

The 4 Emotions of Tai Chi Chuan

Experts insist until tai chi's four emotions are correctly expressed, proper focusing of the mind cannot be achieved.

By Eliot Z. Cohen

The setting: Hong Kong. The time: more than 35 years ago. The event: a celebration commemorating the traditional birthday of Cheung Salm Fung (Chang San Feng in Mandarin), the legendary 13th-century founder of tai chi chuan. The format of the event includes an exhibition by masters of tai chi, preceded by a panel discussion. Among the masters on stage is a man of about 90. During the discussion, he declares most of those who are recognized as masters of tai chi chuan do not really have a complete understanding of that art. He insists one cannot truly master tai chi until he has learned the method of concentration known as the four emotions of tai chi chuan.

The old man then gives a brief explanation of this technique, since it is clear most of those present, on stage as well as in the audience, are hearing of it for the first time. He begins by identifying the four emotions: hei (happiness); noh (anger, indignation); oi (sadness, depression); and lok (enjoyment). He explains most of the movements of the tai chi form correspond to one or more of these four emotions. When these emotions are correctly expressed by the practitioner, they serve as a means toward the proper focusing of the mind, thus enhancing the smooth execution of the form,

When it comes time for the exhibition, the old man is the first to perform. He demonstrates the fast form from the Ng Gar (Wu) system of tai chi. Present in the audience is a teenager who already has some years of training under his sash. His name is Shum Leung, now sifu Shum Leung of New York. His recollection of the event is still quite vivid, as is his recollection of the old man's form. Even now, more than a generation later, sifu Shum looks back on that performance as the best demonstration of the tai chi form he has ever seen.



To help understand the power of the four emotions technique, it would be appropriate to precede any elaboration on its specifics with a brief explanation of its basic concept. As mentioned, the end of the technique is the proper focus of the mind, or *yi* in Cantonese. Such focusing has long been considered to be paramount for the mastery of tai chi chuan. In the *Tai Chi Classics*, there is a passage attributed to Wang Chung Yueh of the Ming dynasty, which says "the mind gives the command; the breath (*chi*) goes forth as the banner, and the waist executes the command." (The translation is by sifu Shum in his book on tai chi chuan.) The *yi* activates the *chi*, which stirs the muscles which propel the waist which sets in motion the hands and feet. Clear, unencumbered *yi* is thus reflected in smooth and unencumbered movement, just as cluttered and obstructed *yi* is reflected in cluttered and obstructed movement.

As with any art, proper concentration helps one attain the level of *yi* necessary for the proper execution of the tai chi form. However, concentration is one of the most difficult techniques to learn. What many people believe to be concentration is merely the act of thinking about concentration. When a student is told to concentrate, he probably will instinctively express a serious countenance and then proceed to reflect on the need to concentrate. For many martial arts students, it is usually an aggressive countenance that appears to be the expression of preference. The exception is tai chi chuan, during the practice of which many practitioners tend to force an overly serene or spaced-out expression.

The method of the four emotions is based on neither extreme being conducive to the practice of tai chi chuan. Nor, for that matter, are any contrived and artificial expressions.

One of the reasons why the four emotions technique is not widely known is because while it is applicable to any tai chi chuan style, it cannot be applied to the slow form synonymous with the study of tai chi. The slow form is, in fact, the heart and soul of tai chi practice; but in a system that does not already contain a fast form, the form must be speeded up if the four emotions technique is to be employed. (In the *Ng Gar* system taught by sifu Shum, the fast form is similar to the slow; but its moves are more connected and it is performed about six times faster than the ideal speed of the slow form.)

The four emotions are paired into two sets of opposites — *hei-noh* and *oi-lok*. It should be noted although *hei* (happiness) and *lok* (enjoyment) are sometimes interchangeable in conversational use, there is a difference in meaning. For example, money can buy *lok* (i.e., various luxuries and other pleasures), but having a lot of money to spend is *hei*. Thus, *lok* would mean enjoyments such as a good movie, a scrumptious meal or a comfortable chair or bed. But having the means to enjoy these things is *hei*. Also, if one were having a good time at a friend's wedding, that would be *lok*; but for the person getting married, *hei* would apply.

Following are some examples of the applications of the four emotions technique:

When the practitioner is moving forward with striking techniques, or if he were otherwise performing moves involving punches or kicks, he would express the emotion of *noh*. These moves are comparatively direct, aggressive methods for obliterating an opponent. This emotion is considered to be the opposite of *hei*, which is expressed in a sequence such as hands moving like clouds. Such movements involve more side-stepping and less head-on attack, and thus is more conducive to the tranquil mood of *hei*.

Lok includes moves calling for more than normal eye concentration. An example is the recurrent movement known as "single whip," in which the practitioner appears to be savoring the action. This expression is considered to be the opposite of *oi*, which is applied to moves performed while retreating from an opponent. An example of *oi* is the sequence of "brush knee, twist step," performed while moving backward. When this same sequence is performed while advancing, it is included among the movements of *noh*.

The pacing of the form is based, in part, on the use of the four emotions. Consequently, where the slow form is evenly paced, some movements of the fast form are performed faster than others. When the four emotions technique is applied, the movements of each emotion are done at the same speed as those of its opposite. Thus, the more circular, indirect moves of *hei* are performed at the same speed as the

more direct, attacking moves of *noh*; and those of both are performed faster than the savoring moves of *lok*, or the melancholy retreating moves of *oi*.

The most important of the four emotions is *hei*. It is the foundation of the technique; only when the mind is calm and relaxed can the other emotions be properly channeled. If the mind is encumbered with unchanneled anger, concentration is greatly impaired, and practice could actually be counterproductive.

The difficulty of the four emotions method is not so much in knowing which mood to express with which movement, but in knowing how to express that mood. It does not take much "expression" to pass the point of exaggeration. Even the skilled observer who knows what to look for should barely detect the changes of expression on the face of the performer. It must be emphasized this technique of emotional expression is only for the "internal" use of the practitioner.

The "secret" of the four emotions technique can be summed up in a single word: spontaneity. The master does not force the emotions, but allows them to unfold naturally. Instead of trying to perpetuate them, he witnesses them. He doesn't control, he experiences. He is guided by the principle that what is natural need not be forced, just as what is unnatural should not be forced.

For the martial arts student, this concept of spontaneity is the definition of the properly focused mind. The idea neither began with tai chi chuan, nor is exclusive to Chinese culture. Yet the idea pervades the doctrines of the ancient Taoists, and in that context has greatly influenced the evolution of Chinese martial arts. There is, for instance, the time-honored Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, which is generally translated as "inaction." As it is put forth in the writings attributed to Chuang Tzu, *wu-wei* can be explained as "non-agitation," "effortless action," or "spontaneous action." Chuang Tzu gives several examples of men who had attained such a skill in various arts or crafts, they no longer needed to analyze, scrutinize or intellectualize what they are doing. They had achieved such a high level of spontaneity they were said to have "forgotten" the techniques and forms of their arts.

However it is attained, the properly focused, spontaneous mind is the strongest weapon of the wisdom-warrior; and is that which turns form into art and art into illumination. This separates the ordinary "expert," whose skills decrease as his years increase, from the true master who has triumphed over the encumbrances of old age. Only by aspiring to the *yi* of such masters can one begin to understand the meaning of tai chi chuan.



About the Author: Eliot Z. Cohen has studied tai chi chuan since 1977 under master Shum Leung in New York City. This is his first contribution to Inside Kung-Fu.

