



You may distribute this PDF freely, as long as it is left completely intact and unaltered.

You may also republish excerpts as long as they are accompanied by an attribution link back to <http://www.drtaichi.com>

Copyright © 2006 David-Dorian Ross. Some rights reserved.

Mastering Flow: Contents

The Building Blocks of Synergy	2
Slow Down	6
Sink Down	9
Relax	11
Balance Yin and Yang	15
Be Natural	
Be Continuous	13

A life of Soul... is by definition a life in balance, and one of the main experiences of balance is Flow – which we might also call rhythm, ease, grace, or continuity. Flow is what makes life feel smooth and easy. Flow is associated with the disappearance of the boundaries of limitation. Flow is the sense of effortlessness, of being in the zone of Peak Performance and Peak Experience.

On the other hand, the absence of Flow is what makes life feel disconnected, cut up, out of proportion... out of balance. If you've ever felt like your life was made of separate distinct areas – work over here; home and family over there; hobbies, recreation and education all in their own domains – then you've felt what it was like to lose Flow. If you've ever felt like your life was a story of taking three steps forward and two steps back, then you've felt what it was like to know the absence of Flow.

When we practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan, we first learn to flow with our bodies, and then to flow inside, around and through the events and relationships of our lives.

Flow is what you get when synergy is present, and T'ai Chi Ch'uan trains your body to move synergistically. Synergy is defined as the coordination and interaction of all the parts of the body, mind and Spirit in such a way that the whole is greater the mere sum of those parts. The way that T'ai Chi Ch'uan nurtures the BodyMind and leads to the experience of flow is through the first pillar – the practice of the solo forms.

The solo forms are like an intricate dance that requires strength, balance, coordination and serenity to perform correctly. The huge body of T'ai Chi Ch'uan tradition contains all kinds of rules, checklists, guideliness and principles about how to dance the solo forms. In other words, the forms are an *exercise in synergy*.

The Basic Principles

The basic stances, transitions and postures will get you well on your way to learning to play T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Yet even so, all these elements combined are still only the outer shell of T'ai Chi, without a heart and soul. To really infuse your movement with the unique flavor and character of this art, you must understand the guiding principles which underlie the motions. The traditional authority on the correct performance of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is a collection of writings from the T'ai Chi Masters of old, entitled The T'ai Chi Classics. If you're ever in doubt about the correct way to stand or move or interact according to the T'ai Chi principles, just read The Classics. The Classics are also our connection to the ancient masters. As we read their poems and essays, we start to get a sense of the cultural context out of which T'ai Chi Ch'uan has grown.

Originally, The Classics were simple rhymes and lyrical verses passed from teacher to student orally. Since a majority of Chinese in ancient times were illiterate, the songs were easy to memorize. That way, even if you couldn't "read" between the lines, you could remember your teacher's words exactly. By contemplating the poetry of The Classics, a student might eventually understand the spiritual truths contained in simple verse about martial arts.

One of the first lessons we learn by studying the deeper wisdom of T'ai Chi is that the basic principles are the building blocks of synergy. We practice the solo forms according to the Principles *entrain* them into ourselves, until we *embody* their essence. Here are the six *basic* principles to synergy and flow.

1: Slow Down

Of course, everyone has read about the fast pace of modern society, and how it causes stress. But beyond – or deeper – than that, the principle of Slowing down asks us to “pay attention.” When we move slowly in T'ai Chi, it gives us *time* to see everything we're doing. And in seeing ourselves, our actions, our choices and decisions – with clarity – we can see whether our actions really align with our intentions. Often, we discover we don't even really know what our intentions are!

In moving slowly through the postures of the solo forms, we open up – and then reinforce – new neuromuscular pathways. These are bridges between the brain and the body, between our minds and our muscles. Thoughts, feelings and perceptions are also phenomena of neural pathways, and each time we have these unconscious mental experiences we reinforce those neuromuscular pathways as well.

But when we slow down, we get time to see whether our thoughts, feelings and perceptions are really leading to the results we want in life. Do they lead us to peak performance and peak experience? Do they lead us to Flow?

The deeper lesson:

The principle of Slowing Down doesn't necessarily mean that you have to live your entire life at a snail's pace. None of the ancient T'ai Chi fighting masters, for example, ever purposely moved so slowly that their opponents could hit them! The principle of Slowing Down is really a metaphor for being in the moment. In a nutshell, synergy is lost when you are not in the moment, but synergy is gained when you learn how to be in the moment.

We practice the forms slowly at first in order to develop the ability to relax, release tension, and to have time to focus and pay attention. Paying attention helps us to develop ting jing – the energy

of listening.

The principle of slowing down combines with the next principle to remind us that what's important is consistency – an even tempo and a steady, sustainable pace. When you move too fast, you forget things. You skip the little details. You get sloppy, and there's less follow through.

A self-check for the first principle is to ask yourself, “Am I losing anything in my follow-through?” If you are, then as slowly as you think you should be going, you can probably slow down a little more. You've probably stopped “being here now,” and this has robbed you of your awareness of this moment.

The first key to Synergy is to take whatever time is necessary to really see our thoughts, feelings, actions and perceptions clearly. Practicing the first principle consistently will lead to “ting jing,” the T'ai Chi skill traditionally called “listening power.” We can call it *awareness*.

2: Sink Down

In Yang Style T'ai Chi Ch'uan, the first movement in every routine is called "Opening the Door." The hands float up and then down as the knees bend to a certain depth – and then stay bent at that level for the rest of the routine, without any rise and fall of the hips. It's like doing the Groucho Marx in slow motion walk for 30 minutes!

The deeper lesson:

This is a metaphor for commitment and consistency. When it's easy – no pain, no fatigue – there is no test of commitment. It's only when things get tough does one really see if there is commitment.

On the other hand, if you pay attention to the small changes like the subtle rise and fall of the body, you might see an unconscious pattern. If the player rises and falls during the transitions, what is present is an unconscious habit of letting

go (even to a small extent) of the commitment to stay down.

Synergy is lost when you are not consistent in your choices. If your behavior changes whenever a whim strikes you – or every time things get really difficult, you have lost the alignment between your values and your actions. You have cut yourself off from the most fundamental and unique power that human beings possess: the free will. But strengthen the will power by practicing the Sink Down principle, and synergy will be restored.

The second key to Synergy is to be committed to pushing the envelope, and playing full out in life. As Mihaly Csikszentmihaly says, one of the fundamental characteristics of Flow States is that they most often occur at the edges of one's performance abilities.

3: Relax

To relax is to let go. In T'ai Chi Ch'uan there is a certain kind of looseness of the body – suppleness that somehow never loses the benefit of structure.

In Chinese, the word for “relax” is “sung,” which means to loosen, to relax, relieved, not rigorous. In actual practice, however, when my coaches have told me to “fang song,” they were actually looking for a lengthening of a body part, and a dropping toward the ground.

It always amazes me to meet people who don't know that they are stressed. Tension is so obvious it's like a neon light and klaxon; I can recognize it in total strangers as they walk down the street. But often these same people – when asked – will say that they don't feel particularly stressed or tense or tight. Maybe it's just that they don't know what it's like to be relaxed.

When I teach the solo forms to beginners, I introduce them to a principle called, “differential relaxation.” This is the principle that every body position or body movement requires the activation and contraction of certain key muscles – and the rest of the body should just relax. Knowing the *difference* allows you to let go.

There is another important aspect to the relaxation principle. One of the unique aspects of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is that it stimulates the harmonious circulation of *qi* – the internal life force. *Qi* is said to flow along specific pathways, known as the *jing luo*, or meridians. These meridians span out over the entire body in the same way that the arteries, capillaries and veins do. But if the muscles are tight, then it will cut off the circulation, and *qi* flow stops. But it's not only muscular tension that will stop the *qi* – mental or emotional tightness is as well. An old T'ai Chi saying goes, “Wherever there is tension, the *qi* will not flow.”

The deeper lesson:

It always amazes me to meet people who don't know that they are stressed. Tension is so obvious it's like a neon light and klaxon; I can recognize it in total strangers as they walk down the street. But often these same people – when asked – will say that they don't feel particularly stressed or tense or tight. Maybe it's just that they don't know what it's like to be relaxed.

Synergy is lost when there is tension. Synergy is lost when there is attachment. On the other hand, synergy is gained when you learn to distinguish between just enough and too much.

The third key to Synergy is to *let go... with structure*. The secret to this ability is having distinctions – and having distinctions requires developing awareness, the first key. The practice of developing awareness actually applies to all of our principles – you have to be aware of what you’re doing in order to master it. Awareness is the foundation of Synergy, and the more acute one’s awareness, the greater one’s ability to utilize distinctions.

4: Balance Yin and Yang

How do you get from here to there?

That's a question that I'm often asked – and the question itself indicates the arrival at a certain level of development in the study of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Underneath it all, this is more than a question about the T'ai Chi form – it's a question about life.

Consider that the whole form is a dance of body shapes representing yin and yang. Although there are some places where yin moves to greater yin, or yang moves to greater yang, most of the time the player moves from yin to yang to yin and so on. This way, the entire form is a balance of shapes and movements, and in the end the whole dance has depicted the T'ai Chi – the harmony of the universe.

Yang is the expanding principle. Yang opens, moves upward, reveals itself, and moves into

action. In the solo forms, the final postures represent yang. Yin is the gathering principle. Yin closes in, moves downward, conceals itself and moves towards stillness. In the solo forms, the transitional mid-way points between the final postures represent yin.

How do you get from here to there? The first step is to understand where “here” is. Does this moment in time, space or thought represent yin or yang? The next step will be to move toward the balance. In the solo forms we almost never move from yang into further yang, or yin into further yin.

The fourth key to Synergy is to find the natural ebb and flow that alternates between yin and yang.

5: Be Natural

First of all, this principle refers to the idea that the movements should be “easy” and follow the natural line and flow of the body. Nothing should feel like you are twisting your body into a pretzel. If you ever feel like the movements are overly difficult or confusing – you’re probably making too much out of them.

Here we might think of the metaphor as “going with the flow,” or not fighting against current. I often point out that when one is learning the forms, if a movement feels weird or difficult it might be because you’re making it too complicated. Make it natural... make it easy.

Moving naturally must necessarily assume moving from a position of balance and alignment. The body’s ideal alignment starts with a neutral anatomical position. Here we would see the natural landmarks – feet, ankles, knees, hips,

waist, shoulders and head – lining up evenly on both sides. The natural curves of the spine would not be over-exaggerated, and the hips (the origin of most postural problems) would be neutral.

Another meaning of this principle is to start from – and stay as close to – neutral position. The most “natural” position of the body is what we call “anatomical neutral.” Every position we create in the body proceeds from anatomical neutral. This means the hips are on the same line, the shoulders are on the same line, etc. Also, the natural S-curve of the spine is neither over- nor under-arched.

In T'ai Chi we're always checking not only the vertical alignment of the spine, headtop to tailbone, but also the neutral anatomical position. If the shoulder is raised up, then the body is losing its neutral – its natural. We find that we can still make the shapes out of alignment, out of neutral. It's just much harder. We find in these cases we are weaker and more off-balance. But when we

return the shoulder or knees or hips (or whatever) back to alignment, the movements get so much easier – and feel more “natural.”

It is important to remember that “anatomical neutral” doesn’t actually exist in nature. It is merely a concept – an ideal alignment that we can imagine might exist. In reality, every human body is unique. The most important thing is to understand in what way and to what degree do you deviate from neutral?

The deeper lesson:

The metaphorical meanings of this principle also have to do with alignment as well. Neutral life is being in the moment, without judgment or manufactured interpretation. Synergy is lost when we start out with preconceived notions or assumptions. That prejudice prevents us from being in the moment, and experiencing what actually is happening. If we are not experiencing what is actually happening, then how can we

respond to it? We lose our flow because we are no longer in alignment with what actually is. Synergy and Flow is lost when you have pre-judgment. Flow is lost when you're out of alignment. On the other hand, Synergy and Flow is gained when you make it easy -- misalignment and compensation always make it harder.

The fifth key to Synergy is to find your center and move from your original, natural neutral – physically, intellectually, emotionally and Spiritually. When you start from a good position, you can move into a better position. But when you start from a bad position, you can only move into worse positions.

6: Be Continuous

The obvious metaphor here is not to quit. Not to give up (as in the previous principle), nor to even rest.

But here I think is where we are introduced to the most intriguing aspect of solo forms – that the essence of practice is to perfect our timing. Each individual technique in the form is a complex combination of motions of each arm and hand, each leg and foot, rotation of the torso and even turn of the head and eyes. All the pieces ideally must commence motion at the same time, and arrive at their final positions and stop motion at the same time. Yet each body part is a different length, a different weight, must travel a different distance and often in opposing directions!

The deeper lesson:

This is perhaps the most powerful metaphor of the six basic principles. In our culture, we are taught to think linearly about our lives. We're encouraged to set priorities, and to decide what is most important, and then next most important and so on. But the fifth basic principle offers an alternative point of view: everything is an *equal* priority. After all, life really does come at us all at once, so setting linear priorities is a defiance of the third principle Be Natural.

Instead of setting priorities, then, the T'ai Chi key to synergy is master the timing of everything. As we learn in perfecting the solo forms, it **is** possible to set all things in motion at the same time and coordinate their completion at the same precise moment. It just takes practice.

The sixth key to Synergy is to practice the timing and coordination – whether it's the timing of the movements of your body, or the coordination of the events and relationships in your life.

This ebook is yours to keep and to share. If you like it, pass it on to a friend. Check back regularly with www.drtaichi.com to find new ebook downloads. And visit our podcast, The T'ai Chi Diaries, on itunes.