

Keys

Nasser Butt©November 2015

I have been contacted several times of late to comment upon the 'Keys' of Taijiquan as people have heard their instructor mention them or talk about them in class. The primary reason for the question is that it has oft caused confusion amongst students, where they have heard one instructor say one thing and another something completely different!

So, I have been bombarded with requests to help clarify the matter and clear up the confusion surrounding these mystical Keys.

Firstly, we need to clear up a simple erroneous concept — **we need to distinguish between key postures or segments within the Taijiquan form and the Keys themselves!**

The Taijiquan form is littered with key postures which are essential to develop one's understanding of the art. These postures or sequence of postures bring about a higher understanding of the form take, for example, the sequence of postures referred to as '*Grasping the sparrow's tail*':

These represent the epitome of Taijiquan, housing the four main energies of *P'eng, Lu, Ji* and *Arn*, along with the basis of the '*Five Directions*' and are, hence, considered a key sequence which, if not understood or developed correctly, will not lead to advancement of the form. However, as important as these postures are, they are not what we call the main or primary Keys!

The Keys themselves are postures or concepts within the form which can literally push your understanding of Taijiquan into the stratosphere! These can either be purely on the physical level or on an internal level, or both.

Most instructors, including experienced instructors, when talking about the Keys are actually referring to key postures or sequences such as the one described above. They DO NOT know or understand the Keys as they either lack the experience and knowledge or never trained long enough with Erle to have experienced or been shown a 'Key' in situ! However, these instructors will go on to comment on the subject erroneously through their limited knowledge, thereby causing confusion!

Erle would often say to me in our conversations:

“There is no shame in admitting you don’t know when a student asks a question you don’t have an answer to! However, say that you will find out and then go out and learn!”

Sadly, few instructors have heeded that advice. They much rather waffle through a subject then simply admit they don’t know!

There are Ten Keys ‘hidden’ within the sequence of the Old Yang Style Taiji form.



Erle demonstrating the Key of Lift Hands © Nasser Butt

I will only talk in detail of the first of these Keys — ‘Lift Hands’.

Although this is considered the first Key, it is also considered to be perhaps the most important of Keys — *it is the Key to Qi Balancing and development internally as well as physical balance! It is also the Key where we first experience pure Yin Yang in a singular posture* (I’ll let you figure out how and why?).

We make no distinction between the postures called “Lift Hands” and “Play the Pippa” — they are the same! What separates them is the start position of the hands. “Play the Pippa” is considered true Lift Hands as the hands rise from the bottom, whereas in the posture called “Lift Hands” in the Old Yang, the hands begin mid-way up.

The posture represents the lifting of the Qi from K1 (Kidney 1 or the ‘Bubbling Well’) up the backbone and into GB20 (Gallbladder 20) - This is what the masters of old wrote about in the classics that, *“The Qi must rise up the back”*. This occurs during the ‘lifting’ component of the hands. As the hands are lowered, the Qi is balanced throughout the body as it falls back into the Tantien. In this posture it is said that the body is in a state of perfect balance with the Earth. The breathing is deep and natural which, in turn, further enhances the balancing effect. It is also here that we first break one of the ‘golden’ rules of the beginner — we go as low as

possible without breaking structure or falling over — in other words, the knee moves beyond the toes!

The posture must be done over two full breaths before continuing into the next posture — not a single breath as performed by beginners. The arms must be in a total state of sung and move in perfect harmony with the body and empty foot.

This Key is, in itself a key to the Qi Development Tools, as all the Qi Development Tools begin with this posture. This is why the Qi Development Tools were given towards the end of one's training because by then you should have 'mastered' the Key of Lift Hands!

I was there when Erle first taught his instructors the Qi Development Tools. I recorded them both on film and in stills. I remember having this conversation with him and asking, "Why was he showing this to people who were not of a particular level?"

I remember his reply clearly — I quote my notes from the day:

"It's ok to show it to them Nass. Most will even think they can do them after a while. But you will see that most have not understood or developed the first Key yet, without which this is simply 'another' exercise!"

So, when I see people practicing advance ideas, like the Qi Development Tools, which Erle evolved over decades of practice — I smile and remember these words and watch the same guys perform the form and sure enough the don't even have the first key!

Evolution is a slow process.
It takes time.

Too many folk want to be the 'Master' when in reality they are doing nothing more than aping the moves of a Master. Erle once told a story on mastery, I'll repeat it here:

"A Young man in Japan wanted to study swordplay with a famous master, so he asked the master how long it would take him to learn the sword if he practiced every day. The master told him about 25 years. The boy looked shocked and asked how long it would take him if he practiced night and day and had mastership as his only goal. The master told him that he would never learn!"

I hope I have cleared the matter.

One is revealed. You have nine more to discover.