

The Foundation of Taijiquan

By Ma Hong

Translated by Tu-Ky Lam

The foundation work of Taijiquan is in the Taiji form itself. In other words, only through practicing the Taiji form can you gain the full benefits of Taijiquan, be it for health, for self-defence or for art-appreciation. The more you practice the form, the better foundation you will have.

Chen Pin-san, a great master of the 16th generation of the Chen family, once said, "Practice ten thousand reps, and you will come to understand Taijiquan." Grand master Chen Fa-ke practiced 30 reps a day throughout most of his life. Wu style Taijiquan founder Wu Jian-quan asked his students to try to do ten thousands reps in three years. My Teacher, Master Chen Zhao-kui (son of Chen Fa-ke) said, "The practice of the form is the most important foundation work because the form is the end result of the accumulative fighting experience. Most martial arts in their early stage are only single postures. These postures grow in numbers, and they become a set of martial art form. Practicing the form will enable you to defend yourself in a fight." He also said, "The form is the foundation of push-hands; push-hands is a device for testing the correctness of the form; and push-hands is a bridge between the form and free fighting. Doing push-hands without practicing the form can gain some skill in self-defence, but without the foundation work you cannot keep on improving, and raise your skill to a higher level."

Why did the grand masters in the past put so much emphasis on practicing the form? Because it is only through practicing the form can you get the benefit of good health, self-defence, and enjoyment of a great martial art. If you practice Taijiquan for health, you still have to practice the form to activate the circulation of your internal energy. From the viewpoint of martial art, although push-hands is an indispensable part of Taiji training, yet in the Taiji form there are a lot of postures which are very useful in free fighting. Kicking, striking with elbows, etc. are not allowed in push-hands competition. In free fighting, some techniques are forbidden as well. Yet all of these are contained in the Taiji form. You can learn and develop the fighting skill from practicing the form. For (martial) art appreciation, you will have to practice the form, without which people cannot appreciate the gracefulness, beauty, etc. of Taijiquan. In short, we can say without the form there is no Taijiquan.

Six characteristics of Taijiquan

To be a good Taiji practitioner, your Taiji form should show the following characteristics: correct postures, flowing internal energy, clear martial arts application, strong flexibility, elegant appearance, and consistency with Taiji theory.

1. Correct form

Like learning calligraphy or painting, when learning Taijiquan, there is a period when you have to copy your teacher's movements. Your movements will have to be correct. This period is crucial to your future development. The instruction of your teacher is also important as the saying goes, "Like teacher, like students." Therefore, whether you are teaching or learning, you must not take it (this period) lightly. The correct Taiji form should meet the following requirements.

Keep the body upright. You should also bear these points in mind: when you bend your knees, they should not go past your toes. Your crotch should be round and loose. Relax (draw in) your chest and sink your waist. Suspend your head-top, and loosen your shoulders and drop your elbows. Your

energy should sink as well. This requirement is the most important of all.

Pay attention to the starting, middle and finishing points of each move so that you can do them correctly.

Make sure you are clear of “chan si jing”: whether it is “shun chan” (turn your palms out) or “ni chan” (turn your palms in).

Pay attention to your steps and stances, including the “shun chan” and “ni chan” of your legs.

As for the opening and closing of your chest and waist, you should know how much to turn and which direction to turn.

When shifting weight, make sure your crotch moves in a concave curve (like the bottom of a wok), and know where your weight is. You should also be clear how you move your hips in accordance with the weight shift.

Know where you should look.

Breathe properly with the movement.

If you keep the above points in mind and practice in accordance with these rules, you should be able to improve quickly. Otherwise you will be struggling all the way.

2. Total internal force

If you practice the form correctly, your “nei jing” or internal force will gradually develop. What is “nei jing” then? “Nei jing” or internal force is the total strength of the body, the energy and the mind. It is very similar to the ordinary force or strength. The difference is in that “nei jing” is more flexible. It has the following characteristics.

It is the complete force of the whole body, which is achieved through the proper co-ordination of the body, arms and legs. Our whole body should be relaxed, our toes cling to the ground, or we can stamp the floor and make use of the force which bounces back from the feet and goes all the way to the body.

This force is generated by the internal rotation of “dantian” (lower abdomen). Whenever you move, your movements should be originated from “dantian”. In other words, they should be controlled by your waist. “If your waist does not move, do not move” or “if the inside (dantian) does not move, the outside should not move”. The Taiji classics say, “The most important thing is that everything should be conducted (including deflecting and counter-attacking) from the chest and the waist”, which is actually carried out from “dantian”. The internal rotation of “dan tian” can have very great benefit to health.

It requires the close co-ordination of breathing with the movement. For more detail, see my other article on this topic.

It is a well-balanced force consisting of both hard and soft. Wang Zong-yue (Tsong-Yueh), in his “Taijiquan Lun” said, “Yin and Yang mutually aid and change each other. Then you can say you understand chin (internal strength).” The Taiji form consists of the hard and the soft, opening and closing, substantial and insubstantial, which are intermixed with each other. In push-hands, there

is the mixture of deflecting and attacking at the same time. All this shows how Yin and Yang are at work in Taijiquan.

It is a spiral force produced by “shun chan” (turn the palm out) and “ni chan” (turn the palm in). “Chan si jing” or silk reeling force is produced not just through turning the hands or arms, but rather by turning the whole body: arms, legs and waist. That is why you can see a practitioner, when he practices Taijiquan, moves spirally up and down. “Chan si jing” not only helps your energy circulate fluently through the energy path in your body but also sends out a strong force. It is the essence of Taijiquan. The fact that a Taijiquan practitioner is able to stick and follow, deflect and hit back at the same time depends largely on “Chan si jing” or spiral force. The reason why practicing Taijiquan can activate the flowing of your energy and regulate the function of your internal organs is also due to this force.

It is an overlapping force. Your internal force moves to the left first if it wants to go the right; and in the same manner, it will go up first if it wants to come down. (In other words it moves from opposite direction first, and the movements of the chest and waist, such as their opening and closing, work in the same manner, too.)

It is a well-balanced force, which requires the practitioner to sink his right waist and leg if his power charge is to the left, and vice versa. His waist should move back if he discharges power to the front.

It is a force which moves from one section (or joint) of the body to another, not much different from the movement of a worm.

It is a well-co-operated 3-section force: top, middle and bottom. (Translator notes: the three sections can refer to the whole body: upper part, middle part and bottom part. They can also refer to your limbs such as your arms: shoulder, elbow and palm. When one part of the body is attack the other two parts will have to give their support. For example, if you grab my hand I would strike you with my elbow and even with my shoulder if close enough. When practicing the solo form, you should show that your internal power comes through the shoulder, elbow and then hand.)

It is a force that gives you equilibrium by shifting your body weight.

It is a force produced from the waist that moves down first and then upward. (One of the characteristics of “chan si jing”).

It is a springy force which is flexible and explosive.

The above characteristics of internal force are acquired through the correct and diligent practice of Taijiquan.

3. Clear martial arts application

Taijiquan is a martial art, no more and no less. As such its martial arts application is its soul or main concern. The Taiji classics say, “practicing the form is practicing fighting.” Therefore, martial arts application is the most important element of Taijiquan. While practicing the Taiji form, you should:

Know the position of yourself and that of your opponent. Make sure that you know when and where he wants to attack.

Try to understand the martial arts application of each move: whether it is used to neutralize or to

attack, and whether it is ward-off, roll-back, press or push, etc. This will enable you to practice with a sense of purpose, thus clearly showing you are doing a martial art form, not a dance or a fitness exercise.

4. Flexible strength

Whether you practice Taijiquan for health, for self-defence, or for art's sake, you should show great strength. The saying "use mind and not force" is not complete. Emphasizing the use of the mind is right but not to use force is incorrect, as using mind can produce force. Your Taiji form should show such qualities as strength, speed, resilience, and liveliness. Otherwise it is not a sport. Your Taiji strength should have these characteristics: Mixture of Yin and Yang, force of the whole body, force produce by "shun chan" and "ni chan", and springy force, of which the spiral force, springy force and the force produced by the mind and "dan tian" are of special value. How can you train to increase this flexible strength? I recognize you should work hard on the following:

Increase the time of your practice. Practice at least ten reps a day so that you can do ten thousand reps in three years.

Keep your postures low to increase your durability and strength. My teacher Chen Zhao-kui called the low postures training the moving stance training. It can increase the flexibility and durability of the joints in your shoulders, hips, knees and ankles, making the co-ordination of all the joints in the whole body possible.

Practice single movements many times. Do them with "fa-jing" meaning power discharge. You may require your teacher's help with this practice, which mainly suit young and energetic people.

You should do push-hands to strengthen your agility and flexibility. Push-hands can help you sense your opponent's force so that you can follow and make use of it, or neutralize and counter act at the same time.

You should compliment your Taiji form with power training drills to increase your internal strength. For example, practice the long staff, Taiji ball, Taiji drum, etc. You can even strike at the punch bag, but you must punch with spiral movements and spring-like force.

Practice with all your mind. Many scientists and martial artists have proved that the human mind can produce force. When training, imagine you are fighting with an opponent. Use your mind to induce a force to strike at your opponent. Practice in this way, and your mind can produce a strong force. This is also the reason why Taiji practitioners emphasize using mind when practicing Taijiquan.

Practice with varied speed: slow and fast intermixed with each.

5. Elegant style

The traditional Chinese culture, be it calligraphy, painting, drama, music or martial arts, all places a lot of emphasis on style. Taijiquan is no exception. It requires Taiji practitioners to express the true spirit of Taijiquan through their own style in the same way as other artists do. So all Taiji practitioners should be able to show their own style in their Taiji form. To achieve this goal you need to:

Understand the philosophy of Yin and Yang, which permeates the traditional Chinese culture and is the foundation of all their arts.

Understand the fighting strategy of Taijiquan: be calm and face your enemy. If they do not attack you, there is no need to counter-attack. If they do try to offend, you must be sure of winning the battle. Always show you are calm and confident when you are practicing Taijiquan.

Give good training to your mind through the practice of the solo form. You should show that you are in the best state of mind and can cope with all situations when required. So your form should be so full of energy, which shows the spectators you are in great spirits. Practicing Taijiquan is not only a training of the body but also of the mind. Watching people practice Taijiquan is a great pleasure to the mind.

Show the rhythm of Taijiquan. The slow and fast, the soft and the hard, opening and closing, the twining of the whole body, etc. are the basic structure of Taijiquan. They work in harmony to show the gracefulness of Taijiquan, which at times look like flying dragon or snake, and at other times is like drifting clouds or running streams. The saying, “whole body is soft as boneless, but once the energy is released, any part of the body can be used as a hand to attack” is an excellent example of this rhythm.

6. Consistency to Taiji theory

You should learn the basic Taiji theory and use it as a guide to your practice so that each movement meets the requirement of the Taiji philosophy. You should have a good knowledge on these:

The relationship between Taiji theory and the traditional Chinese philosophy.

Traditional Chinese medicine, especially the part on the energy paths in the human body so that you can understand how your energy flows.

The relationship between Taijiquan and health.

Physic, which will help you better understand the internal power and martial arts application.

The Taiji classics. Study these carefully so that your form is correct and is consistent with the theory taught in the Taiji classics.

Experience tells us that those who understand the Taiji theory and can put it into practice learn Taijiquan much more quickly than those who do not. Taiji theory help people understand how Taijiquan works, and provide them with a way to learn more by themselves. Good Taiji teachers should teach Taiji theory and show how it is applied in the Taiji form and push-hands so that their students can continue to learn by themselves.

The process of Taijiquan training

This is, in essence, the process of constantly correcting and refining your Taiji form to lift it to a high level. It involves the following.

a) Instructor Breaks up the Form; and Students Copy or Learn Carefully.

My teacher, Master Chen Zhaokui, when taking private sessions, always asked his students, “Do you want to learn Taijiquan quickly or do you prefer to learn in greater details?” Indeed, learning Taijiquan can be faster or slower, and it can be sketchy or can go into details. If the instructor can describe and demonstrate the movements clearly right from the start, and students learn them carefully. Then it may take longer, say more than one year, to learn the whole form. But the overall

learning process is faster. Besides, when practicing the form, try to do it slowly. Except when doing “Fa jing” where you are required to move fast, practice your form slowly - slow but not broken nor lifeless. “Low Stance + slow movement” can produce quicker results. Chen Xin said, “When you have to be fast, you should be faster than your opponent; and when you need to be slow, you should also be slower than your opponent.” This explains why practicing the form slowly is important.

b) Instructor Keeps Correcting Students’ Form; and Students Train Diligently.

A good teacher will produce good students. Your teacher’s guidance and your fellow students’ support are indispensable. Your own effort is important, too. You must determine to improve. Every time you practice the form, try to discover what needs to be improved. Even the smallest correction or improvement counts. It certainly helps if you can have more understanding of your form or feel you have reached another level each time you train. In other words, you must train hard and train well and improve all the time.

The Taiji form should be the core of your daily training; and push-hands, single movements and power training drills are supplementary.

Practice the Taiji form every day, so that you can gain the full benefits of practicing: for health, for self-defence, and for art appreciation. The other parts of training can be done alternately.

Ways and time frame to attain the six characteristics.

All I have been talking about above is the foundation work of Taijiquan. Of the six characteristics, the first one (correct form) is the starting point and should be worked at first. Then you can train to achieve the others at your own pace. There is no need to follow the exact order as described above. But to be good at the Taiji form, you have to train really hard for three years, practicing from three to five hours every day. It also depends on your intelligence, your patience, and the guidance of your teacher. Once you have got the foundation laid down, it is all up to you whether you want to build a ten-story building, a twenty-story building, or a skyscraper.

© Copyright Tu-Ky Lam

All rights reserved Home Last modified

3 September 2003

© Copyright Tu-Ky Lam

Email: tukylam@yahoo.co.nz

Website: <http://www.geocities.com/tukylam/>