

# THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF CLOUD HANDS

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY CLOUD HANDS?

This book explores why Cloud Hands feels so complete and how Cloud Hands provides a paradigm for the internal practice of Tai Chi Ch'uan. Many practitioners of Tai Chi Ch'uan consider Cloud Hands to be the exemplary movement in the art. Some speak of the posture in mythological or mystical terms and its elegance is truly beautiful to behold and experience. It has a floating, billowing quality like rolling clouds. Some practice it as a solo exercise, where it stands on its own as a very developed chi kung (nei kung)<sup>11</sup>, and others practice it as an integral part of Tai Chi Ch'uan form practice. Yet for all the accolades, it is difficult to put your finger on why this particular posture is endowed with such richness and completeness. One aspect underlying the sense of completeness in Cloud Hands is its internal and external symmetry. No other movement in the Tai Chi Ch'uan forms contains the internal and external symmetry of Cloud Hands and, because of this symmetry, Cloud Hands more readily allows access to deeper internal principals than other postures.

## A. THE TRAINING STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is beneficial for a wide range of practitioners, even though it is written primarily for practitioners with a solid foundation in Tai Chi Ch'uan. For less experienced practitioners, the basic training methods can bypass years of incomplete training and erase incorrect habits already formed. I assume the reader is familiar with core concepts, i.e. song, nei jing, chi and zhong ding. To assist the reader I will explain many of the core concepts in depth through out the book. The book is in part Tai Chi Ch'uan theory and in part a training manual to facilitate experiencing some of the deeper and less obvious aspects of internal training. The book provides a methodology for bringing the theoretical into concrete practice and application.

The book begins with some of the most simple aspects of training Tai Chi Ch'uan, such as how weight is shifted from one foot to another, which is rarely taught properly, and builds systematically towards internal practices which have little or no physical counterpart. Along the way, each component is integrated using Cloud Hands and supplemental exercises.

The unique aspect of this book is how it brings the esoteric aspects of Tai Chi Ch'uan into real practice. I utilize the Tai Chi Classics as it was intended, as a training manual and a theoretical treatise. This book is also structured as a guide to understanding Cloud Hands and Tai Chi Ch'uan, and how the meditative, health and martial aspects of the art intertwine. The health benefits gained from practicing Cloud Hands, or any style of Tai Chi Ch'uan, are bound together with the three components of internal power. To gain the complete health benefits, you must practice and integrate all three components of internal power. Each provides a component of internal health cultivation and the sum is greater than the parts. Likewise, the underlying meditation practices must be integrated to fully access the internal power in a martial context. Tai Chi Ch'uan works as a health exercise for the same reasons it works as a martial art. And it works as a martial art in large part because of its relationship to meditation. Without an understanding of its internal structure and meditation, its health benefits are diminished along with its martial prowess.

I assume that the reader has a working practice of Cloud Hands in either Yang or Wu Style Tai Chi Ch'uan. I give a cursory explanation of the external movements, but strongly recommend learning them before jumping into the body of this book. In the alternative, you can learn Cloud Hands using the book by following the road map provided. Whether you are a beginner or experienced practitioner, I strongly recommend practicing the supplemental exercises in the book along with learning a Cloud Hands form. I only address Yang and Wu styles of Cloud Hands because I have an insufficient grounding in other styles.

<sup>11</sup> The term chi kung is a modern umbrella term that describes many kinds of internal and external practices. I literally translates as "skilled breath practice". Nei kung is a specific type of chi kung that has its roots in ancient practices. Nei kung translates as "skilled internal practice" and its primary purpose is to harmonize body and chi.

## **B. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SYMMETRY**

Internal and external symmetry is first introduced in the opening movement of Tai Chi Ch'uan, sometimes translated as Separating Powers or Separating Nei Jings<sup>22</sup>. The symmetry in Separating Powers is simpler than in Cloud Hands because Separating Powers does not involve turning, shifting or stepping. Separating Powers trains how to internally change in such a manner that the four primary jings (peng, liu, ji and an, or, in English: ward-off, rollback, press and push) are strengthened and supported through a vertical circular pattern. Because Cloud Hands involves weight shifting, waist turning and stepping, it forms a more complete paradigm for the Tai Chi Ch'uan form than does Separating Powers.

For the sake of convention this book refers to three components of internal power: 1) Cross-body power; 2) Left/Right Alignment or Joint power; and 3) Zhong Ding power. All postures in Tai Chi Ch'uan utilize all three components of internal power, but the balance between the three differs from posture to posture. Cloud Hands emphasizes the stable power of the zhong ding and how it manifests in symmetrical patterns as your turn, step and shift weight. Cloud Hands also clearly maps how the nei jing changes that are developed in Separating Powers coordinate with turning, shifting weight and stepping. Another aspect of Cloud Hands that contributes to its completeness is its emphasis on the power and energy developed in the zhong ding. In contrast to many other postures in Tai Chi Ch'uan, some which rely more heavily on cross-body power or left/right alignment power, Cloud Hands primarily utilizes power from the stability of your center.

Of the thirteen postures in the Tai Chi Classics<sup>33</sup>, Cloud Hands is the stepping method of central equilibrium, or zhong ding. Zhong ding is most often translated as central equilibrium. This stepping method is the fundamental stepping method in Tai Chi Ch'uan because it embodies the internal process of stepping, turning and weight shifting regardless of the direction of the step. The other four stepping methods (step forward, step back, look left and look right) are variations on the zhong ding method. This enables Cloud Hands to form a paradigm for the internal symmetry in Tai Chi Ch'uan as it reveals the hidden relationship between the stepping methods, the changes of nei jing and cross-body power.

## **C. THE THREE COMPONENTS OF INTERNAL POWER & HEALTH IN TAI CHI CH'UAN**

In Tai Chi Ch'uan the most easily accessed power and neutralizing energy is developed bio-mechanically. Tai Chi Ch'uan's basic neutralizing and power training combines refined physical alignments, powerful waist turning, with pushing and stretching through the legs and body. The more subtle, and ultimately more effective and powerful internal power training in Tai Chi Ch'uan requires much more attention to internal energy, subtle alignments and releasing the tension throughout the body, energy, and mind. However, without disciplined alignments and proper physical mechanics, the internal energy remains trapped within and regardless of the mental effort the energy lacks real effect. This happens on the most basic level because your muscles are working at times in opposition. When this occurs, some of your strength fights against other strength in your body and diminishes the power it can apply. Although this cannot be entirely eliminated, it can be reduced. It is reduced by refining alignments to maximize the power generated by a particular movement.

The relationship between cross-body power, left/right alignment power and zhong ding power and their associated health benefits will be explored in more depth in later chapters. Each component is associated with the following health benefit: cross-body power with soft and connective tissue health and bio-mechanical health; left/right alignment power with joint, spine and vascular health; 3) zhong ding power with spine, nervous system, glandular and organ health.

Each component of internal power constantly contributes to each posture, transition, or application in Tai Chi Ch'uan. But the health benefits of one component are not the exclusive domain of that component. They overlap and reinforce each other. From posture to posture the balance between cross-body, left/right and zhong ding power varies, but each component should always be present. The genius of Tai Chi Ch'uan forms is that, given a particular application and configuration of your body, it provides a matrix to maximize the martial or healing power.

<sup>22</sup> Jing is an expression of internal energy or power in a particular manner.

<sup>33</sup> The thirteen postures refer to: the four primary jings, peng liu ji and an; the four combinations lieh, t'sai, kao and zhou; and the five stepping methods, step forward, step backwards, step left, step right and step around your center (zhong ding).