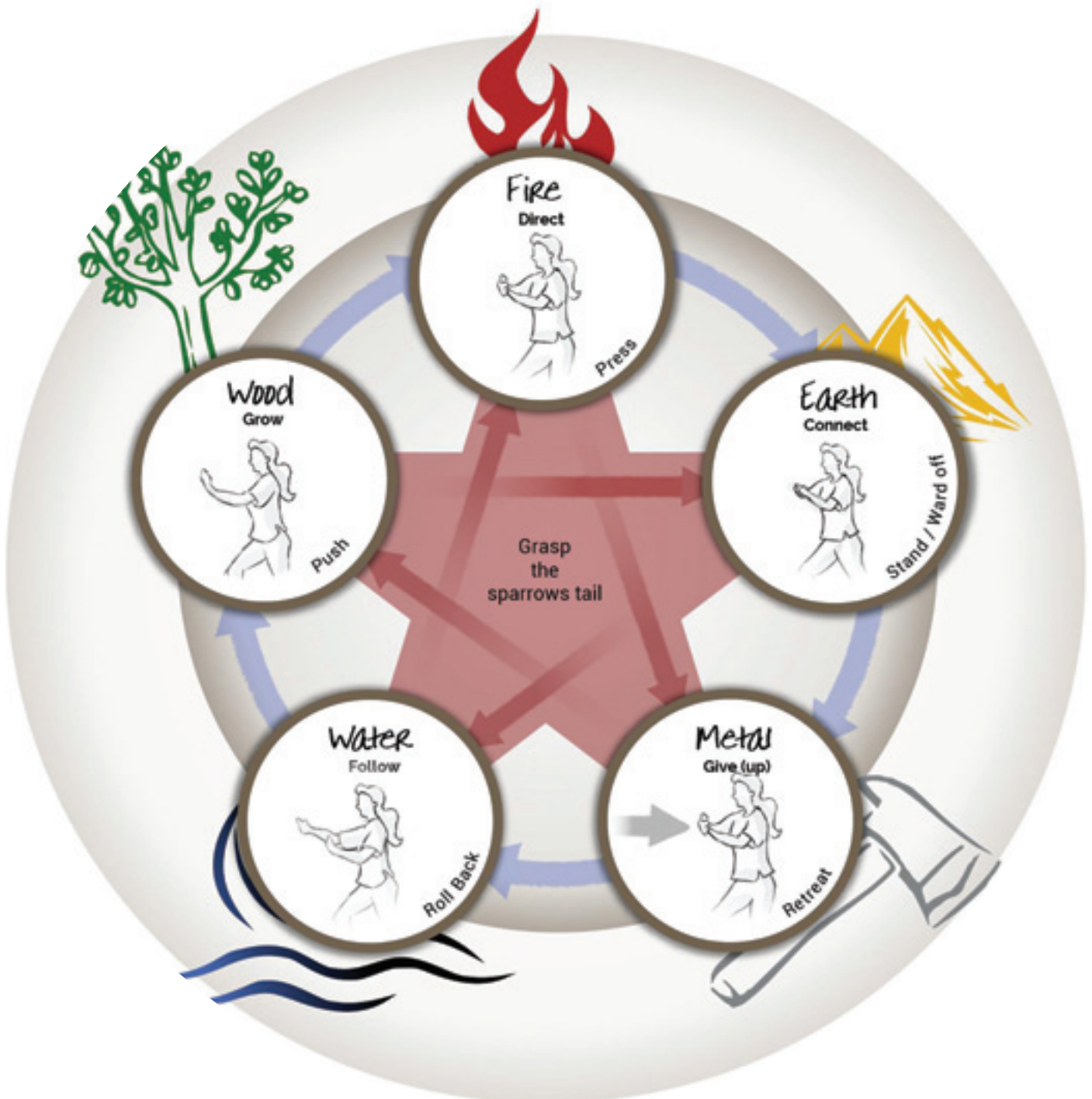


Five elements in the chair

Pim van den Broek



At the online Caledonia Festival in 2020 I taught some exercises with a chair.

These patterns were great exercises for myself when the lockdown in the Netherlands was on and partners weren't very much available; the girlfriend was at work and the cat wasn't up for it. In this article I'd like to share some of these exercises and I hope it will give you some inspiration in the practice of your form

The article is in three parts. First I'd like to explain why training with inanimate objects is a way of getting very clear answers about your tai chi and how you are progressing. The second part is where I give some exercises, related to some parts of grasp the sparrow's tail. In the third part of the article I'd like to get into why this is a very important part of the tai chi sequence, at least for me.

Finding a good partner.

Kai Kherliang once told me: "The floor is always there, make it your best friend," and I took that advice to heart. An object is a very honest partner when you want to train.

People can give very good or very bad feedback. Whether they do not want to hurt your feelings or they do not want to lose, all kinds of dynamics can get in the way of clear communication. Also, your inner voice can choose not to listen to the advice given because you think you know better.

This will not work with an inanimate object. It just gives a very clear message whether you are doing it right or wrong. You want to move it and it doesn't go, then it's not the chair's fault for giving you wrong information, simple as that. Be humble and listen to your chair, be humble and listen to your partner.

Finding good and honest information.

Let's start with a very simple exercise. If you sit on a chair, take a minute to close your eyes and feel the boundaries of your body. Feel where the end of you and the beginning of the world is. Sometimes the ending of you and the beginning of the rest of the universe is very clear and in other places it is more difficult to sense.

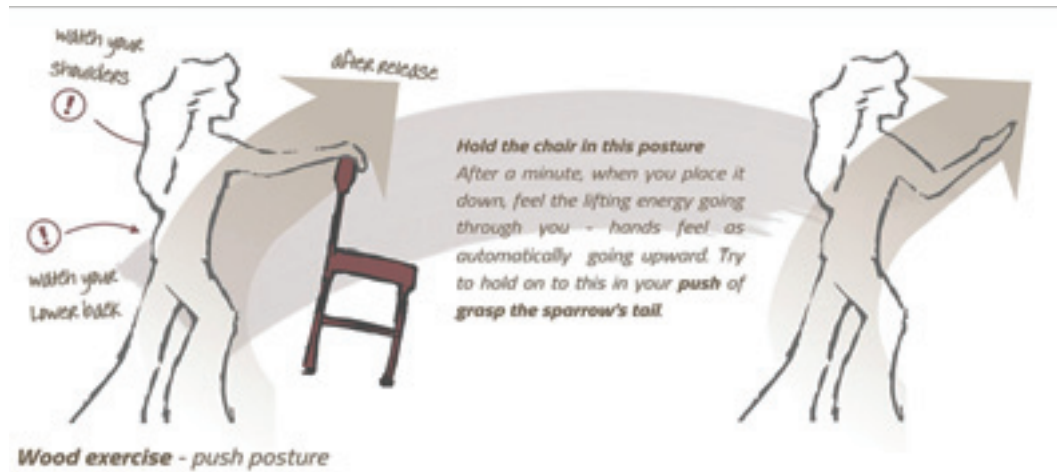
You will find that wherever you are touching something, like the ground or the chair, awareness of where you stop and where the surface of the object and the rest of the world begins, is very clearly outlined. The areas that do not touch anything are more vague, like, for instance the end of your head.

However good you (think you) are, the definition of your body always has a blurry edge where it is not touching something, compared with the places where your body is in contact with something. Imagine being in a completely dark room. Where do you end and where does the room begin? You know very well where your boundaries are if you hit the wall. Contact with objects defines the outline of your body.

The same can be said about the mind. Voicing your opinions to other people in conversations defines the boundaries of your thinking. In daily life as in tai chi, you might come across teachers who think the world of themselves but never go to other teachers' workshops. There is no contact, no clear definition of their boundaries or their limitations, so the mind (and ego) can expand freely. When you make the choice to connect and go to a workshop of somebody else, whether you completely agree or disagree with what is being said, it actually does not

matter. If you totally agree, fine; you get reassurance of the road you have taken and you might still learn a thing or two. If you totally disagree, also fine; it gives you a very good idea of who you are, like hitting the wall in the pitch black room. If it stirs up something, you'll get an idea of your boundaries and you might learn a thing or two about yourself. In any outcome, you learn.

The clearer the message the better the information about yourself. Train with inanimate objects and you get a very clear message. That's where the chair comes in. In the next part of this article I'd like to give you some ideas about playing with the chair (take a light one!) as a partner. Let's do a couple of exercises with five element energies.



Wood exercise - push posture

Wood-expansion.

I always translate wood energy as an outburst where you are moved as a result of the energy expanding in all directions. Imagine sitting under a tree against the trunk and the tree grows very fast. The trunk gets wider and moves you sideways. Your moving really is a side-effect of the enlarging energy. You are not the endpoint of the energy, you are related to it.

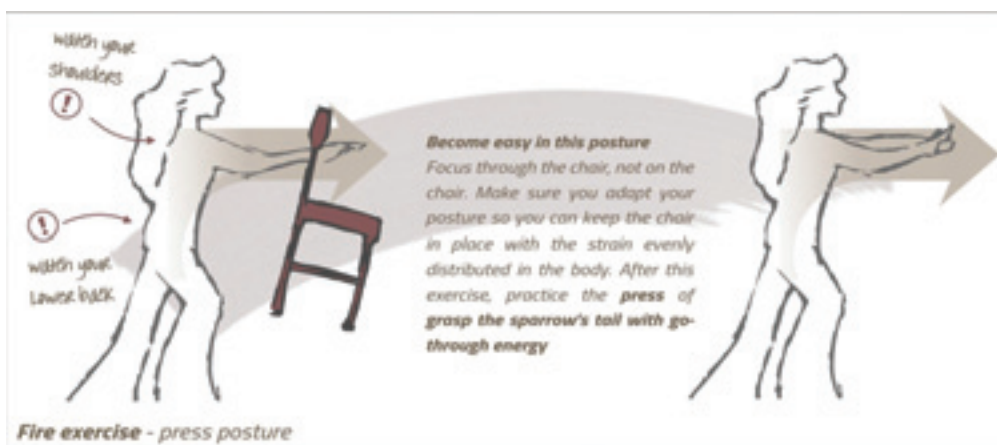
To feel this enlarging energy, stand upright behind a chair. Take the backrest of the chair and lift it for a minute or so from the ground. Be very aware of your posture while you do this, especially your upper body, keep it straight and don't strain your back. After a minute, once you place the chair back on the ground, your hands are probably rising upwards by themselves as a result of the exercise. Feel how this is an energy that expands and moves through you. You are not the endpoint but a means of this energy.

Now try to do the push from the grasp the sparrow's tail set and try to do it with this same going-through energy. Try to feel that the expanding is going through you.

Fire-focus

This second energy has more of a quality of determination in it, a quality of focus: locked on target and nothing will stand in its way. Let's see if we can translate this energy into an exercise. Take the chair and put the backrest on top of your hands, just where the wrist ends. Lift the chair (be aware of your posture again) and have the feeling as if you are now focusing your energy forward. The chair is hanging but it is not standing in the way of where your focus is going. Now the energy is not being disrupted by the hanging of the chair on your arms. If you know the unbendable arm exercise, this one is very closely related. See if you can keep this posture for a minute.

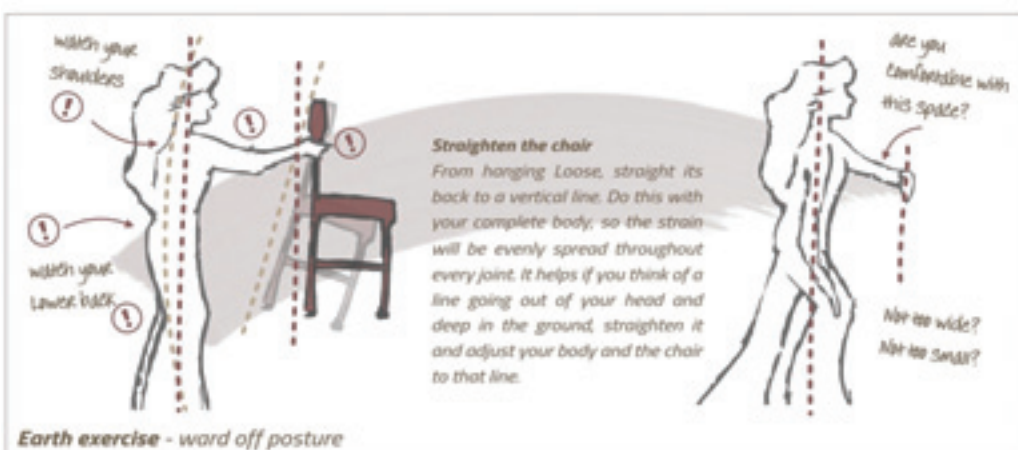
Now try to have this same energy and project it in the



press from the grasp the sparrow's tail set.

Earth-balance

As you may be aware earth in five elements is not just the



ground. It is more an inner quality that does not need expanding any more to voice itself. It doesn't have to prove itself, it just is. True strength lies not in expansion, true strength lies in knowing itself. You are much more focused on filling your space and the awareness of your boundaries. Downward and upward. The quality of this exercise lies in finding your inner line and seeing if it is possible to have it reflected in the line of the chair.

Try lifting the chair and holding the chair with both hands at its upper part. Try now to hold it straight vertical. If you just do this, the strain will be on you wrists, elbows and shoulders. Try now to connect the line of the chair with your body as a whole. It means connecting the chair's legs to your feet, the chair's backrest top to your top and see if you can get the chair vertical without straining only one part of your body. Try to get the strain even throughout the whole of your body, elbows, wrist, back knees, everywhere. The vertical line that goes through the chair is connected to the vertical line that goes through you. Not easy. Relax your shoulders, keep this posture for a while to get a good grasp on it.

Now try to have this same line in the posture of ward off, again in grasp the sparrow's tail. As you stand in it, be very aware of your boundaries and the inner line. Is your outward hand related to that line?

Metal-retract

If you think of the seasons, metal is the autumn, when the leaves start to fall. Nature is getting rid of non-essential stuff and puts its energy in preserving for the next season, the next circle. It is retracting, retreating but without losing the essentials. Let's see if we can translate this into an exercise.

Stand behind the chair in a bow stance. Let your hands rest on the backrest of the chair. Move gently backwards so the chair will pivot on its back legs and start falling

backwards. Move it as softly as possible, without any strength.

You think you have it? Go even softer. Gravity hanging your arms down should be enough energy. This shouldn't be too hard to grasp and try it a couple of times. The next exercise is to become so soft, that you can take the chair in

your backwards move with you without it sloping backwards. That means to move it keeping all four legs on the floor.

In order to achieve this, become very soft on the contact points – your hands and your feet. Make the movement so soft that you invite the chair to start moving. The focus in this exercise is on the softness of connection.

To relate this exercise in a posture of grasp the sparrow's tail, you could almost place it

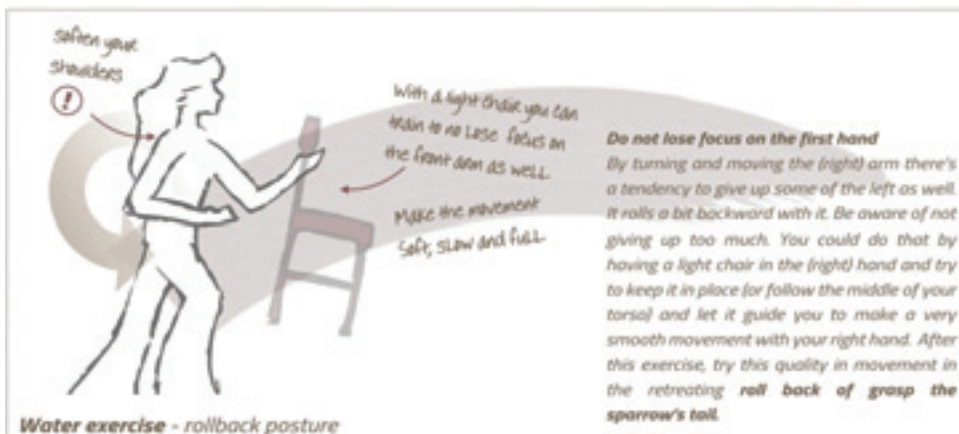
in between the press and the push. There is a retreating movement after the press where it is very important not to give up too much, otherwise you will find yourself in a difficult position to continue with the push. Give up but do not give away the essential.

Water-regenerate flow

Okay, in a very basic way we had wood, which has a dynamic structure quality; fire, which has a very focused structure quality, but only at the start of the movement (the beginning of the explosion); earth, which is about maintaining its balance, its structure; and metal, which is about giving up the non essential, but keeping for instance its basics; part of it is of course structure.

Now on the other side of the five element spectrum in





Water exercise - rollback posture

between fire and earth, we have water. We saw that fire and earth make use of structure. In water you could say it is a bit different. Water is formless and it gives way, qualities that do not require structure. If you follow your opponent up until the part that you become part of her or his movements, your own structure might get in the way of getting synergy with your opponent. So in this element we use very little structure but volume instead. You follow like water, but without giving up. Think of a balloon filled with water. If I press the upper part together, the lower part becomes bigger. It doesn't lose its volume. Now in a movement I can follow my opponent and give up some of my parts, as long as I do not lose my volume. I go backwards because of a push, but I make sure that what I lose above the waistline fills up under it. Your front knee might go a bit forward for instance.

If the essence is formless and it reacts mainly on movements of the opponent, then training with a static object is very difficult. This is why I do not know of a very good exercise with a chair. The essence of water is reacting on change, and that is not what you are going to get from it. Think of the roll back movement in grasp the sparrow's tail. The flow and connection is very important. One of the things of this posture is that the front arm lots of times loses awareness because of the rounding movement of the other arm. Try to work on not losing volume there. You could actually use a light chair to hang on your wrist, but this will be more of a reminder. See if you can do the movement with that extra weight in a gentle way, without giving up too much. And what you give up in your upper body, you counteract with your lower body so volume serves as a substitute for structure.

Completeness in grasp the sparrow's tail.

I tried to talk about five energies, in a very simple and easy-to-grasp way. If you look at the picture you can see that we did the exercises in the growing cycle, wood-fire-earth-metal-water.

Now look at the controlling cycle, the one in red. If you start with earth – it controls water. Water controls fire. Fire controls metal. Metal controls wood. Wood controls earth again. Look at the postures that we put in those positions. earth-ward off, water-roll back, fire-press, metal-retreat, wood-push. The controlling cycle of all five elements is very much represented in grasp the sparrow's tail.

I find it the most important set of postures in the form and keep on working at them the most in my practice. It has all the different qualities we have been working with. With these simple exercises you have a set of very versatile intentions you can work with throughout your form. See if

you can try to do it in your form with the information that your chair has given you in the exercises we did.

It is very important to point out that this goes with this combination of postures. You will find a lot of explanations with lots of different postures on the internet or in books, five elements with or without eight trigrams combined. Be aware that if I change one posture, the relationship to all the others changes.

Look at it this way, a lit candle is

yang compared to complete darkness. Compared to a wildfire, the same candle is yin and the wildfire is yang. The meaning of one element or posture is only valid in a certain context and in five element thinking, always evolving and subject to change. So do not say roll-back is water, but in this set of postures, roll-back is the posture with the most kind of water quality.



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Wrapping up

I tried to write an article about material that is actually best explained in a workshop. There is a link (www.fb.watch/iyRszF397J/) to the workshop that was given online in 2020 here. You can follow it for more detailed instructions.

The exercises are fairly simple, but that doesn't necessarily mean easy. You can make it as complex as you want. Earth energy easy? Try connecting with a heavy chair, and experience a complete other level.

The essence of this article is how you can interact with an inanimate object to get a grasp of these qualities that are part of a bigger flow: the five elements, and giving you a way to use them in postures in your form. As I said before: if you learned something from it, very good. If you totally disagree with this way of thinking, equally good. It gives you information on where you stand. You (or I) have touched an edge there...

Have fun with it! 🍵