

Chapter 1.  
**Plucking up the Back**

from

**Taijiquan**  
*Meditations*  
**for the Solo Form**



**by Robert Amacker**



WhiteCrowTaiji Press

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# Preface

I have endeavored over the years to emphasize to my students that, while Taijiquan is most frequently characterized by the slow and deliberate movements of its solo form, it is not defined by any particular traditional movements, regardless of their historical lineage and authenticity. Those movements must be seen as each respective style's attempt to address the needs imposed on the student by his techniques of interaction with a partner/opponent. It is this interaction, and the protocols of its application, that defines the art. One could be a complete master of Taijiquan and not have necessarily ever even seen any one of the existing variants of the form. But regardless of how tenuous the necessary connection of any particular form may be to Taijiquan mastery, this is not to say that the practice of form is unnecessary, or that any one of the various forms extant could not be a vehicle for right instruction and study.

In *The Theoretical Basis of T'ai Chi Ch'uan* I attempted to expose in great detail the defining skill of the art, the construction of mutual taijis with the partner. Even at the time, however, I stated that while such skill was definitive, it was not sufficient in terms of one's ability to actually do Taijiquan. My insistence upon the importance of personal interactions as the focus of training, and of the construction of taijis as the key to its pursuit, might give the impression that I lack interest in the form. I hope that this book will reflect the importance I place in the solo exercise. Although my own experience is with the Yang Style, the internal discipline and training needed could utilize the outward forms of many different styles for its realization. Arguments over which style is superior based upon their external executions of the solo form are entirely meaningless; arguments over which external version of a given style's form is superior is really missing the point, unless these versions have been modified to be more or less conducive to internal development. For example, it is common for prospective students to agonize over which Yang Style version they should study, the style taught by Yang Chengfu, now known as the "long" form, or the "short" form, later popularized by his student, Zheng Manqing. While the shorter version leaves out certain traditional moves, this is not a matter of critical importance. As I heard "The Professor" (Zheng Manqing) say once in class, ninety percent or more of the real lessons of the form are contained in the very first movement (*Grasp Sparrow's Tail*). Accordingly, every "meditation" presented in this book not only applies to any version of the Yang Style one might be practicing, but in fact can likely be applied to any style of Taijiquan whatsoever. Moreover, generations of "hard" style boxers who have found Taijiquan later in

**Taijiquan Meditations for the Solo Form by Robert Amacker / Preface**

life have shown that even the most external style of boxing can be reformed by the application of Taijiquan's internal principle and training methods.

It is my sincere hope that my writings will encourage all students of Taijiquan to attempt to penetrate beneath the external surface of their styles to the substantive internal details that are the real business of solo form practice.

# Introduction

Solo form practice is absolutely critical to Taijiquan acquisition. It helps create the foundation for the skill of making taijis, but also makes possible the effective *use* of those taijis (I describe it in detail in my book, *The Theoretical Basis of T'ai Chi Ch'uan*).

The exact order and external forms of the solo exercise are the least important things about it. The only critical requirement of these movements is that they accommodate the acquisition of certain internal habits. Taijiquan has at its disposal a variety of historical variants of the form, even within well-established styles. There could be infinitely more examples, all of which could satisfy this critical requirement, but none of which, on account of their outward forms alone, would *necessarily* be doing so. To simply parrot the external movements of Taijiquan, no matter how perfectly, is to entirely miss the point of the exercise. It is not a performance to be perfected, but an *opportunity* to focus on certain internal habits.

The external forms are of absolutely no use without a knowledge and understanding of the “meditations” that should accompany them. By this I mean simply paying almost completely exclusive attention to one aspect of practice, maintaining that attention through the entire form or some significant piece of it. Any particular meditation can be an object of concentration for minutes, days, weeks, or years, and alternated with others in those cycles, but for however long, they are best practiced with mutual exclusivity. By this I mean simply that it is unrealistic to try to concentrate on too many things at a time. This does not mean that in the course of the exercise we may not mindfully check on various aspects of our movements from time to time, but that we stay focused as much as possible on the acquisition of one habit at a time, even if this “time” is only a few minutes. Since they are indeed habits, we find that, through the years, each skill maintains itself more and more automatically, so that progressively when we turn our conscious attention to that particular aspect, it seems to be automatically functioning at a level that is less and less short of the performance it exhibits when it is the central object of awareness. Zheng Manqing compared these different aspects to the parts of a machine, saying that to make the machine run properly, each part should be separately removed, examined, cleaned, repaired, and then replaced. This process of examination, cleaning, and repairing represents mindful practice, that is, conscious attention to detail, while “replacement” in the machine is analogous to returning the particular aspect in question to unconscious functioning. Only when all aspects have been replaced, that is, returned to unconscious functioning, is the machine actually running properly. *Practice* is defined by extreme mental

concentration, but actualization, that is, the use of Taijiquan in real combat, requires a mind that is totally empty.

The list of such “meditations” that I have given here is not meant to be exhaustive by any means, or to even cover all of those indulged in by me personally. They are mainly selected because they suffer from a certain opaqueness of meaning, usually exacerbated by a lack of understanding concerning their place and function in the overall scheme of Taijiquan. They generally represent personal epiphanies, things that, because of faithfully executing the external forms, were in some sense present, but that, when actually understood, gave me the overwhelming feeling that before I had not really been practicing them at all. Or, to put it another way, I realized that five minutes of practice with the “correct meditation,” or actually knowing what I was doing, was literally equal to five days, weeks, or maybe even years compared to what I was doing before.

Most of these meditations can also be done while working with a partner doing tuishou, but in general the speed of that exercise, even when done correctly, is far too fast to allow for the kind of careful relearning that the form facilitates. In general, each level of exercise in the curriculum of the Yang school gets progressively faster, and as a rule those flaws that are found in one level can only be corrected by practice on the previous, slower level. In this hierarchy the form is at the bottom, the most fundamental level, and so the ultimate purpose of many of its requirements may only become clear at some far more rarified point in one’s training. Only when that connection is at least intellectually made can the practice be done with anything even approaching the necessary emotional commitment and depth.

# 1. Plucking up the Back

Taijiquan study involves a number of postural adjustments. It is a mixture of processes, one of increasing the range of motion in certain areas, necessitating stretching, and the other a disciplining of movement that habituates deliberate restrictions. The most important single unifying element in the posture and movements of Taijiquan is the correct alignment of the spine. This is referred to in the literature as “plucking up the back.”

Correct spinal posture is absolutely the most fundamental lesson that one may have in Taijiquan. And though there are benefits and skills connected with the study of the art that are not critically dependent upon this regulation, the workability of all the advanced levels of practice is completely sabotaged without it. Since the musculature of the back is a complex affair, and beyond my capacity to elaborate upon with any medical authority, I will approach the problem from the point of view of a teacher, and describe it in the way that has been shown to produce effective results, in my extensive experience.

The spine has a natural S-like curve that in many individuals is too extreme. Simply speaking, “plucking up the back” means a specific muscular contraction that simultaneously lessens its upper and lower curvature and brings the spine into a straighter and straighter alignment. One may define the ideal condition as one in which the individual vertebrae experience a complete balance of pressure around their perimeter where in contact with each other, and that this contact is maintained at the lightest pressure possible, this of course corresponding also to the greatest lengthening possible while still maintaining the requirement of mutually balanced pressure. In other words, there is nothing about the resulting posture that would contradict in any way the standards of even the most conservative medical establishment.

What makes the Taijiquan method so esoteric is that it involves contracting part of the relevant musculature, but completely relaxing another part of the musculature that normally contracts in concert with it. It is this that separates it from the military posture of “attention.” The spine has two relevant sets of muscles, both of which attach to the backbone. There are what feels like two long muscles (actually a more complex set of muscles) flanking it. These muscles stretch over the upper curve of the back. Relaxing them accentuates the curvature, while contracting them straightens it. The other set of muscles begin with an attachment to the vertebrae, and then horizontally wrap around the body. Where they attach to the ribs, they are called intercostal muscles. Below the ribs, they are called abdominal muscles. In correctly

“plucking up” the back, the long flanking muscles are strongly contracted, while the intercostal and abdominal muscles are completely relaxed. The result of this is a flattening of the upper spine, just as though a large hand were pushing on it from the back. It also results in pulling the middle and upper back into alignment with the hips.

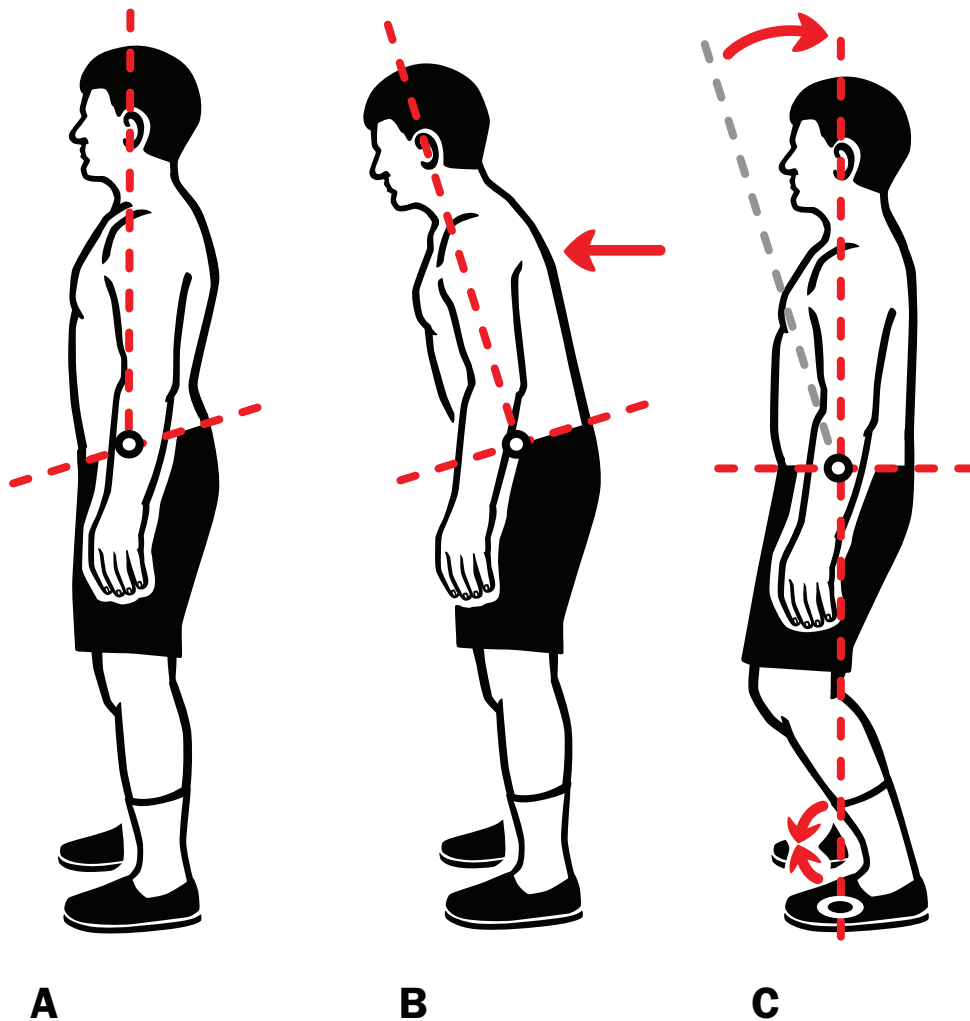
To accomplish this, let us begin with the body in the starting position for the practice of the solo form, that is, with the feet at shoulder width, and the toes pointing straight ahead. Straighten the legs completely. This will produce a forward tip of the pelvis, varying in degree with each individual. Now pluck up the back, aligning it with the tipped pelvis. This produces a rather awkward position in which the body is pitched forward, reflecting the pelvic angle of tilt. The plucking up of the back will thus eliminate both upper and lower curves simultaneously, or rather, reduce them to the desired proper curvature. As stated before, this is not perfectly straight, but a condition in which the force of each vertebrae in relation to the next is perfectly evenly balanced around the center. This tilt is then corrected completely with the legs, with a slight flexion of the knees, and most radically in the action of the ankles (fig. #1.1). Don't let your weight go to your heels or to your toes, but try to keep it right on the so-called “bubbling well” (yongquan point of the kidney meridian in Traditional Chinese Medicine).

At this point you should feel like a kind of bottle floating in the water, able to move equally easily in any direction. If you try to stand up you'll reach a certain point where you'll have to make a choice; either your back will break (curvature will sharply increase) or you'll tip forward again. Since one should do the solo form in an upright position, this means that this defines the highest level at which one should stand when executing it. If you keep that same basic position when lowering the level of the body, there is a certain point when your ankles won't bend any more, and that is as low as you can go. This is the complete range of your movement (fig. #1.2). One may execute the entire form at one level, or, in a more sophisticated version, allow certain moves to sink lower or higher as a matter of function or tradition (based ultimately on function).

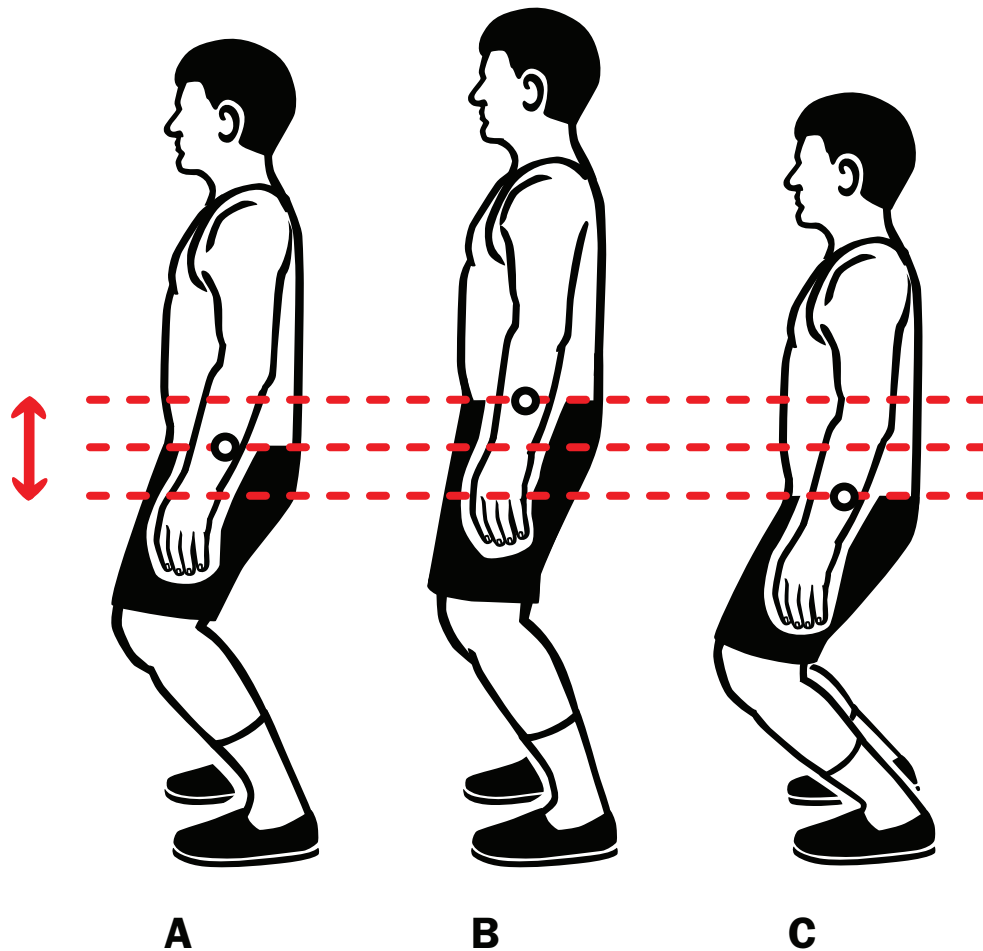
One of the worst and most common mistakes is simply “tucking under” with the waist, which may produce a result credible enough for a still photograph, but improper control of the knees and awkward movement is what happens. The reason that the *Classic* says “relax the waist” in the very same sentence as “pluck up the back” is that this feeling of relaxation in the waist is one very reliable test as to whether one is making this error. There is simply no way to make this critical mistake and *not* experience a feeling of tension in this area.



Taijiquan Meditations for the Solo Form by Robert Amacker / 1. Plucking up the Back



**1.1. Plucking up the back. A.** “Normal” or uncorrected posture. Note the natural tilt of the pelvic girdle. **B.** Plucking up the back. This change occurs entirely from the waist up. There is no action of any kind in the legs and waist, and no tension. Note that the angle of tilt produced in the torso corresponds to the angular tilt found frequently in classical exponents of Taijiquan. **C.** The angular tilt corrected by means of adjustments in the legs. The biggest change occurs in the ankles, which flex to accommodate the forward thrust of the knees and the resultant leveling of the pelvis, also keeping the weight over the “bubbling well.” In this position the back is still energized and plucked up, the legs are working to support the body in their flexed position, and the waist itself, and the joints of the *kua* in particular, are completely relaxed. This is the simplest version of the concept of “tsung.”



**1.2.** Range of vertical movement that still conforms to postural restrictions. **A.** Nominal proper elevation when doing the form. **B.** The maximum elevation possible without either tilting forward or breaking the back. **C.** The lowest elevation possible, dictated by the maximum flexion of the ankles.

But the offender will also notice something else. Straightening the lower spine in this improper way (tucking under) not only does nothing to correct the attitude of the upper spine, it in fact leaves the whole upper body in a state of complete relaxation, which seems very consistent to the untrained beginner with the general admonition to relax “completely.” It should be recognized that the actual condition here is technically *stagnancy*. In addition, the legs need make only the most minimal change during this “correction” of the lower back. When the hips are incorrectly “tucked under,” and the pelvis is thus directly manipulated, there is a feeling of strength and tension in the entire pelvic region, but none in the legs. To be clear, this improper technique allows the stu-

dent to relax pretty much everywhere *except* the waist, and this is a tempting oversimplification of something that is very difficult and time-consuming to master. When the technique is correctly done, the flexing of the ankles and adjustments of the legs produce a feeling of working very hard in that area, and the upper back feels also strongly supported with (at least initially) some effort, while the pelvic and abdominal region are completely relaxed. This not only facilitates both Buddhist and Taoist breathing techniques, but also produces, with no apparent additional effort, suspended head-top, very desired and also, since it cannot be produced by efforts from the neck up only, very rare.

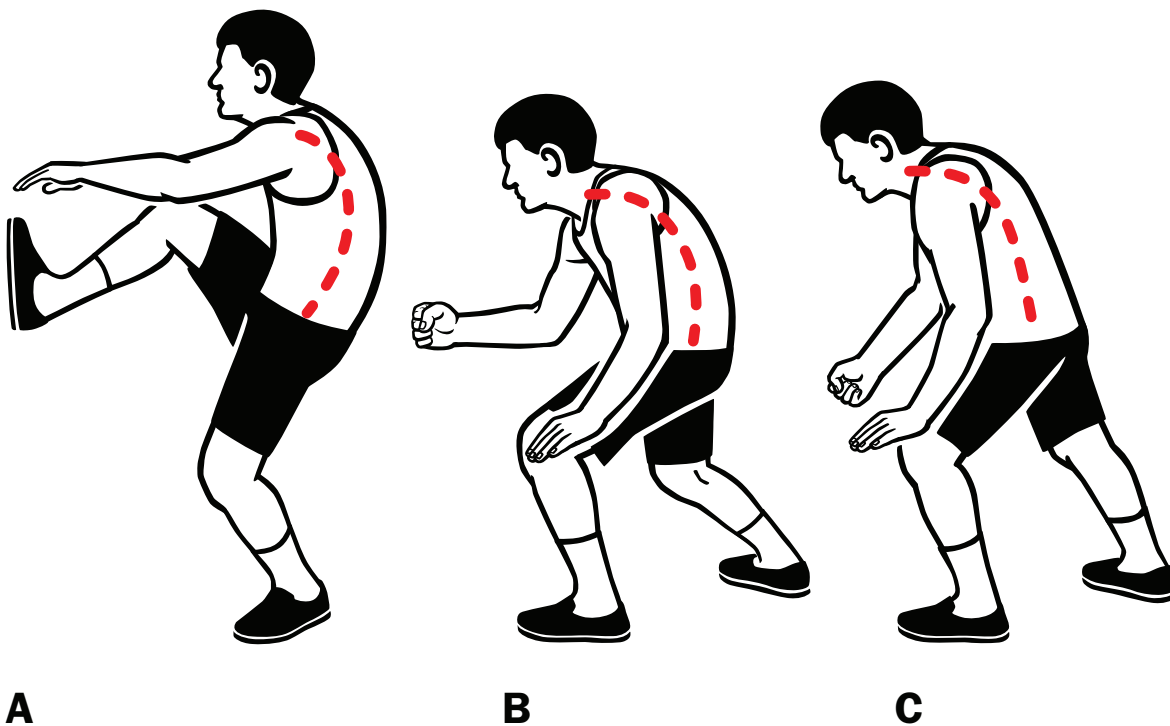
Perhaps it should be pointed out here that it is the somatic unification of the upper and lower body, and the subsequent ability to locate and stabilize a center of movement, that contribute to the fighting skill and uprooting power of the resultant technique, not the literal straightness of the back. But a spine that is anything less than the perfect curvature and correct length will result in many other deficiencies, regarding both martial art and health.

In the *Classic* that states that “force is released through the back; and the steps follow the bodily changes,” the entire mechanism through which those “bodily changes” are followed is critically dependent upon the upper and lower connection that we are here describing. This means that every single part of the Yang Style Taijiquan curriculum other than Solo Form and tuishou is effectively forbidden without it, every part that requires steps. To those who would say that they are not that interested in the “fighting” aspects of Taijiquan, but only in health and philosophy, understand that these advanced levels are not only a reward for correct practice on the more beginning levels, but also a test for just how correct that practice in fact was. And like all tests, it can bring about sudden enlightenment concerning subjects that would have otherwise never been understood.

Students should not be confused by the instances in the form in which the back is deliberately broken. These instances are mainly historical in nature, stemming from the more external roots of the Yang Style, and may even be excised by future exponents, but in my personal opinion they should remain because, while they may be prohibitive of the “higher levels” of practice, reasonable and interesting exchanges between players are not strictly limited to such levels. Also, these instances give the student a chance to deliberately deconstruct and then reconstruct the correct posture, sometimes a refreshing opportunity to reconnect with our own somatic awareness. When executing kicks that require the knee to rise higher than the level of the waist, if an upright posture is desired, “tucking under”: of the waist, exactly as I have warned against, is required, although it lasts only a fraction of a second and is immediately corrected. For this reason, the movement called Separate Foot (indicating a complete separation of substantial and insubstantial in the legs), though actually referencing a

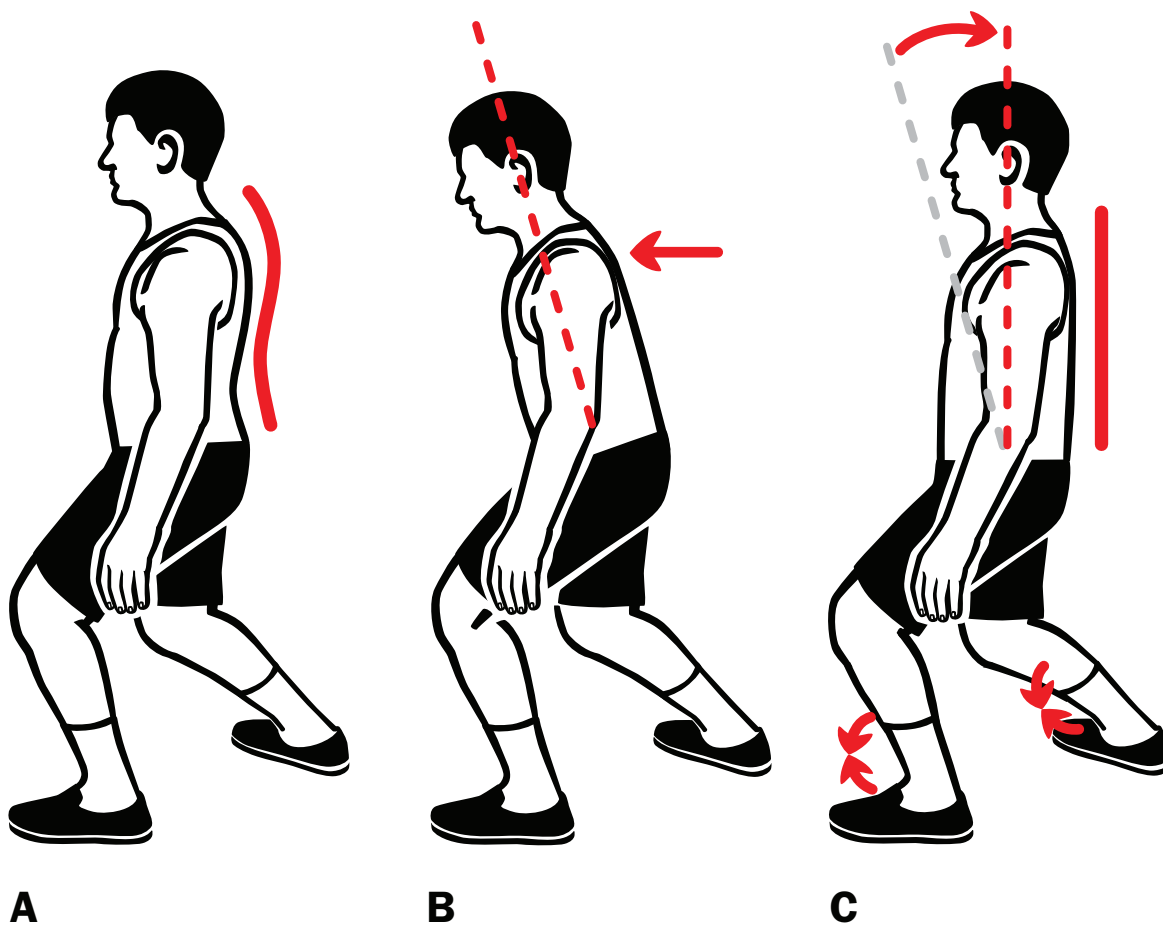
kick, is not called one. The movements of Lotus Kick and Punch the Groin require not only a “tucking under” of the pelvis, but an amplification of the normal curve of the upper back, as well, producing ideally a completely curved back that aligns the tailbone and the top of the spine in a ninety degree relationship. The movement called Bend The Bow and Shoot The Tiger was originally done with sideways bending of the spine, although just about everyone, including myself, now does it with a straight spine. Punch the Knee is very unique in requiring a bend of the upper back and not the lower (fig. #1.3).

The position in which the feet are parallel and the legs straightened, producing a very predictable pelvic tip and obvious angle of spinal alignment, is the easiest position in which to make this correction. Theoretically, one might do this at the beginning of the form, and then simply maintain it throughout, the equivalent of a perfect “meditation.” However, the student will invariably discover that at some point during the form his posture has lapsed, now in the midst of a more complicated position of both legs



**1.3.** Three “violations” of the plucked up back. **A.** The Double Lotus Kick bends the upper curve while “tucking under” with the pelvis, producing a smooth circle with the back. **B.** Punch the Groin utilizes the exact same curvature, but oriented in a different direction. **C.** In Punch the Knee there is no tucking under, but a complete release of the plucked up back, producing a curve only in the upper part of the spine.

and torso. When this happens, it is vitally important that the student makes whatever correction is necessary in exactly the same way that he or she did in the simpler situation. That is, to initially not try to directly manipulate the hips to align with the torso (tucking under), but to pluck up the back so as to align the torso perfectly with the present attitude of the hips. Just as, in the simpler situation, this process caused the torso to tilt forward at some angle, it now will align it in some presumably odd angle with respect to the floor, angled in more than one plane. When this alignment is achieved, now the legs are manipulated to bring the body to an upright position, which will always require a surprising amount of movement, effort, and, in particular, flexing of the ankles (fig. #1.4).



**1.4.** A repeat of the plucking up of the back (fig # 1.1) but now from an arrow stance position. **A.** One may find oneself in a position with the pelvis severely tilted on more than one plane. **B.** The back is aligned with the pelvis, regardless of the resultant angle attained. **C.** Keeping the waist relaxed, the legs are manipulated so as to return to the level pelvic girdle. This will always be accompanied by an unexpectedly large adjustment in the ankles.

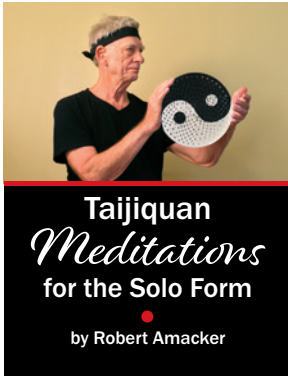
One should note that this method is in complete conformity with the classic that states that when there is a postural defect, one should “seek the solution in the waist and legs,” in the sense that the legs are used to properly align the hips to a horizontal attitude with respect to the floor.

Sometimes the proper somatic attitude is compared in the literature with “cotton covered steel.” It should be noted that this plucking up of the back in no way effects the looseness of the arms, and the strength of the inner core leaves the arms and legs (in particular the insubstantial leg) totally loose and flexible, totally receptive to the transmission of waves created by the substantial leg and “directed” (*Classics*) by the waist. This method unifies the torso into a single unit, destroying the break between the back and the hips so that if one shoulder moves to the side, that associated hip must sink with it, like an egg rolling, or a bottle floating in the water. “Sinking to one side is responsive; being double-weighted is stagnant” (*Classics*). I call this unified head and torso one’s personal *daruma*.

When unexpectedly attacked, the result of this hardening of the spine combined with a softening of the rest of the body produces exactly the opposite of what the normal person does under the influence of force. If someone is unexpectedly grabbed and subjected to someone else’s attempt at physical control, their arms and legs will become extremely rigid and tense, while the back seems as flexible as a snake. Taijiquan training produces the exact opposite result. The arms become completely soft and flexible, while the torso attains a consistent shape that is, among other things, also far less prone to injury. This is definitely a feeling of “cotton covered steel.”

People show a huge variation in their ability to master this technique. However, those who cannot do it right away should not give up, but just realize that the process will take no longer than that required to put all the other pieces together, and when it is finally accomplished it will function just as well as if it had been achieved for decades. Eventually it will become totally unconscious, persisting without any deliberate attention on our part.

Nevertheless, I can tell you from years of teaching that when even the most advanced and experienced students embark upon a new level of the curriculum, one of the first flaws that may appear is a breakdown of spinal posture. This is among students who show no difficulty maintaining it properly at a lower speed and with less challenging movements. When I point this out they return to the solo form with renewed interest in locking this particular habit into the subconscious, which means turning the consciousness onto it full blast. This is done by slowly and carefully testing it when challenged by the requirements of the solo form.



# Taijiquan Meditations for the Solo Form

by Robert Amacker

What is the Taijiquan solo form? What is it that we are actually supposed to be practicing? Why is it done so slowly? It has been a long-standing conundrum that something “invisible” is going on, something “internal,” that, in spite of the fact that Taijiquan is a martial art, its solo form is something more than just a rehearsal of martial attacks and defenses. Its slow speed and seemingly easy, relaxed movements provide the opportunity for the careful examination and retraining of deep internal responses. Here, in elaborate detail, are some of the “meditations” that spell the difference between hopeful fantasy and concrete progress. With the same rigor that he applied to the basic protocols of Taijiquan two-person interactions (The Theoretical Basis of T'ai Chi Ch'uan), Robert Amacker now applies his fifty years of teaching experience to the solo exercise, and to the elucidation of thirteen important “meditations,” all critical to ultimate Taijiquan mastery, all meant to be eventually integrated into unconscious reflexive and creative response. If you're in the mood for concrete, detailed instruction on the “internal” aspects of Taijiquan solo practice, aspects that transcend any style or version of the form, this book is for you. Profusely illustrated by Olesya Amacker.

## Contents:

1. Plucking up the Back
2. The Fundamental Somatic Concept – Li and Stagnancy
3. Chansijing of the Arms
4. Chansijing of the Legs
5. Separation of Substantial and Insubstantial
6. Control of the Knees
7. Rooted Movement
8. Keeping the Feet Flat on the Floor
9. Empty Steps
10. Hand Posture
11. Taoist Breathing
12. Parameters of Size and Speed
13. Martial Meaning



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