

deBlog

This blog documents things I've said to members who attended M-W afternoon "Intermediate Level" practices. Any *metaphysical* comments made represent my feelings about Tai Chi at the time they are made. Those comments need not be taken as gospel but are offered as things to think about.

In part, the goal of these notes is to provide a reference that says more clearly/completely that which I meant to say in practice. Other goals are to provide a reference for people who:

- discuss things later and disagree about what was said.
- find it tedious to wade through Kevin's videos.
- want a quick written guide to performing the moves.

The blog notes are not a literal breakdown of each move but try to provide keys for how to deal with difficult moves.

Thank you for your patience and willingness to listen to my ramblings at practice,
David

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0715/25 - My Beginning

I grew up in Hawaii, mostly on Oahu, a couple of years on Kauai. In 7th grade, I met a fellow chess player named Bob Fong who became a BFF. Lots of boys in Hawaii grew up practicing various martial arts; especially Judo, Karate, Aikido, and Tae Kwan Do. I was not at all interested in such things but, in 1974, Bob invited me to join a Tai Chi group.

I had doubts but Bob had never given me bad advice, so I joined. We practiced Yang Style Tai Chi, roughly from 1973-75 under the direction of Dr. T. Y. Pang. I left Hawaii in July of 1975 to pursue a creative writing degree at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Over the next 40 years, I had 3-4 encounters of the very brief kind with clubs in Boulder and Tampa. I did not stay with any group long, because I did not respect the instructors, the location did not suit work schedule, or the style practiced focused on martial rather than the health aspects of Tai Chi.

I joined the Sun City Center club in August of 2021, when Kenneth Faulk, who led the club for two decades, was still teaching.

In 2022, Kenneth retired. That same year, I *temporarily* assumed the front-right-corner position when long-time member, Judy Kucera became ill. Judy is still with us in spirit but has been unable to return, so I remain in situ.



0717/25 - Thoughts about Practice

The first rule of Tai Chi is to only do what you can; do not try to do more than your body can handle. First learn the move; then learn to relax while doing it.

When people struggle with a move, they tend to speed up; this is precisely when they need to slow down. Do not try to gloss over difficult moves by doing them as quickly as possible.

The slower you practice, the more stress you place on your supporting and stabilizing muscles. This not only creates strength and stamina in those muscles; it also gives you time to audit yourself.

When you practice, see everything and nothing; that is, see everything but focus on nothing.

One way to empty your mind when practicing is to do every move (including transition moves) with a sense of purpose. This will help you to empty your mind of other thoughts.

The five principles are things we need to practice repeatedly until they are incorporated into every move we make. However, there are exceptions. For example: You *always* square hips to the direction of the foot on which you support yourself. But for *White Stork Spreads Wings*, your right foot points at 45° while your hips point 45° to the left of that foot.

When studying a language, one of the first items to learn is how verb endings change for each verb type. Then you learn there are *irregular verbs* and the rules for ending those verbs do not follow the rules for regular verbs. In this sense, practicing Tai Chi is like learning a language.

07/15/25 - Opening of Tai Chi (1)

We tuck our 13-pound year-old Cocker-poo into her crate each night after she has her bedtime biscuit. To make the event as difficult as possible, Sophie has a habit of going completely limp. When I pick her up, I could swear she weighs at least 30 pounds. I tell this dead-weight story because it reminds me of the opposite feeling we want to achieve in the opening move of Tai Chi, when you raise and lower your arms.

In one sense, it seems obvious the move requires the use of your shoulder muscles. But, in a more meditative sense, we want the move to be effortless, as if the shoulder muscles are not used at all. Think of it this way:

Imagine standing chest-deep in a pool, with your hands at your sides holding two tennis balls. If you relax, the balls will rise to the surface, taking your arms up with them. This is the feeling you want to achieve when you do the opening move; completely relaxed in your shoulders while your arms float upwards as if being raised by some unknown force.

While doing this move:

- stand erect
- relax your shoulders
- ensure your knees are not locked
- rotate your pelvis so your tailbone points straight down at the floor.



07/22/25 - The Nature of Chi

Andrea and I took a look one night at a TV show hosted by Henry Winkler about crazy things people used to do for amusement. One segment was about how they used to crash trains into each other. Two locomotives with a few cars attached would race toward each other at top speed on the same track until they collided. The collisions were spectacular explosions, with flames and searing metal flying in all directions.

As I watched the show, I thought about how time seemed to slow down as the trains approached each other. It was almost as if everything was calm and at peace until the moment of impact. In that moment all the enormous potential energy of those two hurtling trains got instantly released as kinetic energy and all heck broke loose.

I was asked recently about the slow way we practice Tai Chi. I like to think our movements are like the trains that seem to move in slow motion until the moment of impact. Time almost stands still until contact is made and then an enormous transfer of energy happens. When we practice, be calm, be confident, and know your movement is just another irresistible force, like that of the trains.



07/30/25 – The Sweet Spot

I used to talk a lot about how I move up and down or pick up a foot -- at times unnecessarily-- while practicing the set, in the interest of building leg strength. I still do that but don't talk so much about it anymore because I don't want you to think leg strength is the only key to doing the moves properly. It took me a couple of years to realize that perfect balance and calm confidence is more important than leg strength.

Regarding calm confidence, consider our typical response when we feel we are beginning to fall. It is natural to want to stand up because that is the opposite direction to falling down. But we need to train ourselves to react to a moment of realizing we are beginning to fall by relaxing downward and letting our bodies adjust our weight distribution as needed. Doing this repeatedly will teach you to be calm and trust your body.

Regarding perfect balance, one reason we move so slowly when we practice is to allow our brains to *audit* our balance as we proceed through each movement. If you do a movement incorrectly, your brain will sense imbalance and signal you to move differently. When you move, your brain will then sense whether you are improving your balance or making it worse and will then signal encouragement or disapproval.

This process is like the game you played as children. With a blindfold on, moved according to instructions provided by your friends; you got warmer or colder, with each step. If you trusted your friends and paid close attention, you eventually got to your goal.

In Tai Chi practice, you need to trust and pay attention to the feedback your brain gives to your body and make the appropriate adjustments. Eventually, you will find a sweet spot for each part of each move; it is the precise position where your body is in perfect balance.

When you experience and recognize that point of equilibrium in any given move, I encourage you to stop for a moment or two. Allow your body to absorb the sensation and your brain to catalog the coordinates of your bodily position. This is one way to develop 'good' muscle memories.



08/04/25 – Push Needle at Sea Bottom (28)

Certain moves often get rushed during practice. Sometimes, we rush because we are anxious about the next move; sometimes because we are worried about balance, and sometimes because a move is difficult. Most of us want to breeze through the *Dan Yu* exercise because, if we do it properly (as if you are sitting back into a chair, rather than bending over as you squat), the exercise puts a good deal of stress on our quads.

Do not yield to the temptation to rush a *Dan Yu* sit. Instead, sit only as deep as you are comfortable. And, while doing so, keep the same timing as when you were trying to sit as deeply as possible.

Push Needle at Sea Bottom is often rushed because it stresses your hamstrings as you try to reach the floor. Do not worry about going all the way to the floor but do the move slowly (\approx 4 seconds down, 4 seconds up) however low you are comfortable going. Keep these points in mind:

1. Relax onto right leg with foot 45° right. Left foot points straight ahead, heel slightly off the floor.
2. Do not start moving downward until your hands are in front of your body.
3. Relax as your arms pull head and upper body down (head down, back curved, not straight).
4. Pause a moment at bottom of the move to feel the stretch.



5. Push from left toe and allow your arms and torso to 'float' up to an erect position.
6. When erect, relax into right leg; turn 45° to the right with hands forming a tee at shoulder height.



08/13/25 – High Pat on Horse (36)

When preparing to review High Pat on Horse, it occurred to me that one reason we do *Reeling Silk* and *Tor Yu* fundamental exercises is to practice the principle of equal and opposite expression. The idea is first to pair each outward/forward expression with a corresponding inward/rearward expression, so your body is always balanced. Secondly, do these exercises in a state of relaxation. We say equal and opposite *expression* rather than *force* to reinforce the idea of being relaxed rather than tense, as you practice each move.

When doing *High Pat on Horse*, pay attention to the principle of equal and opposite expression and how we apply it when doing *Reeling Silk* and *Tor Yu*: The energy for movement comes from your feet/legs. Let your arms/hands move with your body and be an expression of that motion, rather than a forceful thrust of your muscles. A summary of keys for High Pat on Horse is provided below.

1. Start at *Whip to One Side*; weight is mostly forward on your left leg; body is squared up at 90°.

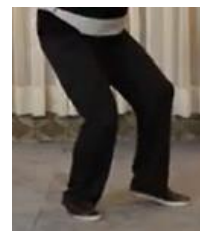


2. Push back from left foot and, as you relax onto right leg, turn your body 45° to match your right foot. Right arm follows your body as you sink down but let your left arm float behind. This is important because, if you let the left arm fall close to your body, you will lose the opportunity to push-pull in Step 4.



3. As you push from your right foot, let your body spiral up and start bringing your right arm forward.

Retract your left foot to the same position it was, just before you stepped forward to the starting *Whip to One Side* position.



4. When your hands center in front of your body, do a push-pull motion as in *Reeling Silk*.

Your left hand comes down in front of your belly, while your right hand rises to shoulder height out in front of your body, with the little-finger edge of your hand facing outward; that is, fingers face sideways rather than forward.

As the move ends: shoulders are relaxed, arms are slightly rounded. Hands are centered in front of your body. Weight is mostly on the right leg.



08/20/25 – Strike Tiger Left/Right (46-47)

Strike Tiger can seem intimidating, because your hands move at different speeds in different directions, you shift your weight a few times, and you turn 180°. Beginners often exacerbate the challenge by standing in the back row where they have no one to follow for the first part of the move. It is better for beginners to stand somewhere in the middle of a middle row.

I often say, if you do not practice every day, you will not be happy with your progress. This does not mean you must spend an *hour* every day, but it is helpful to do *something* for 5-10 minutes daily to keep your thoughts about Tai Chi fresh and to build confidence.

To begin, practice things you know, e.g., the foundation exercises or the beginning moves of the set. Once you realize you struggle with a particular move, spend a few minutes practicing that move. If you improve, great. If not, review Kevin's video for the move or ask Sandy or me for advice.

Strike Tiger begins at the end of move 45, *Kick Right*. You stand with all weight on your left leg, which is 45° from your extended right leg and arm. Proceed as follows:

1. Bring right foot down and place it at a 45° angle to match the left foot 45° angle.
2. Move your arms to "hold a bouquet" (right hand a little higher than left) as you push from your left foot and shift your weight to the right foot.

Face 45° to the right; weight is on right; left toe is down, left heel is up.



3. Relax into the right leg, then step forward with your left foot (no weight on it). Keep your right foot at 45°.
4. Turn your body to match your left foot, shifting weight from right to left. As your body moves, let your left hand fall, making a circle that finishes with a fist about eye level in front, in line with your left leg,.

As the left hand circles, your right hand drops until it is parallel to the floor and forms a fist adjacent to your left elbow.

Weight is mostly on left foot; your body expresses forward in a straight line from head to the right heel.



5. Push from your left foot to shift weight back to the right foot, release both fists and turn your palms inward to hold a bouquet (left hand higher than right).
6. Shift some weight to your right foot so you can pivot on your left heel to be pigeon-toed. Stand up and then relax down into your left leg as you complete the turn, 180° from where you started.
7. Step forward with your right foot (no weight on it). Keep your left foot at 45°.
8. Turn your body to match your right foot, shifting weight from left to right. As your body moves, let your right hand fall, making a circle that finishes with a fist about eye level in front, in line with your right leg.

As the right hand circles, your left hand drops parallel to the floor and forms a fist adjacent to your right elbow. Weight is mostly on right foot; your body expresses forward in a straight line from head to the left heel.



08/27/25 – Kick Right & Strike Tiger with Fists (48-49)

I once said we should do no kicks before their time. Kick moves can be difficult if you put your kicking-leg out before you are perfectly balanced on the supporting leg. One reason we practice each move slowly is to give ourselves time to find and settle into that balance point.

The *Kick Right* move just before *Strike Tiger with Fists* is a good example of this challenge: If you don't relax your body completely into your left leg, your right kick will be wobbly, and you will probably 'fall' into your right leg rather than placing it down with no weight on it. And that will affect the next move as well. Do no kick before its time!

At *Strike Tiger Right*, face straight ahead with weight forward. Proceed as described below.

1. Push from right foot and relax into left, as your body turns 45° left.

Drop your arms down to waist level, then cross your palms as your arms come up to neck level.



2. Stand up on your left leg. When you are properly balanced, draw your right knee up close to your body, then extend your right leg to do a heel-kick straight forward.

Right arm is up and in line with right leg; left arm is back for balance. Your body is still facing 45° to the left.



3. Sit back down onto your left foot. Do not fall forward but step out, placing your right foot straight forward (no weight).

Bring your arms down to waist level with palms crossed and facing up (right arm under left arm)



4. Push from your left leg and turn 45° right. As you turn, separate your hands and move your hands down and around in a circle, ending with fists at face level.

Weight is forward on right leg. Left leg is straight. You should be able to draw a straight line from your head to your left foot.



09/03/25 – Kick Left 90° & Turn and Kick Right (50-51)

A concept called “rooting” is fundamental in Tai Chi. Rooting means connecting with the earth just as a tree does. Rooting improves balance and stability as you move and, on more advanced levels, also enables energy flow from the earth up through your body. Rooting cannot simply be turned on. It is something you must think about and practice constantly. Over time your roots will deepen.

To practice rooting, begin with a mental image of you connecting with the ground, then relax purposefully into your supporting leg, trusting it will support your body. Rooting is crucial with all moves and is especially important when doing kicks, such as the ones we are practicing today.

At *Strike Tiger with Fists*, you face straight ahead with weight forward on your right leg.

1. Simultaneously push down with both hands as you stand up on your right leg.

As you finish standing up, cross hands in front about chin high.



2. Open your arms as you kick 90° left. Left arm aligns with left leg; right arm roughly aligns with torso for balance.



3. **Note:** It might be helpful as you do the next step-and-turn moves to sit down just a little, rather than trying to do the moves standing upright. Also, although we want to do each step as a continuous motion, **do not** speed up when doing the steps.

Lower your left foot pigeon-toed (**in line with right foot**), then turn right as you step your right foot Pa Kua (**in line with left foot**).



4. Step right with your left foot pigeon-toed again (**in line with right foot**). Relax into your left leg and kick with your right foot.

Right arm aligns with right leg; left arm roughly aligns with torso for balance.



5. Finish the kick by lowering your right foot Pa Kua as you raise your arms to hold the bouquet (left hand a little higher than right hand).



Side Note: Someone lost count while doing *Wave Hands Like Clouds*, while focusing on letting the body move the arms. I reminded them that this is one reason we must focus while doing the fundamental exercises rather than just going through the moves in a perfunctory way. They are not just for ‘warm-up’.

09/10/25 – Chop with Fist, Step Up Deflect Parry Punch (52-53)

A question arose about which part of *Step Up Deflect Parry Punch* is 'deflect' and which is 'parry'. Awareness videos are not crystal clear about this and, in English, deflect and parry are synonyms. If there is a distinction in Chinese between the words, I am unaware of what it might be.

I will indicate which is which, but the best answer I can give you is: it really does not matter if you know the names of a moves or the names of the parts of a move. The important thing for this move is to move from 45° left, to 45° right, to straight ahead, smoothly and in synch with feet and arms, while maintaining your balance.

As you finish *Kick Right* (51), you are facing 45° left, standing on left leg; right foot is elevated. Right arm aligns with right leg; left arm roughly aligns with torso for balance. Proceed as described below.

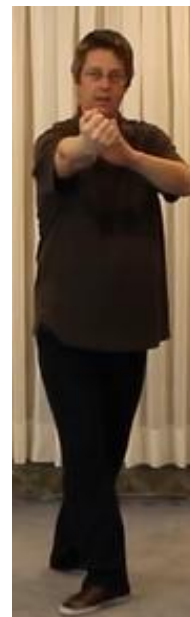
1. As you place your right foot down Pa Kua in front of your left foot, bring your hands to hold the bouquet, left hand higher than the right.

Note: Do not change your body angle; that is, remain facing 45° left.



2. Turn your body right to align with your feet, bringing your right arm straight out to *Chop with Fist*.

Simultaneously, the left arm follows, with your open left hand facing down slightly above your left elbow.



3. Continue turning right; spiral down and shift weight into the right leg.

Take right fist down to hip and push left hand straight out to deflect.

Body is now lined up at 45° with left foot.



4. Continue turning right as you stand and then relax into your left leg.

As you step out with left foot, turn left to face forward.

Move left hand down to parry as the right fist goes out to punch.



Reminders: First, learn how to do a move, then learn how to relax while doing it.

First step (place your foot), then shift your weight.