

Individual breathing types in Taijiquan

by Frieder Anders

Breathing type Taiji (FriederAnders:AtemtypTaiji®) takes account of the Taiji student's breathing type. The breathing type must be individually determined and is the basis for the successful execution of each exercise. Ignorance of the individual breathing type can lead to learning incorrect movements, so knowledge of one's own breathing type is decisive for success in Taijiquan.

This statement is the essential core of my discovery Breathing type Taiji founded upon my 35 years of Taiji practice. The touchstone which determines success or failure of Taiji practice is the Qi force (Internal Energy) Jin, which in the Chinese martial arts has always been distinguished from the crude Li force resulting from the application of arbitrary muscle tension plus body weight. By means of Breathing type Taiji Jin becomes comprehensible and easy to learn, no longer enveloped in a nebulous sphere of mystery.

Breathing in Taijiquan

If one reads various Taiji books one discovers that with regard to breathing there is some agreement concerning the importance of the coordination of movement and breathing, yet there are hardly any definite breathing instructions. Most books endeavour to demonstrate the connection between breathing and movement by referring to stretching and pulling back the arms, „opening and closing“, raising and lowering, but neglect to offer more specific suggestions that would make it possible for the practising pupil to coordinate details or the whole form in a meaningful way.



Yang Chengfu (1883-1935), on whom the present-day Yang style is founded, displays a definite forward inclination, which suggests resp confirms that he was an exhaler. (Which fact confirms his date of birth)

If Taijiquan is regarded as a relaxation exercise, then any breathing style will suffice to bring about relaxation, and the following examples will be sufficient: the breathing in Taijiquan ought to be slow, deep and above all gentle. The production of Jin, on the other hand, the real force of an inner martial art, requires quite a different use of breathing – and here there are no instructions. In Yang Chengfu's writings, for instance, breathing seems to play no role at all, for there are hardly any references to the correct manner of breathing (e.g. in Douglas Wile, Ed.: Yang Family Secret Transmissions, 1983). It is possible to draw two conclusions from this: either breathing is in fact unimportant or it is one of the famous secrets. I prefer the second conclusion, both on the basis of my own experience and of the references to the mysterious „Heng-Ha“ sounds said to have been emitted by the old masters of the Yang style when exerting Jin. The following will therefore concentrate on examining the role of breathing in the development of Jin force.

Breathing in Daoist meditation

In Daoist meditation - and consequently also in Taijiquan - two basic kinds of breathing are distinguished: in his book *The Secrets of Daoistic meditation* Lu K'uan Yü distinguishes „normal“ or „natural“ breathing from „reverse, ordered“ or „paradoxical“ breathing. According to Lu K'uan Yü normal breathing, also called abdominal breathing, comprises „an inhalation which reaches to and an exhalation (which starts from) the lower belly. When breathing in, the air enters and fills all parts of the lungs .expanding them below and pressing down the diaphragm: the chest will thus be relaxed and the belly will expand. When breathing out, the belly contracts and pushes the diaphragm up to the lungs, thus forcing out all the impure air.“ (p.171) The reverse breathing, on the other hand, reverses the breathing movements: it “is deep and fine, reaching also the belly like natural breathing but with contrary expanding and shrinking movements of the lower abdomen and with the diaphragm being pushed up or pressed down for the same purpose. It is called reverse respiration because it is the opposite of natural breathing...the exhalation should be slow and continuous while the lower belly expands (...), the inspiration should be deep and continuous to fill to its full capacity the chest which will be expand, with simultaneous contraction of the lower belly.” (p.172)

In general normal breathing tends to relax, reverse breathing tends to stimulate:

„Deep and long inhalation [reverse breathing, note by author] creates Yang energy, whereas deep and long exhalation [in normal breathing, note by author] creates Yin energy.“ (Stephen T. Chang: *Das Tao der ganzheitlichen Selbstheilung*, 2001, p.84.)

There are moreover breathing techniques that combine the two basic forms. But the instructions about which kind of breathing should be applied and which is the appropriate for which pupil are rather vague. Lu K'uan-Yü [Yin Shih Tsu] continues: „When I began my practice of meditation, I found correct breathing [i.e. reverse breathing] very suitable for me and this way I mentioned it in the first edition of this book. Since its publication, some readers wrote me that they were unable to practise it. If is not suitable for every meditator, I would advise my readers to practise natural breathing which is free from all impediments.“ (p.173)

(Author's note: Lu K'uan Yu refers to a book by the Daoist master Yin Shih Tsu, edited in 1914. [Lu K'uan Yü, /*The Secrets of Chinese Meditation*/, York Beach, 1969.] According to today's knowledge, the description of the physiological aspect of breathing are not entirely correct. Yin Shih Tsu uses the term “correct breathing” for reverse breathing. This may refer to Daoist meditation practice, which considered reverse breathing to be the “correct” form of breathing. Thus distinguishing themselves from the Buddhists, who preferred natural breathing.)

Upright or forward inclined?

Apart from the differing ways of breathing there is another basic difference between the various Taiji styles: they are distinguished by the posture of the erect torso, whether it is vertically upright or inclined slightly forwards. The present discussion in China or indeed anywhere where Chinese martial arts are practised (cf. *Wuhun – Magazine for Chinese martial arts*, No.1, 2006), takes place on the level of preferences and models. In general the pupil follows his master by imitating the latter's movements and posture – that is, his model. (The masculine form is used here in order to facilitate reading.)



Yang Shouzhong (1910-1985) was the eldest son of Yang Chengfu and the great-grandson of Yang Luchan, the original „father“ of the Yang style of Taijiquan.

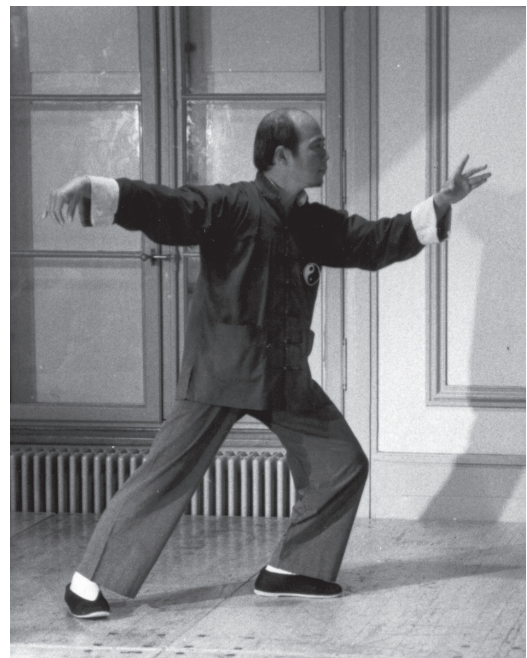
Particularly in China itself, where the pupil dutifully follows tradition and the teacher traditionally explains next to nothing, that will most probably have been the rule. When people seek a teacher they will follow their preferences and choose someone who appeals to them, then remain with that teacher. One's own Taijiquan is right and proper when it is in agreement with the teacher and the latter's tradition.

Nevertheless innumerable variants of Taijiquan – whether new styles or variants of a style – have been developed by pupils, who have either consciously developed in a different direction from their teacher or been unable to follow their teacher's guidelines and thus unintentionally diverged from the latter's example – often without noticing or admitting it.

Thus the three master students (“special student”) of grand master Yang Shouzhong (1910-1985), Yip Taitak (1929-2004), Chu Ginsoon (b.1934) and Chu Kinghong (b.1945) diverge considerably from one another in their individual Taijiquan, although they had the same teacher. In fact Yang Shouzhong practised with his torso slightly inclined forwards, like his first two master students (Yip Taitak and Chu Ginsoon). But Chu Kinghong now moves as upright as if he wanted to grow straight upwards. Who is right? The first two, who have kept to their teacher's example? Or the third, who diverges so conspicuously from his teacher that he has apparently „done everything in his own way“ – that is falsified it, as the pupils of the other two reproach him with doing?

When Chu Kinghong went from Hong Kong to London at the beginning of the 70s he inclined his torso slightly forwards when practising Taijiquan, something that, when asked, he found various reasons for. His Jin was strong but not so light as today. During the following 20 years he worked on the development of inner energy – „pure internal energy“, as he calls it – of which he had received such an impressive display from his master but had not been able to find within himself merely by imitation.

He quietly despaired sometimes, as he confessed later after finally finding access to this energy. Today it is not the same Taijiquan he practises: his torso was once inclined forward, now it is bolt upright; the movements and sequences are still the same though being carried out in a different manner – and he still speaks of his master with the greatest respect. My explanation for the differences in posture and movements lies in different the breathing types.



On this photo of Chu Kinghong from circa 1983 a slight forward inclination is clearly to be seen.

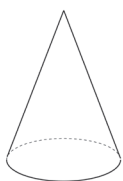
Active breathing and non-active breathing

The theory of breathing types formulated about 60 years ago by the German musician Erich Wilk and now known as „Terlusollogie“ (from terra luna sol) claims that either active inhaling or active exhaling is the way to finding one’s own energy. Those who gain their energy while inhaling are called inhalers, those whose active breathing is exhaling are called exhalers.

The important point is the distinction between “breathing while at rest“ and „energy breathing“. While one is at rest or relaxing the breathing type is fairly irrelevant, and everyone can choose their way of breathing at will. But if some physical action is involved, requiring more intensive breathing than at rest, then it is essential to pay attention to the individual breathing type.

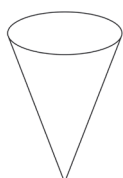
The inhaler gains energy by actively inhaling: the chest expands, the energy rises and expands, exhalation then takes place passively as a letting go, while the chest remains expanded as during inhalation and does not subside.

The exhaler, on the other hand, breathes out actively, thereby gaining most energy: the lateral muscles contract, the lungs and chest contract, the subsequent passive inhalation happens automatically in the lower abdomen and pelvis, both of which then expand. This person’s energy thus flows downwards, like a gust of wind blowing over the ground. This typology may be illustrated by the image of a pyramid or cone: the inhaler’s energy is likened to a cone standing on its point, the exhaler’s energy similar to a „normal“ cone standing on its base.



Normal cone

The exhaler’s base is broad, the „point“ is above the head. The energy expands during exhalation into the basis of the pyramid, flowing downwards and out, then circulating throughout the body while the exhalation lasts. The subsequent inhalation refills the reservoir for this process in the lower abdomen.



Reverse cone

The inhaler’s base, on the other hand, is narrow, formed as a point which rests on the ground from which the energy mounts to the sky in spirals, then upon exhalation subsiding and circulating throughout the body. The different patterns of circulation of energy in the relevant cone can be visualized if one imagines filling them with water.

Breathing types in Taijiquan

The normal or natural breathing of Daoistic meditation basically conforms to the exhaler breathing type, the reverse to the inhaler type. In the following I shall describe the application of the principles of terlusollogie to the positions and movements of Taijiquan. To summarise: the expansion of the inhaler’s energy broadens at the top – like a funnel – whereas the exhaler’s energy expands downwards into the broad base of the cone. This explains the different kinds of erect posture in Taijiquan.

The inhalers must adjust their base and their legwork in such a way that they are always rooted with one foot to the spot where the axis of the inverted cone touches the ground, with more emphasis on the heel when breathing in. The pressure put on the foot in this way is retained when shifting from one leg to the other; the energy-laden torso is moved the shortest distance from one weight-bearing foot to the other, namely from heel to heel. Only having arrived there may the posture be relaxed. The inhalation expansion of the chest, as mentioned above, may not be relaxed during the exhalation which begins during the shift of the centre of gravity to the other leg. If it is relaxed the Jin energy cannot emerge. In this way an inhaler struts somewhat like a penguin through the Taiji motions. The inhaler's Jin can be activated very intensely – but lightly – while inhaling. An attacker is uprooted (put off balance) as inhalation commences and is immediately flung away. Otherwise a gentle exhalation completes the job, though it should be light and unnoticeable, no muscle force or momentum being deployed.



On this picture of 2007 the position of Chu Kinghong is bolt upright.

The timing is just as important: one must exhale in the right place at the right moment, with a slight lowering of the torso exactly down the axis of the hip, knee and ankle joints of the weight-carrying foot. The part of the foot on which that takes place – the talus, i.e. the anklebone – is decisive. It must be precisely there for the inhaler's energy to flow back into the point of the reverse cone, the axis of which must be resting on the ground in such a way as to be optimally balanced over the centre of gravity. This is why the inhaler must stand upright at all costs.

For exhalers, on the other hand, it is decisive that their base, like that of the „normal“ cone, is as broad as possible for their energy to expand within it – which explains the forward inclined posture. At the commencement of the transfer of weight from one leg to the other, when the weight is on the metatarsus i.e. the middle of the foot, their Jin already begins to take effect – more directly than for the inhaler – developing its greatest force in the process of shifting weight. This is appropriate to exhalation, which like a gust of wind loses its strength at the end of a phase. This process is exactly the opposite of the inhaler's: the latter even retains the inhalation tension during the weight shift when the exhalation is already beginning and must only let it go – very gradually – at the very end of the movement. The typical slight bending of the knees, the hip and ankle joints at the end of the movement phase does not take place with the exhaler, but the latter's pelvis subsides a little – the lumbar spine relaxes – in order to open the pelvic space for the passive intake of breath. Inhaler Jin is fundamentally softer, more Yin – yet the body tension is greater! – and exhaler Jin is more direct, more Yang – arising from the maximum relaxation. Chu Kinghong, as an inhaler, speaks of „happy Qi“, i.e. a greater lightness of Jin; what one might say to describe exhaler Jin remains to be determined.



Frieder Anders, Inhaler

It is always striking when someone applies Jin in a way appropriate to his or her breathing type: the exercise partner is uprooted at once. On the other hand it is equally remarkable that when movements and breathing are used against type then the other can only be shifted by using muscle power or momentum to „push“.

Developing Jin

So what does it mean in Taijiquan when it is a question of the concrete deployment of inner energy – that is, in Tuishou and self-defence?

In general there is the principle that in Taijiquan the „opponent’s energy is neutralised and turned against him“ or it is „borrowed“. That is a very general description and is only true for the first stage of Tuishou, the „circle“: the Yang movement of one partner is neutralised by the other’s recoil and reversed at the point where it is exhausted, Yang becomes Yin. But no Jin empowering one to uproot the other is made possible by this practice. Uprooting is not effected by pushing or pulling.

Uprooting is not a thing that one does and actively inflicts on the one uprooted, it is the uprooted person’s own, if involuntary, reaction to a situation that s/he can no longer understand and control.

Pushing and pulling are movements which, in a biomechanical sense, take effect with their force at exactly that point where they attack, either on the partner’s arms or the upper torso, so that the latter is caused to be off balanced by this force to the extent that the torso is moved first, followed by the feet. When Jin causes uprooting, however, the feet react first and lift the body away with them. It should be understood that the movement of that person who deploys the aggressive or explosive force of Fajin is so complex and so gentle that the one uprooted cannot place it at all, doesn’t even sense where or when it begins and unconsciously answers it with a physical reaction that belongs to the category of „FOF -fear of falling“. It is only this kind of uprooting that gives an approximation of what the Daoists might have meant by the concept of Wuwei, action without action, in its practical application in Taijiquan.

The Jin energy, which effects the uprooting, is indeed first „borrowed“ by the attacker by being absorbed, transformed and sent back the way it came. The crucial thing here is the transformation – not merely the reversal – i.e. return or sidetracking – of an individual action.

If we relate all this to the breathing types the following becomes apparent: the inhaler allows the other’s Yang motion into his body as an increase to his own energy by using his own Yin motion – i.e. with his own intake of breath. The inhaler lets himself be „inflated“ – metaphorically speaking – by his partner’s or opponent’s attack, thus increasing his own Jin. The exhaler, on the other hand, absorbs the „hostile“ Yang movement earlier and mentally carries out his own Yin motion before the attacking Yang force can unfold. The latter can therefore be countered directly with his own Yang. The reason for this lies in the fact that the exhaler’s intake of breath is short and passive and has insufficient energy to transform an aggressive movement.

That might also be the reason for what the treatise on the practice of the Thirteen Forms of Movement by Wu Yuxiang says about not relying on the breathing but on the mind; this seems to be the statement of an exhaler. An extremely interesting field of research is thus opened up, which will have the task of re-reading and interpreting the traditional writings of the old Taiji masters from the viewpoint of the doctrine of breathing types. I am sure that by doing this it will be possible to clarify many hitherto vague or ambiguous passages.

The doctrine of breathing types has a very definite effect on Taiji practice, because it shows a way to integrate traditional Chinese breathing techniques into the practice of Taijiquan resulting in an individual meaning i.e. -giving significance to the concept of Dao as “The Way”.

Here is a field for the formation of a durable union of East and West with the discovery of a balance between Taiji tradition and Western insights, which will transcend the extremes of subservience to authority on the one hand and superficial adaptation of Western fitness standards on the other. The old conflict of Taiji masters about posture and movement will moreover also vanish, since the question of whether one should stand bolt upright or inclined slightly forward and whether the movements should be sweeping or restrained will finally not be answered by tradition alone but complementarily by the individual breathing type.

What then of those pupils who follow their masters exactly but have a different breathing type? My answer is as follows: If someone practises against his own breathing type, that person cannot develop his own Jin. For as the work in my Taiji Academy demonstrates time and time again, the Jin energy can indeed only be developed and applied when the pupil moves and breathes according to his breathing type. The inhalers must stand bolt upright to gain access to their energy – and for the exhalers the forward inclination of the torso is decisive.



Zheng Manqing, (Cheng Man Ch'ing) Yang Chengfu's student, is famous for his own completely erect posture which did not follow that of Yang Chengfu. But he was an exhaler, and therefore did not practise Taiji in accordance with his breathing type.

Photo from Draeger/
Smith: Asian Fighting Arts, 1969

Terlusollogy

Terlusollogy „distinguishes two types of human constitution, whose organisms and behaviour depend to an astonishing degree on the sun and moon. According to their position at the time of birth the child will be born either as a solar type, more dependent on the sun, or as the latter’s counterpart, a lunar type, more dependent on the moon. Both types behave in radically opposite ways with regard to breathing, sleeping, posture, motoric functions, need for movement, blood distribution and metabolism.

Physical exercises – functional exercises with stimulation of muscles and nerves, positional exercises with forced breath control – help to do justice to the differences between the types and wean people from the faulty postures often involved, thus alleviating their consequences.“

From – Charlotte Hagen/Christian Hagen: Konstitution und Bipolarität, Haug 1993.

At www.terlusollogie.de one can check one’s own breathing type.

Frieder Anders

was in 2002 the first European to be appointed Master of the 6th Generation in the Yang family tradition. His training, which began in 1973, led him from Todtmoos-Rütte, Taiwan and New York to London, where he was Chu Kinghong’s first master pupil. Frieder Anders is the author of three standard works on Taijiquan and numerous relevant articles in periodicals.