



# Softness and Continuity

By Ed Altman

Without softness and continuity the Chi does not flow freely, and the overall objective of T'ai Chi Chih practice cannot be accomplished. It is not just a matter of moving the arms slowly, and if T'ai Chi Chih practitioners do not pursue the depth of this principle, their movements will remain hollow and shallow. As the arm movements of T'ai Chi Chih are a reflection of what is happening in the lower half of the body, it is of the utmost importance that softness and continuity begin with the legs and be reflected in the upper body.

When focusing on softness and continuity, there are two aspects of the leg movements to be examined. The first is the shifting of the weight, and the second is the release of tension from the legs. The shifting of the weight induces the separation of the Chi into the Yin and Yang components, and students must be mindful that the weight is shifted slowly, evenly, and fully. If the leg movements are done in a hurried or "jerky" manner the Chi will not be circulated efficiently. There have been numerous articles written in previous issues of *The Vital Force* which address this matter.

Once the weight is shifting properly, it is time to examine where we are working against ourselves by holding tension in the ankles and knees. Tension is commonly created in the ankles by "pulling" up the toes on the front foot, or by "lifting" the back heel artificially. This also adversely affects the alignment and posture of the entire body. Just leave the feet flat on the ground and simply shift the weight forward or back from the T'an T'ien. As the weight shifts forward the back leg gradually straightens, and at some point, any further forward movement will cause the back heel to rise without effort. Similarly, allow the front foot to remain flat on the ground and shift the weight from the center of the body to the back leg. This will cause the toes

of the front foot to become lighter and rise.

It is the gradual and full weight shift combined with patience, alignment, and a lack of tension that brings results. If the heel or toe does not come off the ground as described, make sure the upper body is not bending forward or leaning backward. Otherwise, this will prevent the required full shift of the weight and lead to many other problems in T'ai Chi Chih practice.

The other problem area is holding tension in the knees. T'ai Chi Chih cannot be done on stiff legs, so it is necessary to bend the knees to do a "lower" T'ai Chi Chih practice. The knees hold almost all the weight of the body so it is very common for people to unwittingly add tension as they try to bend them. This is using effort and is not needed. Simply relax the knees by "softening the grip" and let gravity do the rest. It takes practice and focus, but when we allow the knees to bend, there is far less tension in the legs. It is subtle, but makes a significant difference.

When the heel and toe are allowed to rest until called for by the weight shift, and the knees are allowed to bend without effort, there will be much less tension in the lower part of the body. The legs (especially the knees) act like the flood-gates that control the flow of the Chi through the body. When they are soft and flexible, the Chi will cause the arms to float at just the right level without effort. When returning to graceful conclusion, the softness of the knees also allows the Chi to be grounded more efficiently. It is the softness and continuity of the legs that provides the foundation for the entire body to move with softness and continuity. When T'ai Chi Chih is done in this way, the deepest benefits may be realized with consistent practice.