

NOTHING'S SIMPLE: EXPANSION AND CONTRACTION IN WATER TIGER'S T'AI CHI

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

Originally published March 2016

One of the challenges we face when we step onto the mat or into the room to begin our journey with T'ai Chi is a tendency to think that something can only be this and cannot be that. Part of the challenge in being able to break down the barriers separating various possibilities is in the way we learn through the lens of our current understanding. Instructions are given to match that understanding. Experience unfolds within that understanding. As we begin to deepen that understanding, we will hopefully come to see it not as end but as one rung on an endless ladder of understanding. Perhaps our understanding of expansion and contraction of the Qi in coordination with the breath and movement presents such a challenge.

The first step we normally take on this particular journey is actually in physical stillness. The verbal instruction in Water Tiger's Qigong-based meditation — standing or sitting — is usually a student's first taste of these complex relationships. One of the simplest instructions is that of the "image breath". It is the idea that there is both a physical breath and an imaginary breath. As the physical breath is drawn through the nose to fill the lungs, the imaginary breath is drawn through the palms of the hands and the balls of the feet to fill the *Shiah Dan Tien*. As the physical breath is released to empty the lungs through the nose, the imaginary breath is sent coursing through the body to expand from the palms of the hands and the balls of the feet. We might also broaden this instruction to imagine breathing through our pores and / or each and every cell of our body. Two things to remember: 1) although we prefer a nasal breath at Water Tiger, an oral breath or combined nasal and oral breath is fine; 2) although we take in air on a physical inhale and expel air on a physical exhale, we shouldn't think we're taking in and expelling Qi with the imaginary breath. The latter is why we also use the image of a flower opening on the exhale and closing on the inhale. A flower doesn't shed its petals and gather new ones. So it is with the expansion and contraction of the Qi.

This focus on the breath as a guide can become an obstacle when we begin thinking of how movement should enter into the equation. The reason for this is rooted in the physical aspects of the breath. We inhale and various parts of the body expand. We exhale and various parts of the body contract. This undeniable fact may lead us to believe that an expanding movement should be paired with an inhalation and a contracting movement should be paired with an exhalation. Although this can be justified (and will be later in this essay), this is not the primary approach used by Water Tiger. Our movement expands, as does the Qi, with the exhale; and our movement



Art by DavidChenArt.com

contracts, as does the Qi, with the inhale. I'd ask you to keep in mind that I used the word *primary* as an adjective.

Why is it our primary approach at Water Tiger? Attempt to throw an effective punch or kick while sharply inhaling and you will have your answer. This is why I can often be heard to assure a demonstration partner that I will hold my breath as we play a basic martial application. If something goes wrong, the effectiveness of the application will be diminished.

If you read through the various classics, you will find references to *ha* and *hen* sounds. *Ha* is the yell of a strike or kick. There is actually a *ha* in Water Tiger's Long Form, *Spin and Kick with Heel — Right* (posture 38). One cannot manifest *ha* while inhaling. *Hen* is the sound that is created when we inhale sharply as in a dynamic play of *Rollback*. Though we can say *hen* on an exhale, the sound *hen* cannot manifest while exhaling.

There is a quote from the Danish physicist Niels Bohr: "The opposite of a fact is a falsehood but the opposite of a profound truth is very often another profound truth." We can expand the Qi on an inhale and contract the Qi on an exhale. If you place your open palm against someone's shoulder and expand to penetrate through the shoulder, you would exhale. If you place your palm there to simply move them, you would inhale. The former is the driving of a nail. The latter is the expansion of a balloon.

How can apparent opposites be equally true? The answer lies in the T'ai Chi symbol (*T'ai Chi tu*). There is no such thing as pure Yin or pure Yang. There is always a small amount of Yang in Yin and always a small amount of Yin in Yang. So, there is expansion in contraction and contraction in expansion. This allows for the seemingly opposite to both exist in equal truth. When we alter the intent, the pathway of the intent changes as it needs to change and Yin becomes Yang as Yang becomes Yin. All we have to do is get out of its way. In other words, the final paradox is that we shouldn't think about all this. We cannot think our way into understanding. The floor exercises and the forms are the true process. Experience is the true teacher. When we make our play of T'ai Chi fit the words we read, it is not art. We may become quite technically proficient, but we will not truly become proficient as T'ai Chi martial artists.

