the spot and were unlikely ever to be able to learn how to do it themselves: it is the mind, not the body, that ultimately makes anything possible. So anyone who wants to learn an art from a foreign culture – or anything new for that matter – must approach it with some degree of an open mind, albeit tempered by a healthy

dose of scepticism, to embark on any genuine course of study and make headway along their path.

Myth Is an Image

If there is anything I have learned from my training, it is that internal arts statements are not only multi-layered, but always point to some pragmatic skill that pertains to developing the body, energy, mind or some combination of these. But how do Western students translate alien concepts into practical application? The link is metaphor.

The pages that follow are a collection of 42 principles, portrayed as illustrations and accompanied by brief explanations, aimed at conveying how the fundamental internal arts techniques function, so you can embed them and literally bring them alive in your flesh. Energy arts training does not emphasise practices for thinking about or visualising concepts. Instead, the focus is on directly experiencing what is happening inside your body – no mental projection required! But of course you must have some level of understanding of what it is you are meant to do as a starting point. Pictures can give you a means for assimilating information without simply overlaying past experiences onto concepts that are actually brand new to you.

“Myth is an image.”

*Alan Watts*⁷

Images can also bypass analytical filters, allowing the mind to create new conceptual frameworks. Take cartoons as an example. Many are designed for adult entertainment and successfully continue season after season because people can take advice and even find humour in their hypocrisies from a cartoon. Most audiences would reject the same advice and narratives if offered by human beings, including by actors portraying real-life situations. Animation can function as storytelling did for the ancients, passing on cultural norms, morals and taboos from one generation to the next via the makings of myth and legend. Likewise, in order to understand the true inner workings of the internal arts, initially bypassing your mind’s analytical gatekeeper allows you to discover their seemingly paradoxical logic and tap into their full potential. No equivalent applications are available in Western culture in any case, so images help to bridge the gap. One prime example is moving the body via bend-and-stretch techniques to produce circular

***Reciprocal inhibition** is the prevailing Western model for explaining how muscles control joints to move the body and states that a group of muscles on one side of a joint must contract to draw a limb towards the body while its opposing group relaxes; then the opposing group must contract while the initial group relaxes to subsequently draw the limb away from the body.

Bend-and-stretch techniques disprove this model as the only method for moving the body by activating all the body's muscles – without contraction. Just about any internal arts student who has a grounding in the basics can demonstrate this base technique on demand; truly advanced practitioners will demonstrate bend-and-stretch in every move of their flowing forms.

movement rather than via reciprocal inhibition,* which, no matter how smoothly executed, can only produce linear movement.

Journey towards Unity

So why on Earth would you want to go to so much trouble to learn an ancient art from a foreign culture? First, exercise is a natural part of existence for all creatures. Watch your cat or dog the next time they wake up, and notice how they stretch and open up their body. Do you remember having to teach them how to do that? Second, there are good forms of exercise and better forms: the good forms keep you healthy and fit; the better forms heal and rejuvenate your body, energy and mind.

If you take a healthy animal, lock it in a cage and dramatically restrict its movement, in time you will notice its mood change. The animal will become depressive or aggressive and, eventually, ill – not just from a lack of exercise, but from the lack of freedom. In many ways we put ourselves in self-inflicted cages. We go from our house, to our car or public transport, to the office, to the pub or one of our favourite restaurants, and back home again. Too many people exercise very little in a day and spend a large part of it sitting and staring at screens. Bits and bytes of information transfer at lightning speed, and people cannot keep up. In comparison to our ancestors from just 100 years ago, we have become sedentary, and this lifestyle change compounds if not causes many modern illnesses.

You may not be able to slow down the pace of your life, but you can choose a form of exercise that includes targeting mental stress and tension – that which significantly impacts on how you operate your body and is ultimately responsible for your sense of wellbeing. Internal energy arts are one real answer to regaining and maintaining sanity in this rapidly advancing technological society and injecting some energy, qi, into your life.

Through the Eyes of the Ancients

The prevailing Western view is that exercise is about the muscles and the heart: that strengthening the muscles and getting the blood pumping via increased cardiovascular activity creates a healthy body. In the East, creating a healthy body starts with slow, gentle, repetitive exercise that targets and releases tension in the soft tissues and nerves, stimulates the organs, circulates blood and energy, and relaxes the body, emotions and mind. Since from an Eastern perspective organ function is associated with the emotions and governs our underlying state of health, exercise is seen as not only for the body. In fact, the concept of severance – separation of mind and body, body and emotions, energy and mind – is quite alien to Eastern thought.

You have a body and that body requires energy to live.

The more qi you have, the stronger and more vibrant you become.

Qi arts are designed to systematically and progressively release bindings that we collect throughout our lives as a result of stress, illness, injury, trauma and ageing. Tai chi and qi gong, and for that matter all internal arts, take some time and effort to learn, but the results build and exponentially multiply over time. Soft tissue techniques initially exercise the outer muscles, and they can eventually work into the deepest parts of your anatomy. As you go inside your body, layer by layer, you learn how to feel, release, open and heal all that is bound and restricted within you. In so doing, you build stamina and strengthen your body, mind and energy. Over time and with regular practice, you can manifest a body that is soft yet strong, free of restrictions and full of vitality.

A healthy body supports balanced emotions that are smooth and unsuppressed.

A calm and stable emotional state supports a mind that can be present, awake and focused.

So practice creates a positive feedback loop that reinforces balance and health on all levels of your being.

The extreme tactics of many modern exercise regimes and martial systems tend to generate a mind and emotions that are tight, hard, stress-inducing and with the mentality that something must be overcome. Internal energy arts come from the opposite approach as integrative,

holistic therapies: first they seek to release, then open, balance, heal, integrate, strengthen and unify all parts into one whole.



However, repeating tai chi or qi gong forms like a machine programmed with algorithms makes them lifeless and dead. Through the eyes of the ancients, energy arts were always regarded as living practices to literally wake up consciousness in the flesh and express that energy – a human being's potential – through forms that morph and develop as the individual does. Together, the 42 principles in the following pages offer a pragmatic methodology for breathing life into your forms to create lasting changes, step by step, *regardless of the specific system or external forms or styles you practise.*

How Principles Are Presented

The concepts presented here are classical principles I have learned over 30 years of dedicated internal arts training. Many are traditional, as described throughout the ages in seminal texts such as *The Tai Chi Classics*,⁸ *Tao Te Ching*,⁹ *I Ching*,¹⁰ *The Book of Chuang Tzu*,¹¹ *The Way of Chuang Tzu*¹² and *The Inner Chapters*,¹³ whereas others are my interpretations based on two decades of full-time teaching and result from my own practice and self-healing journey. All of the principles are essential components that lead a practitioner into the realm of internal exercise and bring the arts alive. Each principle has been diligently tested and yields profound and lasting results for students at all levels of experience who manage to successfully apply them in their practice.

In Parts 2 and 3 of this book, tai chi postures “contain” the internal techniques being described. Each posture serves as a good example

to illustrate a specific internal principle at play, but should not be taken to mean that it is the only posture that contains the principle nor that additional principles are not relevant to any given posture. In fact, most internal principles are active throughout the entirety of tai chi and qi gong forms, and principles that have very specific applications are usually obvious and unambiguous. The purpose of showing a posture at all is to introduce relevant internal concepts in such a way that they can be brought to life in your flesh, through direct experience. This presentation is by no means an attempt to generate a dogmatic application of internal principles through a rigid system; rather, it is an attempt at offering the reader a method for gaining access to the fundamental content that drives and gives shape to internal art forms.

Three Stages for Embodying Internal Principles

Learning a tai chi or qi gong form is done piece by piece, with movements being repeated over and over again. This process allows the internals to come alive and eventually become embedded in the form, from beginning to end, without having to think about them.

The three stages of embodiment are:

First, embed the internal principle into a posture/movement that easily and naturally carries the technique due to its intrinsic design.

Second, look for the obvious places in which the internal principle can be applied elsewhere in the form.

Third, work the principle into all unobvious postures/movements of the form, until it is present and alive in your flesh throughout the entirety of the form.

Why Use Tai Chi Postures?

Although the Water method usually advocates beginning with qi gong before moving on to tai chi (a complex form of qi gong), there are several reasons why focusing on tai chi postures to learn internal content can be more useful than qi gong alone. To start with, most tai chi forms available in the West have many more postures than qi gong forms,* thereby

*This is not necessarily the case in China, where qi gong systems can include hundreds of moves, taking up to several hours to complete.

offering a wider array of possible movements to learn and train internally. Frequently repeating the same postures while layering in more internal principles can blur important distinctions essential for clarity and developing depth of skill. Second, in the West tai chi is much better known and is practised in far greater numbers than is qi gong – with the Yang style, presented here, being the most popular. That said, many forms have been downgraded from the perspective of internals or are not fully integrated, and therefore lack the content and cohesion that actually generates tai chi’s deeper and more profound health and healing benefits. These principles have been practised in China for thousands of years through various internal art forms, of which tai chi is the youngest. So this is an opportunity to demonstrate what makes Chinese internal energy arts more effective forms of mind-body exercise than modern sports, forms of dance or, for that matter, external martial arts.

Visual Lexicon

This text makes use of three distinct kinds of illustration:

1. Mechanics – how forms are engineered.
2. Artistry – how forms become fluid and alive.
3. Yang style tai chi form postures – where all internal content is integrated.

Mechanics: Engineering the Form

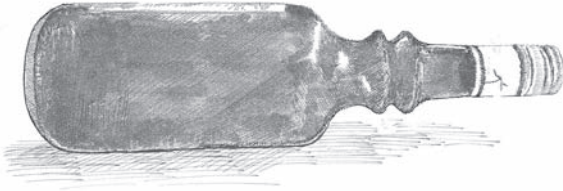
The first stream of images deals with mechanics, offering insight into how the body physically connects up to integrate and blend within the motions of forms to create a well-oiled “machine”. This is one viewpoint, like this illustration of a coin ... or is it the bottom of a bottle? It is hard to tell when viewed from a single angle only.



Artistry: Tapping into the Flow

The second stream of images is meant to inspire imagination and flow, to help you link with and mimic the natural world in which we live – spontaneous and always in perpetual motion. In stark contrast to mundane mechanics, it is the artistry of tai chi and qi gong that breathes life into form movements and yet relies upon them to build a solid container.

And so the object turns to the side and, with the new point of view, we see now that it is indeed a bottle. Our understanding of the bottle evolves from what was previously envisaged and hidden aspects are revealed.



Yang Style Tai Chi Postures

The third stream of images, that of actual form postures used in tai chi and qi gong forms, introduces a movement in which the principle (from either the first or second stream) can be embedded and brought to life in your flesh.



So the bottle turns to the isometric view and reveals its full depth. All three dimensions are on display, and the whole comes into focus. Only when you consider different angles can you see the complete picture, reach a deeper level of understanding and truly integrate the learning experience on more profound levels of your being.

Fusing Art and Engineering

Tai chi and qi gong fuse art and engineering, creating highly sophisticated, multi-layered, dynamic energy arts. Until practitioners grasp and balance both aspects within their forms, their practice will surely lack power and flow. People are naturally disposed to one side of the coin

or the other – that is to say, more technical or artistic in their approach. In the West, we are conditioned to play to our strengths and improve individual skills. In the East, people learn to play to their weaknesses, which balances and reinforces the whole.

Only when weaknesses are strengthened can balance be achieved.

Only when balance is achieved can the realms of art and engineering be seamlessly integrated to heal, reinvigorate and maximise human potential through internal arts training.



Who Can Benefit from This Book?

This book is designed to teach the fundamentals that drive and underpin training at all levels and stages of development, not a form. There are numerous books on forms packed full of diagrams and figures that largely only serve to confuse those trying to learn tai chi and qi gong because three-dimensional motion cannot be accurately portrayed by a series of two-dimensional images; and large gaps between moves prevent students from truly following along and catching the flow. The situation is compounded by the fact that the average person's proprioception is distorted, leading practitioners to believe they are mimicking what they see when they might actually be doing something quite different. Anyone who has attended a tai chi class where the

teacher offers corrections will have experienced this disconnect firsthand! However, for those who do not have the benefit of a teacher's live input, they can find themselves in a cul-de-sac and completely lose their way by hardwiring inaccurate movement into their bodies. These "bad habits" become hard to break later ... that is, if they manage to find a good teacher who is willing and able to offer the corrections they specifically need.

Whether you are a complete beginner, an experienced stylist or anywhere in-between, learning and training an internal art always requires attuning your mind to the *modus operandi*, content and quality of the art you are practising. In the longer term, you need a method for staying on track and preventing squandered effort, either by missing some of the essential principles in your practice or by trying to move on to more advanced techniques too quickly. All of the material in this book is a part of fundamental training that should never be regarded as too elementary, nor not important enough to develop and revisit time and again, as internal arts training is intrinsically circular. Through the cycling, intermediate and advanced students will find the holes in their understanding and skill set, and root out weaknesses; this guides and sets the pace for ongoing practice without a bunch of mental mumbo jumbo, allowing more advanced training to transpire organically.

Even the most advanced practitioner is encouraged to return to the basics and refine their art. In fact, from one perspective, we are all beginners. The more we know, the more we realise what we do not know. The more we accept this disposition, the more our minds can open to learning new things. As our minds open, we can see more clearly what is weak, unstable and lacks integration. I have encountered too many practitioners who have put in immense effort, some over many years, in great earnest, yet their forms cannot really be considered internal. Maybe they trained a weak system, did not have a teacher who could perform or communicate internal techniques that are virtually invisible to the untrained eye, or they did not spend enough time on component practices. Whatever the case, this situation is incredibly unfortunate, and, in the pages that follow, my aim is to show you how to develop quality and depth in the fundamentals, which not only unlock health and power-generating benefits but also more advanced and extraordinary levels of practice.

Creating a Practice Microcosm

Most people are only searching for a practice to maintain health and wellbeing, to prevent suffering. Even so, it takes discipline and effort to achieve, as a half-hearted attempt at practising anything once in a blue moon will yield little in return. For those who want more from their practice, it will take considerably more dedication and determination.

Whatever your level of commitment, creating your own practice microcosm is a good strategy for achieving your training goals. Take each of the principles, one thread at a time, train and develop it for several days, weeks or months, then reintegrate it back into the whole. As you cycle through and slowly upgrade each and every component, maintain a gentle intent on opening up on ever-deeper layers of your being. In time you might find you can adapt to and accommodate what might not have been conceivable before: relaxing that which is tense, strengthening that which is weak, and letting go of all that binds and restricts you from being truly free and at ease with life. There is no need to force or rush your progress in any specific way, no need for mental projections about what life will be like in the future. Instead, be content at the place where you find yourself, in the here and now, focus on creating more stability in that place and allow your next phase of development to unfurl naturally, in your own time, through accurate and sustainable practice.

