

Three Levels of Tai Chi Practice: Li, Chi, and I

By Hal Mosher

Tai Chi as an art has a series of refinements that develop as your practice and your understanding increases. Li, Chi and I are three plateaus that will become clear as your practice increases. Li means strength or force in English, Chi means breath or life force, and I (ee) means intention or mind. There are many different plateaus in Tai Chi that can be practiced in many ways. Tai Chi has no belt system of rank like Karate, but uses these different points of emphasis to gauge where your practice is. For example, one gauge is the level of relaxation that goes along with your movements. One should become more and more relaxed as your practice develops. This can be gauged in many ways: how deep the breath goes in your body, how fluid your movements are, and how much tension rises up during push hands practice. In this way, your practice becomes an endless self-awareness tool, and although it requires more self discipline than the belt systems, it becomes much more rewarding in the long run. Li, Chi, and I are another way of developing your self awareness in Tai Chi practice. These levels are not just physical levels, but they link the physical, internal, and mental aspects of our bodies with something the ancient Chinese call spirit.

First let's start with the physical; Li. Li is strength from the Chinese translation. Strength in terms of external muscles in Tai Chi is a fault. In Tai Chi we are trying to develop a strength that comes from the tendons. The tendons have a direct connection to the bone and therefore increase the blood flow to the bones when they are worked. In order for the tendons to be worked properly the surface muscles first must relax. When the muscles are relaxed then the tendons will relax. This process could take many years. You begin by relaxing the arms, then the back, then the legs. Eventually, you want to relax until there is no more Li. When there is no more Li, then the Chi will fill the bones.

Writing or talking about Chi is problematic. It is like explaining what an orange tastes like to someone who has never had one. The best way to define Chi is breath mixed with intention. However, the Chi also has some properties like blood in your body: it regulates internal organ function and overall health. There are three types of Chi: the first type of chi is innate, which means we get it from our parents. It is this chi that is composed of a male and female aspect which separate when we die. We can think of this chi as life force. The second type of chi is like ether. It fills the universe, and connects all phenomena together. The third type is the one that is connected to the blood and breath; this is the one we cultivate by doing Tai Chi. These three types will interact as our practice develops. This interaction should give one a more visceral connection to nature, your body, and your role on this earth. As we relax more in our practice the chi fills up the body creating even more relaxation. Sometimes chi can be felt as warmth in the hands or softness on the skin creating a sort of static electricity. With practice one will be able to direct the chi to go anywhere in your body with your mind. Soon the chi becomes secondary to the mind, although it pervades your whole body. The Tai Chi form is a way of making sure that the chi is moving through the whole body without any blockages. If the chi won't go somewhere in your body, then that is the place one needs to try to relax. When the whole body is full of chi, then the mind or I then takes over.

Intention is the best way to think about I (ee). Where the intention goes, we tend to follow. This implies however that we can control our minds, but it is not always an easy task. In fact, controlling the body is easy as compared to the mind. This is why this is the next to the last stage in our practice. Fortunately, the Tai Chi form prepares us for this difficult step by developing a strong ability of the mind to focus on one thing for prolonged periods of time. One can practice these above methods by trying to do the form with using very little muscle strength and more chi, and then try to use only the mind without the muscle. This can be done incrementally by taking out ten percent of the muscle used during the form and inserting the mind in its place. With practice you can use mostly the mind and less and less muscle. The mind then becomes very flexible and peaceful at the same time. As you progress with this over time the mind also dissolves into spirit.

Spirit in Chinese is shen which is a bit different than the Native American idea of spirit. This idea of spirit is more like the Tao which is formless and all pervasive and at the same time inexpressible. At this point form practice is not needed; everything you do is the form. The spirit actually manifests in everything you do, and according to the mythology you become almost immortal. Very few people have reached this level of practice, but it is the end point of Tai Chi when the levels of Chi and mind have been traversed. The mythology says the martial applications at this point are like snapping your fingers, they are completely effortless. I encourage all my readers to strive for these attainments.