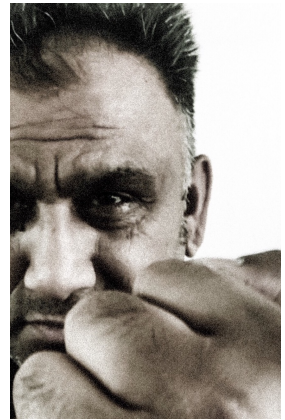


The Pace of Taijiquan in Form Practice

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I have often been asked this question by most of my students and others regarding the pace at which one should perform their Taijiquan form? This is a question that tends to puzzle or perplex many.

I recently read the last interview given by Fu Zhongwen, regarded as one of the best students of Yang Cheng-fu and his main disciple, a couple of months before his death in 1994. In the interview Fu states that:

"... the fastest you can go with the 85 movements or the 108 would be 18 minutes and the slowest would be 22 minutes. "You don't want to go past that." The ideal is 20 minutes exactly. And you cannot do it with some movements fast and some movements slow. It has to be continuous motion. If you do it for 22 minutes but some parts you do fast and some parts you do slow, that is not following the T'ai Chi principles. It must be continuously flowing without stopping."

In the same interview, James Fu - the grandson of Fu Zhongwen - who was also present tells us:

"...some people think that slower is good and some people tell him they do the form in one hour or 40 minutes for a set. "This is useless. This is not T'ai Chi anymore. This is just movements. The reason that we do T'ai Chi slow is because we want to do it faster. This is the principle." "

These are interesting comments coming from a high authority, especially, in Fu Zhongwen but, are they correct?

We know for a fact that the original Yang family form was NOT even paced. It was performed at varying speeds with leaps, shouts and rapid kicks!

In Fu's own book, 'Mastering Yang Style Taijiquan', we find an introduction to the history of Yang Style by the famous martial arts historian Gu Liuxin, who himself was a former student of Yang Cheng-fu. Gu informs us that the original form included:

“... fajin (issuing energy), leaps, stomping of the feet and other moves of comparative difficulty.”

It was only much later from around 1928 that Yang Cheng-fu, himself, brought about changes in his family form when according to Gu:

“After Yang Cheng-fu went to the South... he changed... to a continuous pace with no breaking of the cadence, and from a hurried to an even pace.”

Furthermore, he (Cheng-fu) removed all leaps, shouts and stomps from the form as well as revising and/or simplifying the more difficult movements to make it more holistic and less combative .

So, why would Fu and his grandson make these comments?

Surely, it is obvious that the correct thing to say would be that these comments are true of Yang Cheng-fu's modified form and the subsequent further bastardizations of his form by later generations developed for the masses. If we look at Fu's statement carefully this is exactly what he is telling us when he mentions the 85 or 108 movements! They are NOT true of the original **martial** Yang family Taijiquan as practiced by the founder and elders of the style, including Yang Cheng-fu himself!

Change of pace plays a critical role in the practice of ones Taijiquan form and should be obvious to any student involved in understanding how energy systems work.

Whilst studying Taijiquan we must develop 3 critical skills:

1. Gather/store energy
2. Balance energy
3. Issue energy

Only by understanding change of pace can we even begin to have a chance to develop the above. The clues are in the Classics along with the practice of the founders of the style.

We are constantly told, as can be seen from Fu's example above, that our Taiji must flow continuously without stopping like water or a river. But does that mean that our Taiji must be practiced at an even or continuous pace?

The answer is simply NO!

Wu Yu-hsiang, in his 'Expositions of Insights into the Practice of the Thirteen Postures', tells us to:

“Be as still as a mountain, move like a great river.”

The “great river” in this instance has been interpreted by many as the mighty Yangtze, itself. But whether it is the Yangtze or any other of the great rivers that traverse this planet, I ask the reader a simple question:

Do any rivers, anywhere, move at an even constant flow or pace?

Again, the answer is an obvious NO!

Rivers not only bend, twist and wind but, also, exhibit distinct paces:

1. Constant/Even/Slow
2. Still Waters
3. Fast
4. Rapids/Powerful Currents

Not only is the above true but, also, that rivers can run deep underground only to resurface many miles later still on track towards their ceaseless journey towards the oceans. They can drop suddenly from hundreds of feet with a majesty equal to none. Swelling, overflowing and gathering energy before releasing their benevolence on arid lands, flooding them with life-giving abundance or being dammed by humans - their energy converted to hydroelectricity to drive our modern needs. And, yet, at other times unleashing their violence destroying all that stands in their paths!

This is exactly how our Taijiquan forms are meant to be - like a great river! My teacher Erle, would always tell us that in order for us to understand our Taiji, we only have to do as the classics say. In this instance that we flow like a river and in understanding that we can perhaps begin to understand the various energy movements hidden within our form and how to release them in combat or otherwise.

The slow, even movements of our form are the energy gatherers or storers.
The fast movements are the energy balancers.
The explosive movements are the energy release or issuers.

Let us now look at Gu's description of Yang Shao-hou, the elder brother of Yang Cheng-fu, doing his form:

"... lively steps, movements gathered up small, alternating between fast and slow, hard and crisp fajin, with sudden shouts, eyes glaring brightly, flashing like lightening... and an intimidating demeanour."

Can we not see the river in Shao-hou's form? Mighty, great, and dangerous, something commanding our respect?

The Original Yang family form contained slow movements for gathering Qi, fast movements for balancing Qi and explosive (Fa-jing) movements to disperse the Yang Qi, built up during practice, as opposed to the slow only style of modern forms, thereby, making it a completely balanced system. This is critical, as the slow movements of these modified forms, lead to an excessive build up of Yang Qi, which then turns to its opposite Yin State thus, causing harmful "Yin Dullness" within the body.

If we look at the 'Old' Yang form we will see this clearly even in the opening movements of the form.

From the stillness of preparation, the form moves evenly through grasping sparrow's tail and slightly quickens in the first part of single whip (from where the posture derives its name), only to slow down to half-pace during the second part. It again quickens as spear fingers pierce to the rear, before the even pace resumes through dragon palms, and the centrifugal build up of reverse dragon palms leads to the fa-jing release immediately followed by the stillness of lift hands, which is performed as slow as possible - and then the cycle resumes again!

It is imperative that we understand the change of pace of some of these vital postures as in them lie clues and in some instances '**keys**', which open the door to the higher levels of the form!

I have already mentioned above that the posture of lift hands is always performed as slowly as possible (over at least two-breaths)! - ***this is the most important key*** and it is vital that we explore what this means. The posture of lift hands and all its derivatives should be performed as such. Just as *single whip* and *brush knee twist step* and their respective derivatives are performed at half the original starting pace of the form!

There are 9 of these keys, excluding lift hands. It is up to the practitioner to discover them or, occasionally, their teacher may 'give' them one or two through their practice without actually saying what has been given to nudge the student along in a time of need!

Understanding the 'pauses' within the form are just as vital as understanding the changes of pace. There are several 'pauses' within the form. Some are blatantly obvious, whilst others are more subtle in their nature. The waiting time for these 'pauses' is unique to the practitioner and may, also, vary with the time of day as well as at which pace the form is being performed at!

Not only must some of the postures within the form, themselves, be performed at very specific speeds but the form itself is also performed at 3 distinct speeds overall during each practice session!

The first time is usually the 'quickest' pace of the form and represents the bones, muscles and sinews - in other words, the physical body - and should take between 10-15 minutes. Having said that, this time will almost certainly vary according to the physical well-being of the practitioner!

The second pace is done at approximately 50 percent of the first pace and represents the mind.

The third pace is done at approximately 50 percent of the second pace and represents the spirit, so that ***by the time all three paces have been done, body, mind and spirit have been unified!***

The classical times for practice were:

Dawn: When coming out of yin and entering yang.

Midday: When you are in extreme yang.

Dusk: When coming out of yang and entering yin.

Midnight: When extreme yin!

Again, it's interesting how these times may also correspond not only to movements of water across the earth's surface but also to the 'High Times' of prayer in most cultures!



Another aspect of the 3 main paces could also be looked upon as a metaphor for the three ages of humans.

The first pace could be interpreted as the time lapse between birth and adulthood. This is when we are usually at our most vigorous - learning and developing.

The second pace as the time between adulthood and middle age. We are still developing but hopefully, we have understood a lot and learned from the folly of our youth and have become more settled.

And finally the third pace as the time between our middle age and our ultimate demise - the end of the river's journey as it joins the sea! By this stage our vast experience should allow us to see things a lot more clearer and deal with changes without the worry and inexperience of youth. We can ultimately look back and reflect and pass on our experiences to the generations to come.

By virtue the metaphor can be extended to the form itself, where each third corresponds directly to each age as shown above.

The movements of Taijiquan, therefore by emulating the great river, generate, both, centripetal and centrifugal forces encouraging the flow of blood and life-force energy, or Qi, from the centre of the body, out to the extremities and back, along the acupuncture meridians, thereby, allowing the body to heal and rejuvenate itself over a 24 hour period, whilst strengthening us physically, mentally and spiritually - each posture teaching the practitioner the principles of combat and natural movement as practiced by the entire animal kingdom.

I have deliberately used as much lay language as I can in this article. This is because I do not want people to get confused with metaphysical debates. In part this has been a big problem with the internal arts, where people have tried to use a language that most, including themselves, have little knowledge of!

When you do your Taiji, I, just as Erle, or any other good teacher, cannot tell you what it is you will feel during the form. Any language we use to express that idea immediately becomes limited by the rules of the language itself! I cannot say that I feel a tingling sensation in the dantian - I may, you may not! You may express that feeling in a totally different way.



Many years ago, at the start of my journey, I was once told by Erle that if we see a hundred people practicing Taijiquan and all of them move identically at the same pace and with the same flow then only one of them is doing Taiji - the other 99 are monkeys, aping the one! We cannot tell the one apart from the monkeys!

The even-paced forms, as well as the modified shorter forms, were not only influenced by later practitioners but also by the Chinese government, in whose opinion everybody had to conform! They not only looked and dressed the same but they also had to move in the same manner thereby, stamping out any hint of individuality! This is how we get subservient societies and crush the growth of the individual, and prevent them from becoming all that they can be!

Just as no two rivers flow or move in exactly the same way, neither do two individuals! We are all unique and move with our own energy. The only thing we all have in common are the principles as laid down in ***The Classics*** - in following these we should all be identical!

This is exactly how our Taijiquan should be - unique. A river unto ourselves!

This monkey has started to explore and develop basic tools... I am a work in progress.

Author's Note:

*By the term "energy," I am referring to the **Bioelectrical, Chemical and Mechanical Systems** of human physiology (mental and physical) and all that they encapsulate to allow us to understand and develop potential and kinetic energy, as well as power and how we use this for work, rest, play and in combat. I do not subscribe to supernatural energies and there is no evidence - none whatsoever - that the 'Masters' of old did so either! If you wish to knock someone out - hit them!*

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Mastering Yang Style Taijiquan by Fu Zhongwen, translated by Louis Swaim

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