Frequently Asked Questions

What is Tai Ji Quan 太极 (極) 拳?

Tai Ji Quan is, at the forefront, a martial art. It is no ordinary martial arts. Tai Ji Quan is a valuable method for enhancing health by cultivating calmness and balance. It is an engaging leisure pursuit with tried and tested method of self-defense. [3]

What is Chen Style (Family) Tai Ji Quan?

Chen 陈 is a last name for a clan in China. Chen Family Tai Ji Quan is the original style from which all other styles have evolved from. Chen Style Tai Ji Quan is characterized by its soft and hard movements and is unique in its use of “coiling” or “twining”, also known as “silk reeling” (Chen Si Jin) to create enormous power. [1] Created in the late Ming dynasty (1600s) by the respected general, Chen Wang Ting, who combined Chinese medicine, the energy principles of qi, controlled breathing, and the theory of yin and yang with boxing methods developed by the famous general Qi Ji Guang. [2] It has been practiced successfully by generations of people in the simple village where it was created nearly four centuries ago. [3] It has a simple system of training that does not have an end.

What is Qi 氣?

Grandmaster Chen said qi can be thought of as the nerve conductions throughout the body. It is a feeling and that qi is weak by nature. The slightest deviation will cut off a qi flow. I like to extend that explanation to say qi is the feeling you get when your body posture supports the most efficient way for blood to flow through capillaries to reach the extremities. The correct posture also supports the nervous conductions pathways to maximize the sensations received when blood reaches various parts of the body.

What are the 4 P’s of Tai Ji Quan?

Grandmaster Chen Xiao Wang said “Taiji (quan) is not mysterious. It is only mysterious when someone does not how to explain it. Tai Ji Quan is a science.” I coined the 4 P’s of Tai Ji Quan to explain what Tai Ji Quan is all about from a scientific point of view.

The first ‘P’ is Physics. Physics is a science that deals with matter and energy and the way they act on each other. There are many ways for objects to interact, light, sounds, heat, atomic, and mechanics, to name a few. The physics in Tai Ji Quan is about mechanics. The structure of the limbs, the body as a moving unit.

Chen Style Taijiquan
The second ‘P’ is Physiology. A science that deals with the ways that living things function. The human body has solids and fluids. There are things you can see like blood, then there are things you can’t, like feelings. Everything in our body is connected to one another.

The third ‘P’ is Psychology, a science of the mind and behavior. Tai Ji Quan uses psychology in self-defense. Many proses in earlier writings of Tai Ji Quan alluded to that. For example, “to make our opponent go right, you first lead them to the left.” Or “Lead your enemy into emptiness.”

The forth ‘P’ is Philosophy, the study of ideas about knowledge, truth, nature, etc. Tai Ji Quan was originally created based on the theories of yin and yang. This philosophy can be extended to our daily lives and how we deal with people or business.

**What is the movement principle?**

Grandmaster Chen Xiao Wang said “You coordinate the rest of your body with the source, the dan tien. When the dan tien starts to move every part of the body move simultaneously, all connected to each other. You connect the muscles of the legs and the back to follow it. The body then pushes the hands, which express the force. It is a three-dimensional movement, utilizing the whole body. The dan tien, hip, knee and leg all synchronize setting off the spiraling motion throughout the body. The dan tien area by itself does not have much force. But when it is coordinated with the rest of the body, it can coordinate a lot of power. When you initiate movement from the dan tien area, the energy from the dan tien will communicate with the rest of the body. Then together, the energy becomes a strong force”. [3]

In short, using the dan tien as the source of the driving force, when one part of the body moves, every part moves, and each part is connected to the next. That is the movement principle of Tai Ji Quan.

**Where is the Dan Tien?**

Many articles have described Dan Tien as the “elixir field” or where the body stores its energy. It is said to be located 3 fingers’ breath below the navel and about 1/3 way in. Personally, it suffice to say that the Dan Tien is located in the lower abdominal region, below the navel and inside the body. It is your center of gravity. It is also where most of your solid organs are located and thus not surprising that it is where the center of gravity (CG) would be.

**What is the Standing Posture?**

Zhang Zhuang or standing posture can be considered the simplest tai ji quan form to learn but can be difficult to master. You will hold a specific posture with arms raised for a period of time. This period will get longer as you become more comfortable in the posture. The longer you can stand, the more you will develop awareness of and maintaining the most efficient and relaxed structure alignment needed to
hold the position. Zhang Zhuang can help you develop proper body posture, leg strength, and the upper body relaxation necessary to perform daily movements. Prolong standing sharpens your mental concentration, develops your experience of qi (internal energy), and stimulates the circulation of this energy. Zhang Zhuang is probably the most important part of Tai Ji Quan, because it builds the foundation for strength as well as focus. Sweating while holding the standing posture is normal.

**What is Silk Reeling Exercises (Chan Si Gong)?**

One of the uniqueness of Chen Style Tai Ji Quan is its use of Chan Si Jin or silk reeling force. Every posture, every action, and every technique is characterized by a spiral-like momentum that originates from the Dan Tien. Silk Reeling Exercises is a method to practice this movement principle. If attaining martial combat abilities is not your goal, silk reeling exercises can be your lifelong regimen towards better health.

Silk reeling are motor skills sequences taken from the traditional choreographed forms. The name derives from the metaphorical principle of a silk worm coiling silk inside its cocoon – spinning smoothly and continuously without jerking or changing direction sharply. Too fast, the silk thread breaks, too slow, it sticks to itself and becomes tangled. Hence, the silk reeling movements are continuous, cyclic patterns performed at constant speed with the "light touch" of coiling silk. This set of exercises emphasize ground connection, waist connection, knee alignment, kua sinking, opening and closing of joints, and dan tien rotation. These exercises will increase the mobility of your joints and relax the muscles and tendons.

**What is relax 松 (song)?**

Song is a Chinese character that is commonly interpreted as relax in English. Unfortunately there is no single word to interpret that single Chinese character. Relax is just the start of Song. Master Chen Bing said to be Song, you first go limb. And then you put open your fingers and let the feeling of expansion reach the finger tips. Physiologically, Song means the muscles are neither contracted nor expanded. The muscles are in an equilibrium state throughout the body. In the long form of the Chinese character, you can see that it extends this feeling to the hair.

**What is qi sinking (气下沉)?**

The word sinking brings forth a picture of something physically going down. Sinking in Tai Ji Quan does not have visible sinking or downward movements. It is a state of relaxing the waist so that the feeling of relaxation sinks and can be felt through the leg. There is sense of pushing without the visible physical downward movement.
What is the Dang and what is Yuan Dang?

You can think of the Dang as the region below the waist and above the knee. Yuan Dang means rounded Dang. Basically, keep the Dang round by pushing the quads slightly outwards with feet point forward. You know you are about right when the knee caps is on top of the feet and the groin area feels relax.

What are the 4 / 8 energies (jin)?

The word “energy” is one of those words that makes Tai Ji Quan “mysterious” The word energy is a translation of the Chinese character Jin. Jin (劲) means strength, spirit, or manner. It can also loosely mean intent, which better describe what jin is. A Chinese saying has it that where intent goes, jin follows.

The first 4 energies are also described as the primary energies or jin. They are Peng (棚), Lu (捋), Ji (挤), and An (按). The second 4 energies, also commonly known as secondary energies are Cai (采), Lei (捩), Zhou (肘), Kow (靠.)

What are the 13 movements?

The 13 movements consists of the 8 energies, 4 directions (attack, retreat, guard right and left 進, 退, 顾盼) and still (定).

What are the 4 S’s of Self Defense?

The 4 S’s is what I coined for those seeking to understand the requirements of an advantageous situation during a conflict.

The first ‘S’ is Stability. It does not matter how strong you are or are not, without stability, you will fall in a conflict. Stability comes from knowing where your center is and how to move so that the center is felt and never lost.

The second ‘S’ is Sensation. The ability to feel and not be felt is the ultimate goal – 5 Yin 5 Yang. Peng energy is inside creating a structure but the strength within cannot be felt by the attacker and to them, you feel soft as if you are not there but when you need it, the strength emerge to direct force onto the attacker.

The third ‘S’ is Speed. Grandmaster Chen Xiao Wang once said if two skillful practitioners are fighting, the one who wins is the one with speed. Speed relates to how fast you can change your position so that it becomes advantageous while maintaining Stability and Sensation.
The forth ‘S’ is Strength. Some people said if you issue strength, it is no longer Tai Ji Quan and that’s nonsense. Strength is needed just when you need it to complete the attack. The strength is delivered through a series of well-timed spiral movements through the body because of the movement principle of Tai Ji Quan. The saying of 4 taels move a thousand kati (四两拨千斤) refers to borrowing an attacker’s strength to counter attack.

To accomplish these S’s, your mind must be calm, with the inside wound tight and outside relax. [内紧外松 – Nei(4) jin(3) wai(4) song(1)]

**How do I learn Tai Ji Quan?**

While I provide instructions on how to perform the various movements, you need to take responsibility for yourself and your own learning. One hour a week may be enough to provide basic instructions but it is not enough to see progress. Your progress will depend on how much you continue to practice outside class.

Learning Tai Ji Quan is like learning how to write. In writing, we start with a dot when the pen meets the paper. That dot is the standing posture. You then draw alphabets or strokes, that’s silk reeling exercises. Once you know the alphabets, you make words out of them and those are the movements of a form. When you start to string the right words together, a poetry (the form) is formed. The more you draw alphabets, the better it looks in a poem.

Learning Tai Ji Quan is a lifelong activity. It starts with the turning of the little pinky and it never ends. Have patience. You will know when you “get it”. Create a daily routine and stick to it. Start small by standing for 5 minutes and then gradually increase the period of standing time. Listen to your body. If it hurts, stop, if it feels good, keep going. Be aware of natural ranges of motion and listen to the “inside” of your body – just try your best.

Finally – remember to have fun and make mistakes as that’s how we all learn!
About me ...

My name is Khiang Seow. “Khiang” is pronounced like “Key”-“Young”. “Seow” is pronounced like “Meow” but with the “S”.

My Tai Ji journey started in 1990 when an elderly gentleman from China taught me Yang Style Tai Ji Quan and Qi Gong to stay healthy. In 1995, I saw Chen Style Tai Ji Quan for the very first time. Little did I know that I will be practicing Chen style Tai Ji Quan for the rest of my life!

Through a series of fortunate introductions, I have studied Chen Style Tai Ji Quan with Grandmaster Chen Xiao Wang, Grandmaster Chen Xiao Xing, Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei. These gentlemen are direct descendants of the originator of Tai Ji Quan. I have also studied with their disciples, Master Ren Guang Yi, Master Chen Bing, Master Chen Zi Qiang and Master Chen Hui Xian. I consider all of them my teachers (老师 lao3 shi1) because it is through them that my understanding of Chen Style Tai Ji Quan has grown deeper with each interaction, advancing my understanding of Chen Style Tai Ji Quan. I continue to study with these great teachers whenever opportunities arise, which amounts to about 2 – 3 workshops a year between March and Nov. In 2010, I spent two weeks in Chen Jia Gou, Henan province, China – the village where Tai Ji Quan originated, practicing every day. It was humbling to be amidst villagers who started their training as early as 3 years-old, eating, sleeping and breathing Tai Ji Quan. Over the last two years, I have been fortunate to be a translator for some of my teachers’ workshops in the U.S.

While my repertoire include 9 sets of empty hand forms and 5 sets of weapons forms, I continue to be a student seeking to learn new sets when opportunity arises. Forms include Lao Jia Yi Lu, Lao Jia Er Lu, Xin Jia Yi Lu, Xin Jia Er Lu, 18 form, 19 form, 38 form, Silk Reeling Exercises, and push hands drills. Weapon include single sword (49 form), single sword (54 form), broad sword, double straight sword, and spear.

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