

# **Martial Applications of the Eight Energies of Tai Chi**



**Article by Austin LaPointe**

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## Introduction

Tai Chi began as a form of self defense and a way to promote longevity through exercise beginning with the Chen family in China during the late 1500s.

Since then it has been adapted into many styles with different approaches to training, though the original philosophy of self defense and overall well-being continues.

While most modern styles of Tai Chi can trace their origins back to one of the original five styles (Chen, Yang, Hao, Wu, Sun), 20th century practitioners tend to focus on the health benefits of Tai Chi, often forgetting its self-defense uses.

Tai Chi allows us to use minimum energy to confront a violent world. The physical application of the fundamental energies of Tai Chi are designed for close contact efficiency. Often referred to as the eight gates, these fundamental energies are ward off, roll back, press, push, elbow, shoulder, split, and pluck.

These basic movements enable us to defend ourselves by only exerting the optimum amount of energy and instead utilizing the energy of our opponent.

All eight energies focus on close quarter combat.

It is also important to note that the first four energies work in straight lines while the last four work at angles.



## Peng: Ward-off

Ward-off, traditionally referred to as Peng, can be thought of as a circular sweeping motion with one arm.



When it becomes necessary to distance yourself from your opponent, possibly to collect yourself and decide on your next move, use peng to divert your opponents forward movement to the side thus unbalancing him.

In this way, you take advantage of their energy and use it for yourself.

As your opponent comes forward on the offensive, reach your lead arm across diagonally putting the back of your hand and forearm on their shoulder, upper arm, or upper rib cage.

Step away from them as you guide their momentum in a different direction. You can continue leading them further in one direction or, if you chose, into the ground with a simple leg sweep.

*Peng Ward off. By staying to the outside of the attacker and closing the off, we present little opportunity for them to attack.*

## Liu: Roll-back

Roll-back, or Liu, is also defensive and serves to set your opponent up for your next move.

Again, the opponent is coming forward.

Rather than divert their energy and change their direction, this time you bring them towards you.

As they come in, quickly take hold of their lead arm and back away as you bring it towards you while only applying minimum energy. This forces them off balance and puts you, who are already in control of their arm, in a position to take the offence.

When someone forces in, you yield and pull them in and down as you step back.

Example: Someone attacks with a rush and you roll them through.



## Ji: Press

Press, also known as Ji, can be offensive as well as defensive.

Defensively, it is done by abruptly pressing on your opponent (anywhere) with the back of your wrist, supported by defensively the edge of your other hand.

This jars them from their intended direction and knocks them off balance, putting you in position to take the offence.

Offensively, this energy can be used as a strike. Ideally, one would make contact with the chest or mid-section, knocking the wind out of them. Since you are striking with your wrist, this isn't suitable for contact with harder body parts such as shoulders unless used solely to press rather than strike the opponent.

The Energy can be applied as advancing:

When at close range put the edge of one hand behind the wrist of the other, and shove with your legs.

Example: Close range.  
Send them sailing.





## Ahn: Push

Push, or Ahn, is different from Ji in that rather than striking or trying to knock the person off balance, you are trying to redirect them.



Typically, when your opponent is coming toward you, you put both hands on their chest and bring them to a stop.

At this point, the opponent usually backs up and you apply your own force and direct them backwards, in whichever direction you please.

This energy is often compared to the waves of an ocean. The water comes in and goes out, so too does your opponent as he shifts from entering to exiting.

The Energy can be applied as neutralizing:

*An Push: actually, a downward pushing.*

Example: Simply use both hands to collapse someone's energy as you shove them down and away.

The last four energies are usually performed at angles....

## Jou: Elbow Strike

Jou is an elbow strike.

It's use in Tai Chi is different from a typical elbow strike. Jou is a good followup to Peng.

When you have diverted your opponent's energy in another direction, move in the opposite direction with the same arm you used to guide them to perform Jou. Because they are already moving in the direction of your arm. Less energy is required to perform a more powerful strike.

Jou can also be used in counter to Liu.

As you move towards your opponent while he pulls you in, rotate and strike with the arm he is holding.

Because he is pulling you toward him, less force will be required to strike since your arm is already being pulled in that direction.

The reason Jou forms angles is because in order to strike, you must rotate your body, putting you at an angle to your opponent.

The Energies can be applied in combination: Jou Elbow, in combined with Lieh (split).



An attempted grab is deflected, and balanced by Lieh with an opposite direction elbow strike.

## Kou: Shoulder Strike

Kou is a shoulder strike. Like Jou, the body must rotate to put your shoulder against your opponent. You need minimal energy because one can easily put the weight of their entire body into the strike.

Also, like Jou, this is a good counter to Liu. As you are pulled in, turn your body to strike with your shoulder.

In the same respect, liu is often followed by kou as your opponent will be thinking the same thing. The Energy can be applied as meeting force with force:

Kao Shoulder: in anticipating Ahn (push) the defender presents with the lead shoulder and stops the attack.



## Lieh: Split

Split, or lieh, is used to break the hold, strike, or press of your opponent. It is a great counter to ahn.

When your opponent pushes you to change your momentum quickly bring both hands up to split theirs. This can be done either by coming up over the outside of their hands and reaching in or directly up through the middle.

Generally the middle is faster and allows you to react faster as your hands will already be directly in front of you when you are done.



When performing lieh, it is entirely possible to split their arms before they make contact with you. In this way you can break their movement as well as knock them off balance, as they were expecting to meet resistance.

Lieh (split) can counter An (push) by bringing the hands up and and to the inside and splitting outward.

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## Tsai: Pluck

Pluck, or tsai, is a fast jerking motion of the hand. It can be used, much like lieh, to change the course of your opponents hands as well as change the direction of their overall momentum.

Tsai is often used in a downward motion. Because of this, it is also referred to as pull-down.



If your opponent is using peng, ji, or ahn, it is a simple matter to quickly grab one of their hands or arms, then quickly jerk them downwards. Usually their entire upper body will follow allowing you to shift your position from defensive to offensive.

Tsai - Plucking - A fast jerking movement that doesn't give your opponent time to adjust, just as a tree branch can't bend in time when a monkey plucks a piece of fruit.

*The energy can be applied as a set up.*

Possibly more than any of the other energies, this energy teaches explosiveness.

Example: Catching an opponent's wrist and snapping it down fast to set up a sweep.

In this way, a ward off, roll back, press, push, elbow, shoulder, split, or pluck, can be used in self defense as well as offence while using the minimum and most efficient amount of energy possible. They are designed for close contact efficiency and are the fundamental movements and techniques of Tai Chi.

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