

THE NECESSITY FOR SOFTNESS IN TAIJIQUAN

by Michael A. DeMarco, M.A.

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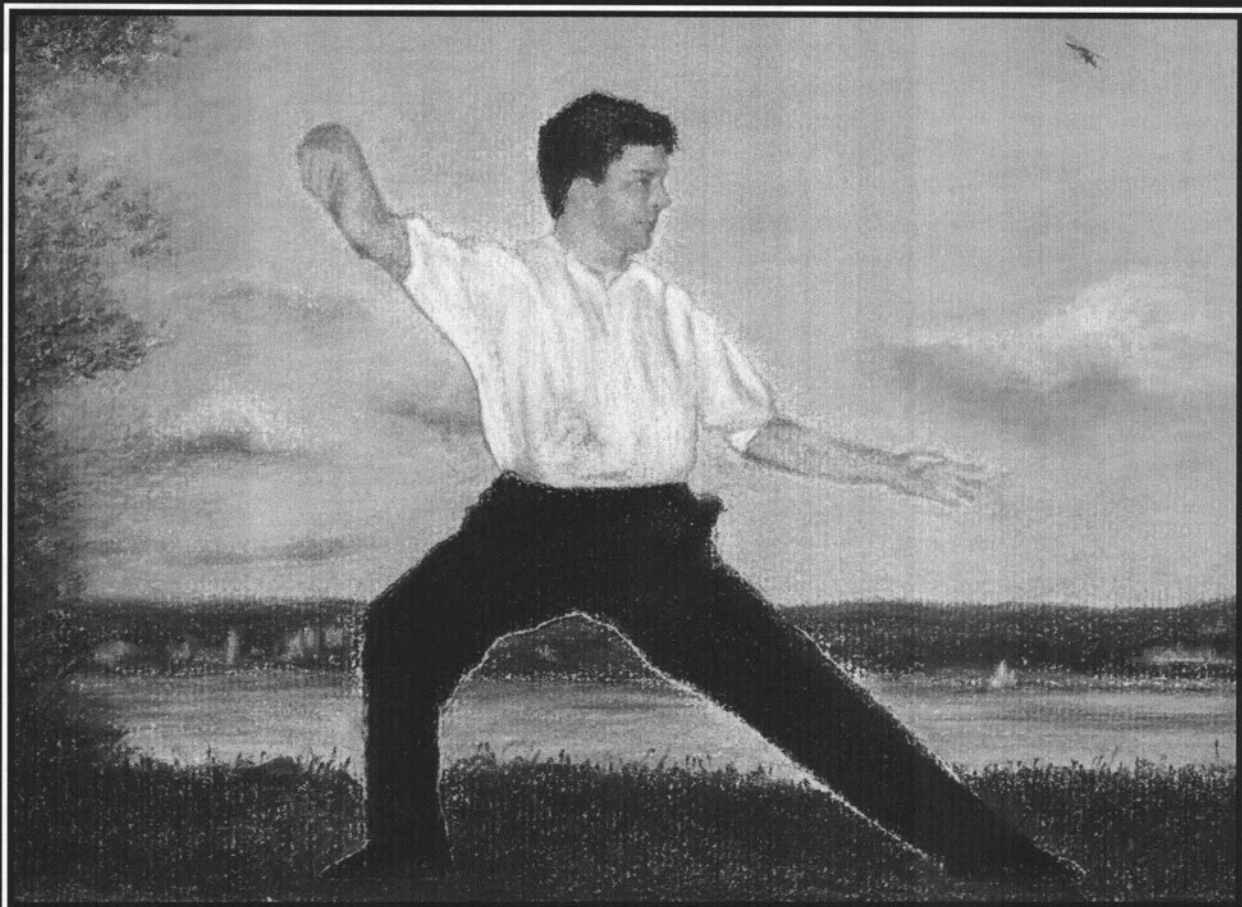
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SNAKE CREEPS DOWNWARD

Illustration by Mary E. Tanner

*In the whole world, nothing is softer and weaker than water.
 And yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can beat it,
 Because there is nothing you can use to replace it.
 That water can defeat the unyielding –
 That the weak can defeat the strong –
 There is no one in the whole world who doesn't know it,
 And yet there is no one who can put it into practice.*

– Ch. 78, Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*

*Henricks, R. (Trans.). (1989). *Lao-tzu te-tao ching*. New York: Ballantine Books.

THE NECESSITY FOR SOFTNESS IN TAIJIQUAN

BY MICHAEL A. DEMARCO, M.A.



For Daoists, water has long been the ultimate symbol for illustrating proper actions. Its unique characteristics offer insights into the Way (*Dao*) of movement which, when applied to the martial arts, gives lessons on how to improve our practice and execution of technique. Through the practice of the various styles of *taijiquan* that are executed in a relaxed, slow and easy manner, the practitioner can feel the subtleties that allow one's movement to become like water, moving in harmony with the Way.

What is so unique about the nature of water that can be usefully applied in martial arts practice? Water is soft and yielding. However, a river, in travelling thousands of miles from its source to the ocean, must overcome countless rigid obstacles. In the martial arts, someone defending himself must overcome whatever obstacles his opponent may present, be they physical or psychological attacks. Like water with its ability to change form, a person can best defend himself from attack by yielding. Throw a rock into a pond and the water allows the rock to take its course. It yields to the rock while encompassing it. Throw a rock against a tree and see the damage done.

For defense against any aggressive movement, yielding proves to be very effective. A target cannot be hit if it is not present. In the practice of *taijiquan*, one quickly learns to yield to an incoming attack. In like manner, one learns to flow with the opposite forces which may draw one onward, such as being pulled forwards. When attacks are neutralized in this fashion, it also becomes possible to eliminate any further threat from the attacker by an appropriate technique, i.e., joint lock, throw, or strike. Although relaxed, the response can be executed quite powerfully, much like the concerted force exhibited by a typhoon. Even air, which is often described as "nothing," becomes increasingly dangerous as it transforms from breeze, to wind, to hurricane, to tornado.

All photos by Pete Gool.

Special thanks to Peter Danielewicz for his help in demonstrating the techniques with the author.

In this article, we present a few exercises designed to train the martial art practitioner to move more naturally. The following exercises focus on the necessity of softness in order to find the inter-relatedness of unified body movement, the flowing ease of proper technique, and the balance necessary for stability. Above all, these exercises should bring about a "feel" for natural movement that can be applied to the range of self-defense techniques. Some applications from the Yang taijiquan form will then be presented to show how these theories can be applied to any technique.

EXERCISES: THE WAY OF TAIJICUAN BODY MOVEMENT

In addition to softness and yielding, water also illustrates other important characteristics worthy of observation. Because of gravity, water seeks equilibrium as shown in the level surface of a pond. It sinks to the lowest level while remaining even at the surface, much like the well-balanced postures of taijiquan. Water flows and shifts. Since taijiquan is based on the principles of yin and yang, each taiji form flows smoothly one into another. A river moves as one and the techniques strung together to form the taiji set likewise move as one continuous stream. The following exercise will illustrate some of the natural, water-like qualities necessary for doing taijiquan properly.

EXERCISE ONE:

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

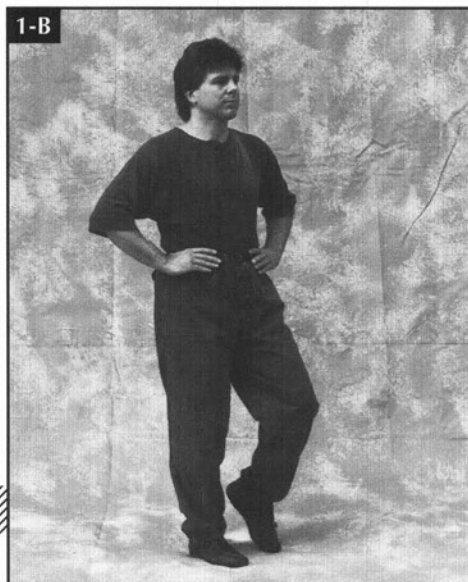
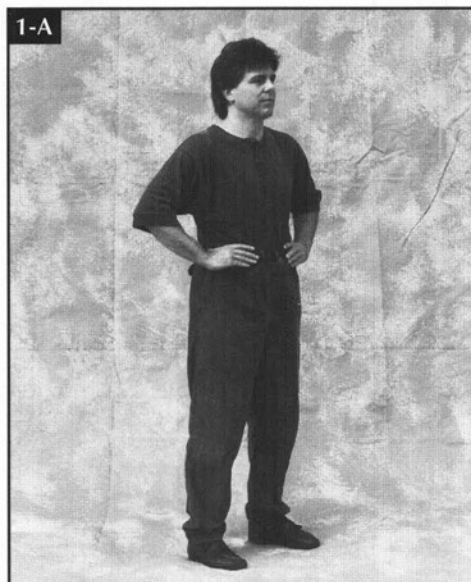
Take a single step. This is something we do every day of our lives, but seldom do we take the time to notice just what the movement entails. Take a single step and ask yourself, "How did I do it?" There are two basic ways to step forward. One is to quickly lift up one leg, lean to the front to place the foot down, and fall forward onto the extended foot. The second way follows the taijiquan principles and is shown in the following photos. The complete process for taking a step should be done in a balanced and relaxed manner.

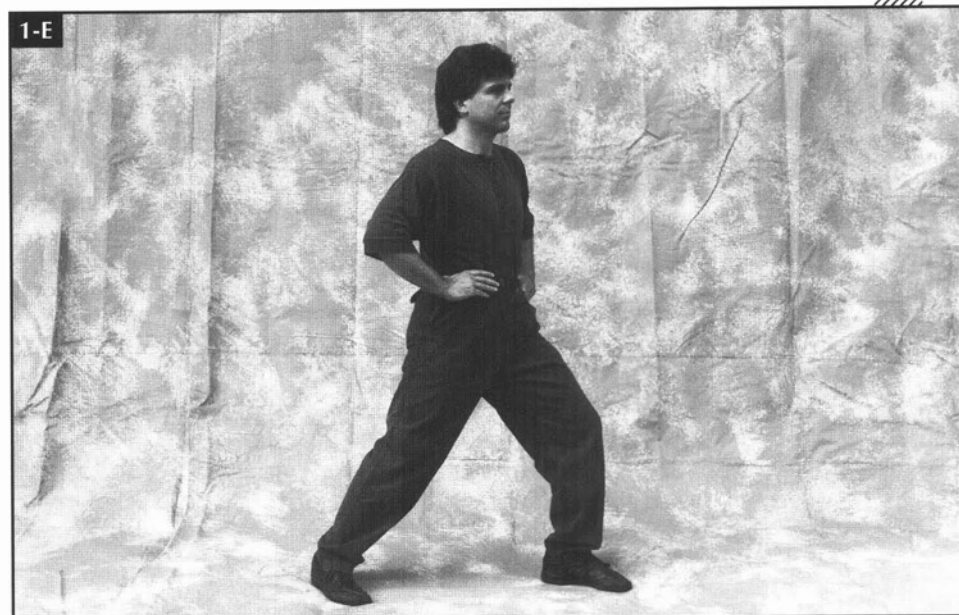
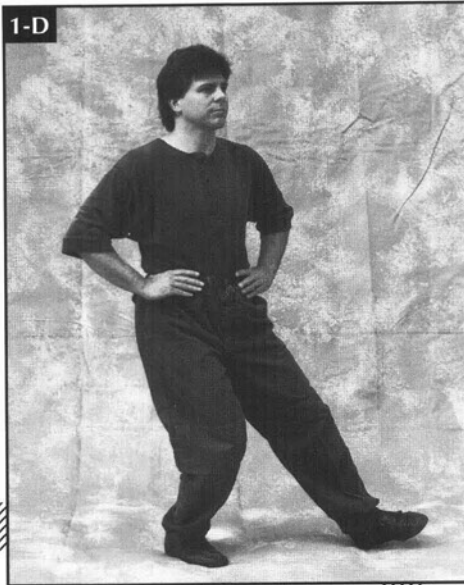
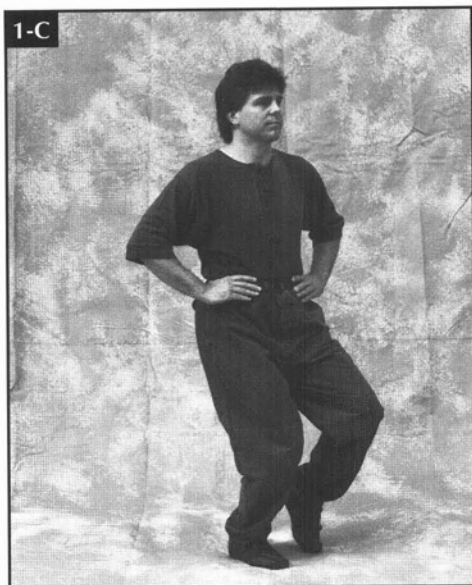
1-A

The body is erect and balanced with weight distributed equally on both feet. This position is natural and relaxed.

1-B

Slowly shift the body weight totally onto the right leg while keeping the spine straight. This allows the body to remain in balance and frees the left leg for making the step forward. If you did not shift the weight while lifting the foot, you'd fall!





1-C

If the right leg remains stiff, the left leg could be placed to the front by the body falling forward. Rather than do this, keep the body erect and sink by bending the right knee.

1-D

The sinking movement allows the left heel to be placed forward. The distance of the step depends on how much one sinks. The weight remains on the back leg until the left heel touches the floor.

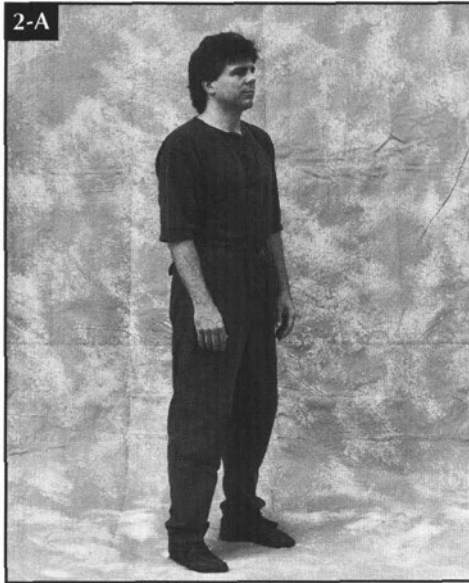
1-E

Slowly shift the weight forward. The toes of the left foot will gradually rest on the floor as the shift occurs. The left knee bends as the back leg straightens. The weight is about 70% on the front foot.

EXERCISE TWO:

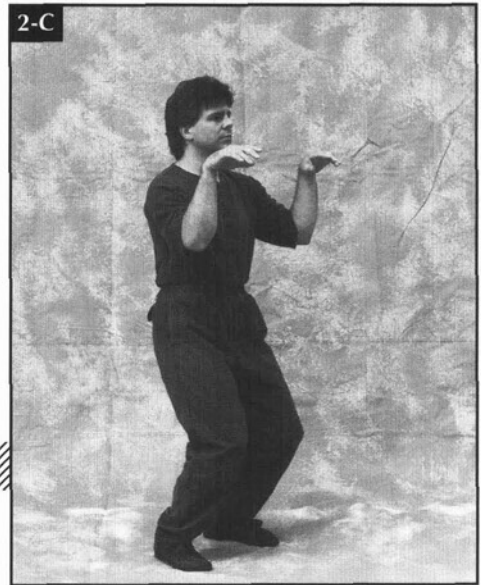
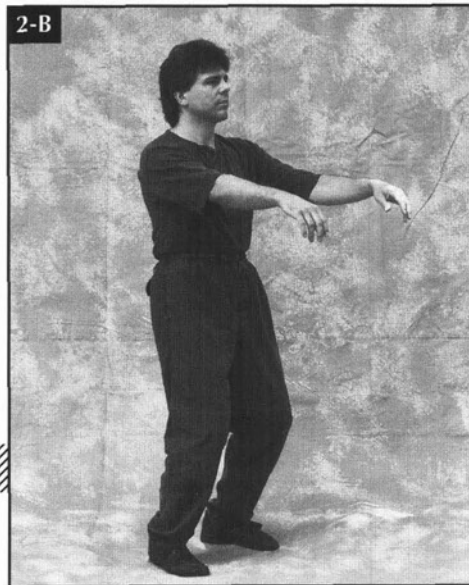
LETTING THE ARMS FALL UP

Have you seen movies in which a person slips on a banana peel? He loses his footing, as if he had a rug pulled out from under him. As he loses his footing, his hands fly into the air. Some taijiquan movements also illustrate this natural reaction.



2-A, 2-B, and 2-C

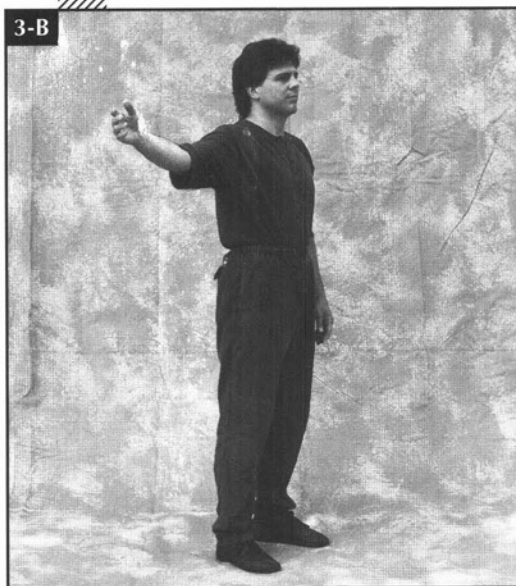
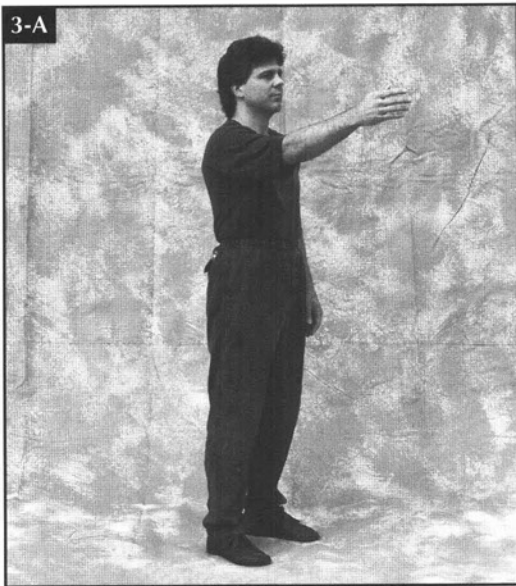
Begin as in 1-A, only with the arms hanging freely. Then let your knees buckle and fall freely into a squat. If the arms are relaxed, they will effortlessly move upwards. The movement must be done rather quickly to have this effect on the arms. Just as *yin* complements *yang*, the sinking motion is complemented by the rising motion of the arms. If you do this movement in slow motion, it becomes necessary to consciously raise the arms. However, the movement will seem easier and the arms lighter when done after this practice than if one relies solely on muscle power to raise the arms. The movement will seem like the arm movement of a water pump. As one end moves downward (the body), the other moves upward (the arms).



EXERCISE THREE:

INTERCONNECTED ARM MOVEMENT

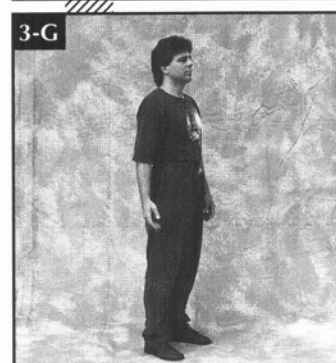
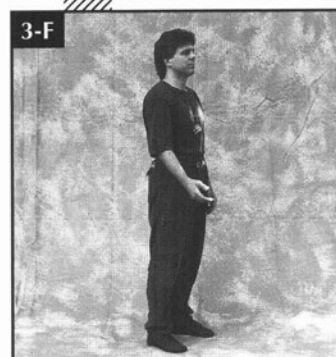
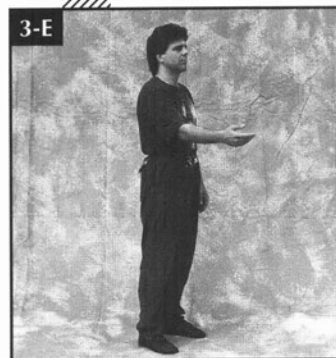
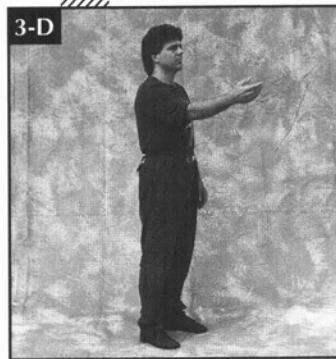
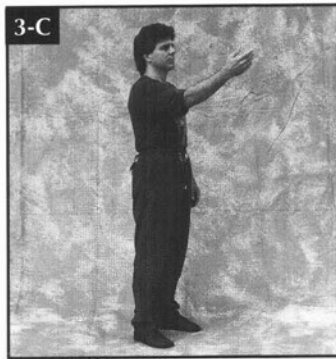
Open a door. It can open only as far as its hinges allow. The following exercise allows one to feel the restrictions a tense body can place on itself. When the body moves as a whole in a relaxed manner, movements become easier and the body flows freely without straining muscles or joints.

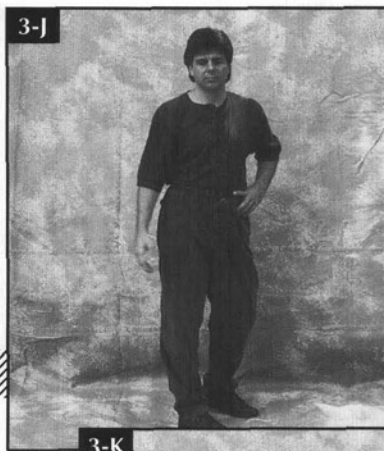
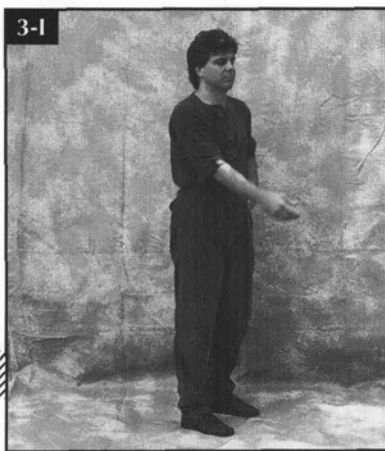
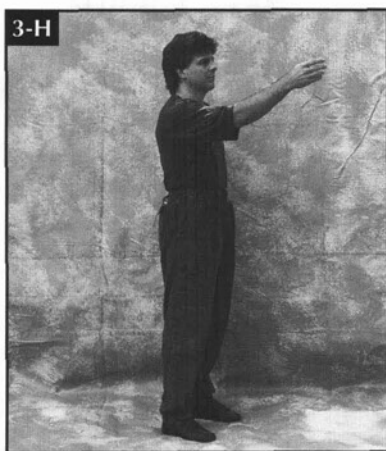


3-A
Stand with the right arm forward.

3-B
While keeping the body rigid, move the right arm as far as possible to the right side. You will feel the right shoulder muscles bunch together and an uncomfortable pulling in the socket. This exercise allows one to feel the effects of doing the movement incorrectly.

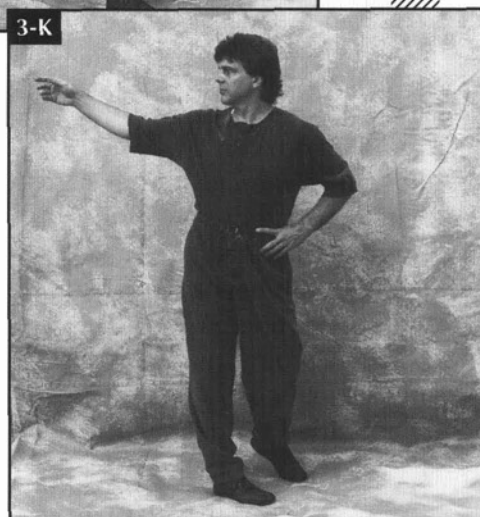
3-C thru 3-G
Start again as in 3-A. While keeping the body rigid, let the right arm fall downward by its own weight. Again, you will feel the arm abruptly stop.





3-H thru 3-K

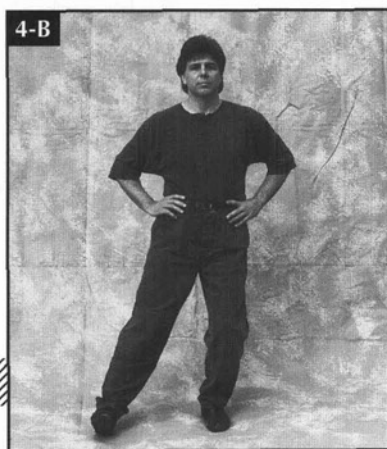
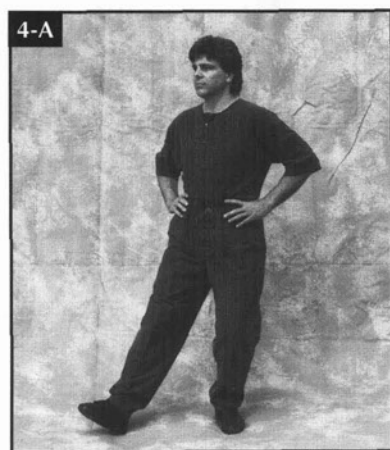
Try the preceding sequence (3-C thru 3-G) once more, but in a relaxed manner. This will allow your hips and shoulders to rotate with the falling weight of the right arm. The natural arc of the arm falling will be a direct line from front to back and the arm will naturally "fall upwards" due to its own weight and speed during the free-fall. The body will also shift to the right leg and the left heel will rise to follow in the direction of the arm movement. The head will also follow the movement as if you were looking, while pointing with the right hand, at an object behind you.



EXERCISE FOUR:

INTERCONNECTED LEG MOVEMENT

This exercise has the same purpose as the previous, except it focuses on the leg and hip movement rather than the arm and shoulder.

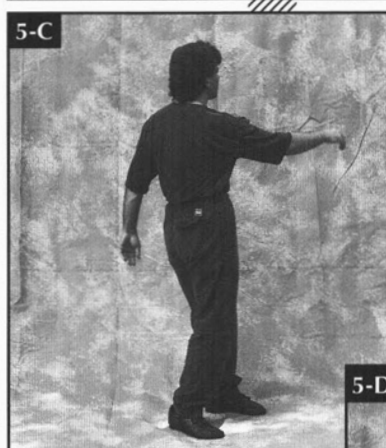
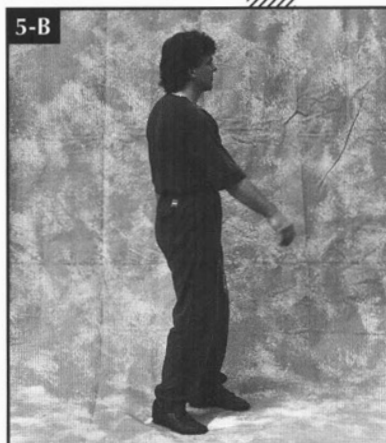
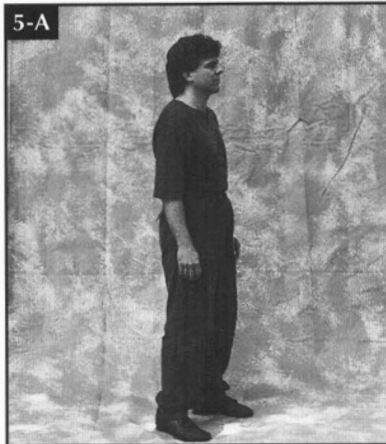


4-A

Stand with all your weight on the left leg (weighted; *yang* characteristic) and place the right heel out to the right side (empty; *yin* characteristic). Face in the direction of your right foot.

4-B

Turn the head and hips ninety-degrees to the left so that you are looking in the direction of your left foot. You can alternate the movement back and forth from the original position. Did your right foot also turn in the same direction? If not, there may be too much weight on the right leg. Or perhaps the lower body is rigid. Proper shifting of weight, as the alternating between *yin* and *yang*, is a prerequisite for smooth, well-balanced movements.



EXERCISE FIVE:

ROPE-LIKE ARMS

LED BY WAIST MOVEMENT

Taiji classics state that all movements start in the waist. However, many practitioners execute movements with tensed hands, arms and shoulders. This is true particularly with punches, pushes, and pulls. The body often automatically tenses at the thought of needing additional power. But taiji does not solely rely on arm muscles for power. Power is generated by an integrated body movement. The following exercise can be repeated by alternating the swing to the left and right. In addition to turning the waist on its axis, the player can augment the same movement by shifting his weight by pushing off the back leg, e.g., the left leg when turning right.

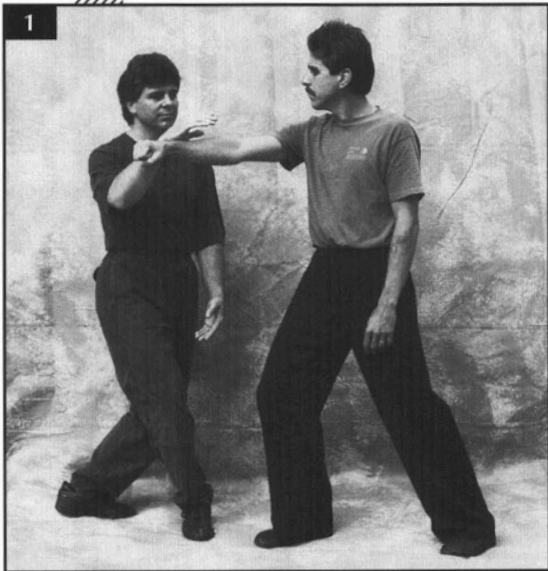
5-A thru 5-D

Begin with the stance shown in 5-A and concentrate on letting the arms hang in a relaxed manner as if they were ropes hanging from the shoulders. Turn the waist to the left and feel how the arms swing in the same direction. As the waist turns, the shoulders turn, moving the upper arms and then the forearms naturally follow. This is not a machine-like movement. The parts will follow one another, just as a whip is directed by its handle. But, as the handle is pulled back, the whip's tip is still moving forward until it strikes its target.

APPLICATIONS

The following taiji boxing movements illustrate the necessity for softness in executing self-defense techniques. The movements embody the principles upon which taijiquan is based, such as relaxation, balance, fluid change, and integrated body movement. Study the photos and practice the techniques to feel these principles in movement.

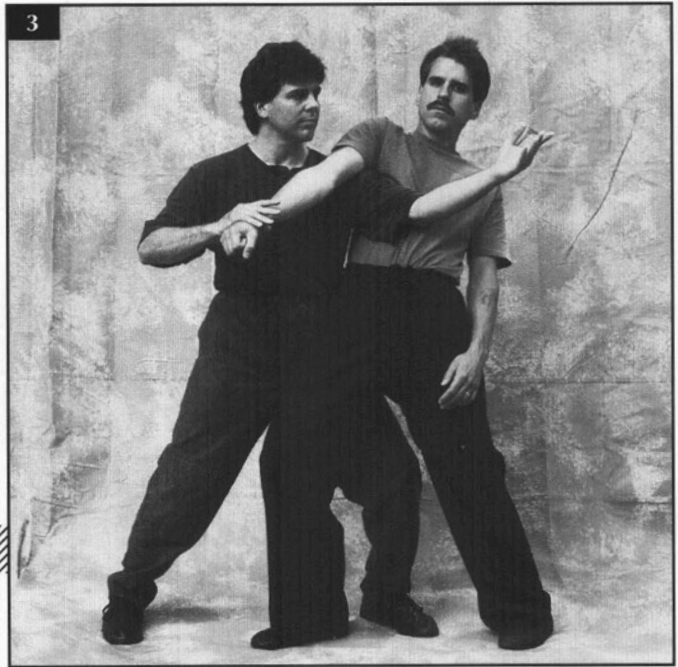
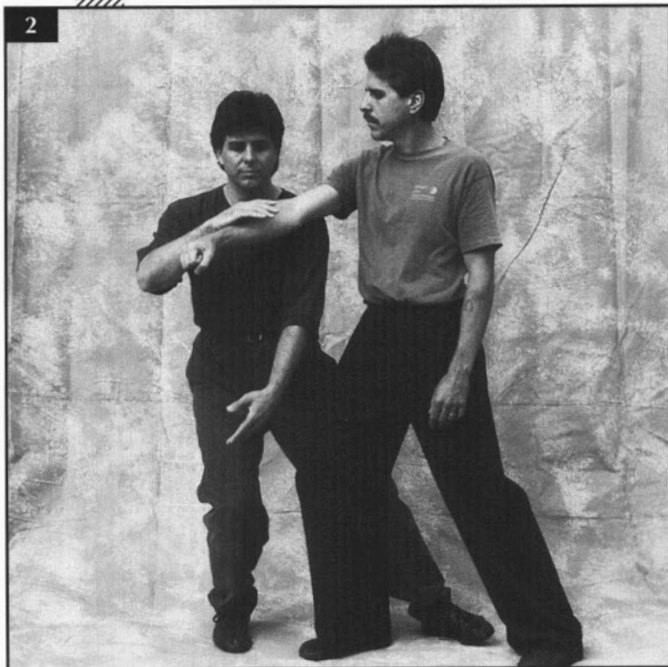
While utilizing these principles can greatly improve martial skills, they also are conducive to physical and mental fitness. When smoothness is attained in executing these techniques, the joints and muscles will not be overexerted or overextended, eliminating the threat of injuring yourself through improper practice. The skeletal system will be in proper alignment with the movements. First practice both the exercises and applications in slow motion. Gradually increase the speed of the techniques but be sure to apply the taiji principles! As an end result, the movements should feel powerful, yet relaxed.

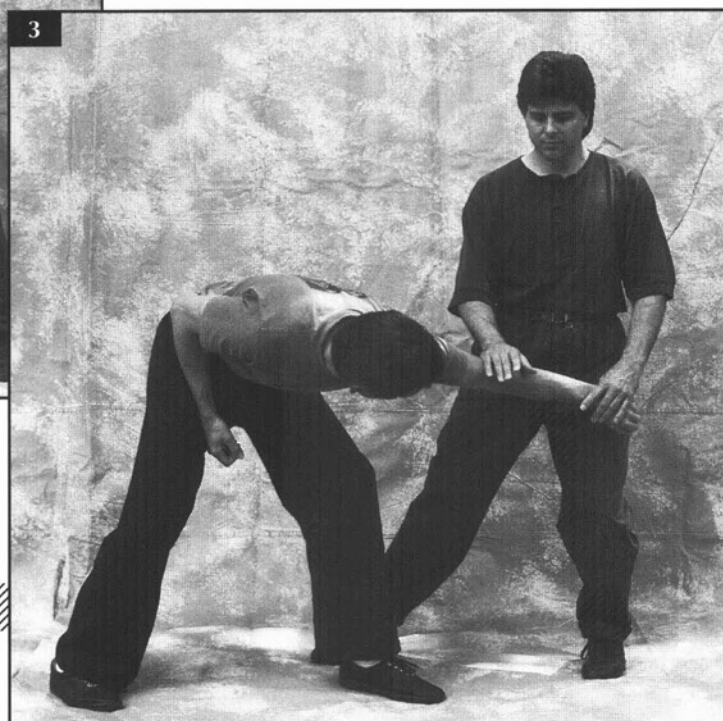
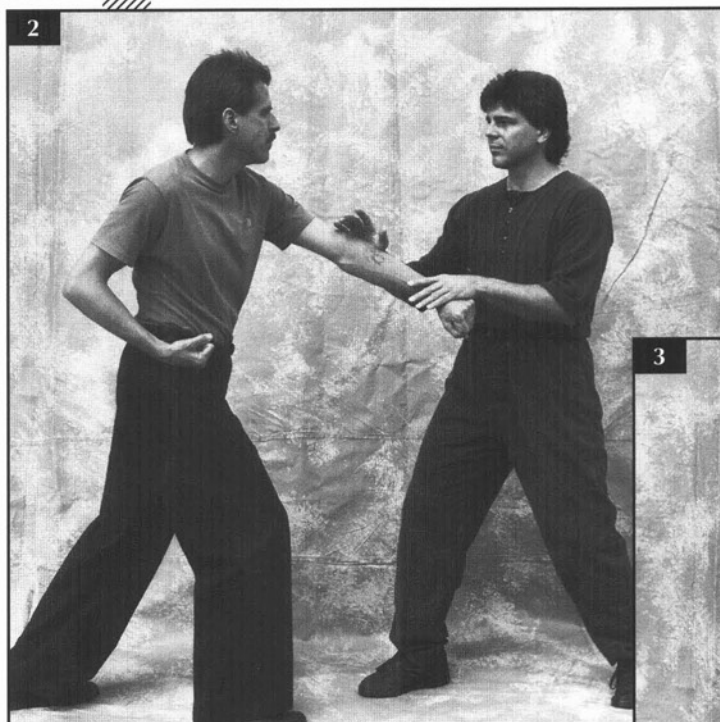
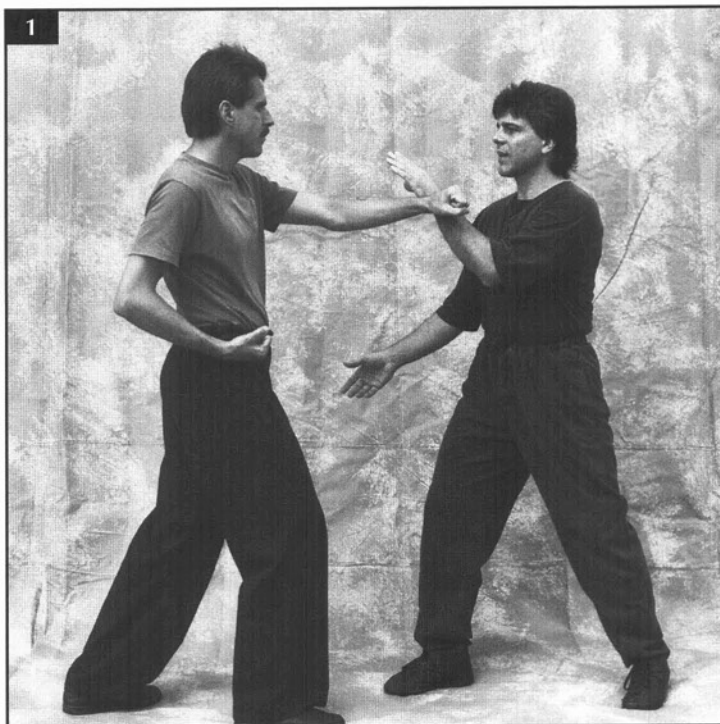


APPLICATION ONE:

WARD-OFF

Ward-Off is a basic but important movement and, therefore, often repeated in the taiji set. The application here shows a technique which can follow a previous block by the right forearm for an incoming right-hand punch. Note that balance is maintained throughout and the left arm follows the rotation of the waist as the weight is shifted from the right leg to the left. It is not necessary to be tense. Since the attacker's strike was deflected, he chooses to withdraw. The defender simply "goes with the flow" to thwart the attacker from regaining his balance and topples the attacker by accelerating him in the direction of his retreat. Compare this movement to Exercise One.

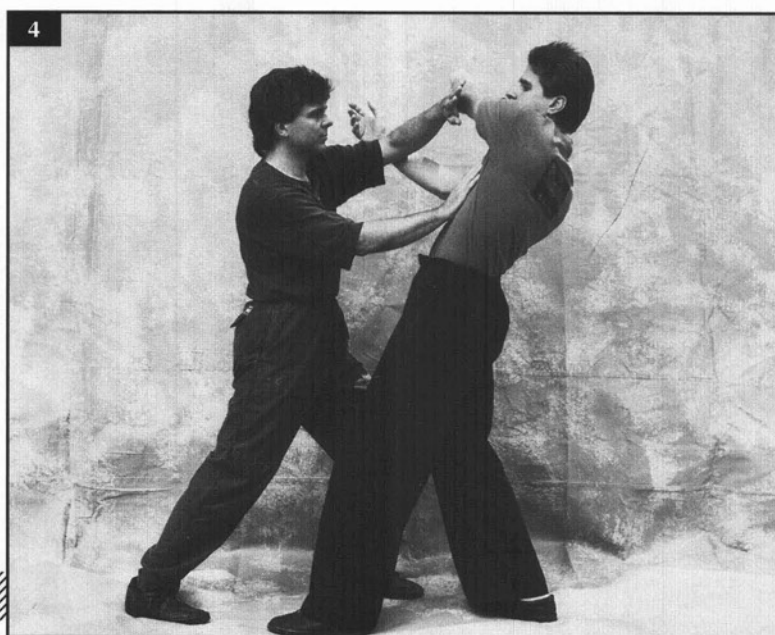
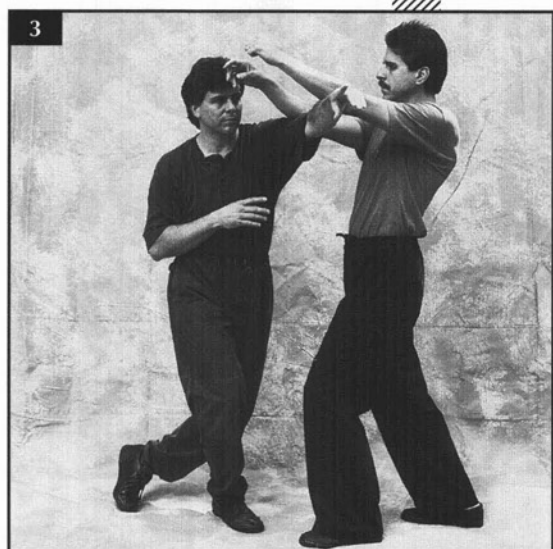
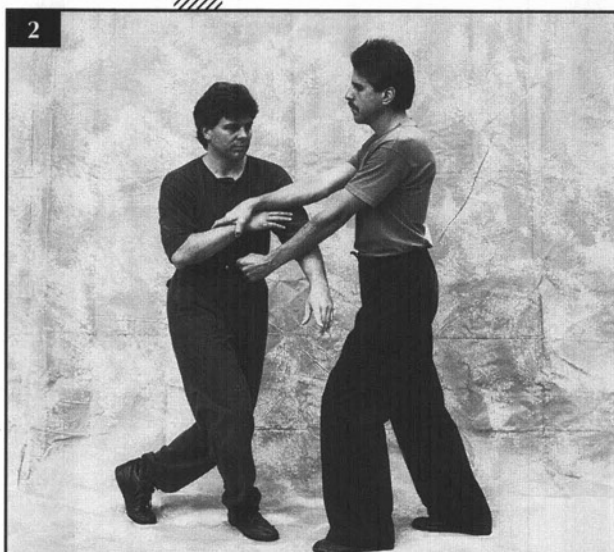
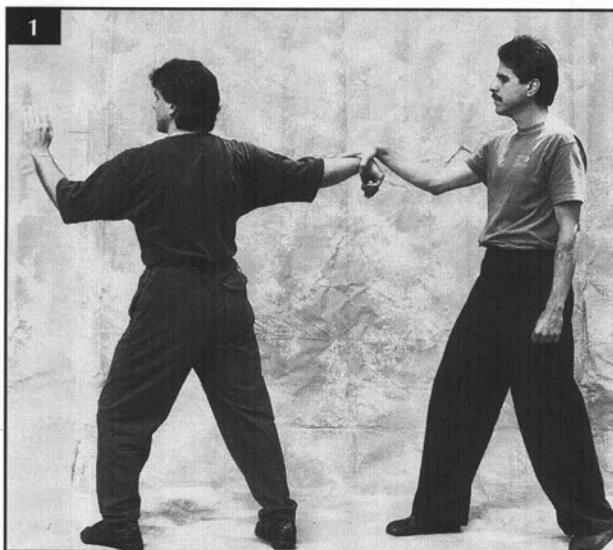




APPLICATION TWO:

ROLL-BACK

In Roll-Back, the left hand can be used to intercept a strike and deflect it. While executing the strike with force and momentum, the attacker can easily throw himself off-balance if the strike does not reach its target. The defender, therefore, moves in the same general direction as the incoming force, easily guiding the strike downward and thus drawing the attacker further off-balance to the ground. Note how the defender has shifted his weight from the front to the back foot as in Exercise Three. The hand placed on the attacker's left elbow is an added precaution.



APPLICATION THREE:

JADE LADY WORKS AT SHUTTLE

One of the applications for Jade Lady can be seen when an attacker grabs the raised arm of a person with the intent to strike him. Since the arm was raised, he tries to strike at the mid-section. Although grabbed firmly, the defender keeps his right arm relaxed and moves with the slight pull from the attacker. As the attacker steps in to deliver a right punch, the defender turns his waist to the right causing the strike to glance off and also be blocked by the left arm. The left arm literally falls into its defensive position by flowing with the body's turn. The attacker, now off-balance, realizes his critical position and starts to retreat. The defender keeps contact by keeping his left arm against the attacker's right arm. Moving with the attacker's retreat, the defender controls the rest of the movement and adds a right-hand push to drive the attacker away. The push could be changed to a strike if so desired. A variety of principles can be found in Jade Lady as shown in the exercises given on the previous pages.

APPLICATION FOUR:

MONKEY RETREATS

By its very name, Monkey Retreats illustrates a backward movement, which follows the same taiji principles discussed earlier. Some actions in the sequence are the reverse of those executed during a forward movement. For example, rather than step with the heel first, the toe is placed on the ground. The block/deflect is still made in the direction of the attacker's strike and the necessary sinking, shifting and turning remain the same as in forward movements.

The attacker and defender are near each other. As the attacker swings his left fist around at the side of the defender's head, the defender begins his defensive movement. His body shifts and sinks to his left leg, allowing the right leg to be free to step backwards. As this occurs, the right hand "falls upward" due to the momentum and is in position to deflect the attack safely to the side. The defender simultaneously places his left hand on the attacker's chest to check his movement. The left hand could be used to strike the attacker if so desired. Note that the defender's left foot is now empty of weight, and the body's turning pulls the foot into alignment with the hips. If the left leg is tensed or if too much weight remains on it, the toes would remain planted pointing straight forward or even to the left and outside the direction the hips are pointing.

• • •

It is hoped that by practicing the exercises and applications presented above, one can come to observe more closely the taiji principles discussed and their importance and usefulness for taijiquan as an art form, a system of self-defense, a moving meditation, and a holistic health system.

