

# THE ROOT OF TAI CHI

## Internal Training for External Fighting

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Say tai chi chuan and internal in the same breath and people automatically think health. That is a good guess, however, it's not the complete story. Remember tai chi was and still is a martial art. Originally, the health aspect was a bonus to diligent tai chi practitioners---not the prime reason to study tai chi.

Ask any of tai chi chuan's respected older generation in Taiwan, Hong Kong or China and they'll tell you that tai chi isn't the real thing unless it is an internal (chi) development exercise. Then go one step further and ask those who studied with some of China's top martial artists, and they will tell you that chi is at its best as a fighting art when the form is practiced as an internal exercise.

Now, this doesn't mean you can practice your tai chi form looking like a piece of cooked spaghetti. Limp and loose isn't internal or chi power development. It isn't even true relaxation. There's plenty of hard work and serious study involved with chi development ---often including exercises that are not part of the form itself. You will also require a teacher who knows how to develop internal energy through the tai chi form and how to use those strengths in a fighting situation.

One such teacher

Chyu-kuan Chern is one of those teachers. Chern teaches tai chi in Chai Yi, a city in the southcentral part of Taiwan. Besides his two schools in Chia Yi, Chern also has a massive tai chi organization, with his students teaching classes in cities and villages throughout Taiwan---including a large class at the University of Taiwan. However, the size of chern's tai chi organization isn't where he draws his claim to fame. He is known in Taiwan as an instructor who develops impressive internal energy skills in his students, including tai chi push hands, which is tai chi's sparring practice. It further develops a stylist's fighting skills, giving him practice at redirecting and neutralizing an opponent's hard power. Push hands practice is the two-person training that allows tai chi students to practice their forms training on an opponent.

Push hands is also one of Taiwan's favorite martial art tournament competitions. It's so popular that the county's tai chi association holds an international push hands championship every two years, partially funded by Taiwan's government. In 1990 the overall team championship went to one of Taiwan's two championship teams. The United States team finished second, with the other Taiwan team in third place.

Chyu-Kuan Chern was the coach of the winning Taiwan team. He is so well-known in Taiwan for his fighting expertise that most of the push hands players on Taiwan's other team also trained with him before the tournament.

Chern learned tai chi from a student of Cheng Man-Ching, Cheng was a student of Yang Cheng-Fu, tai chi best known teacher. Chern uses Cheng Man-Ching's form--- known as Cheng style in Taiwan--- for the foundation and root of his internal training.

“The form is all you need for basic internal development--- if you do it correctly,” he explains. “The form also gives you much of what you need for successful push hands and self-defense training.”

Chern is also considered a tai chi healer in Taiwan. He has a reputation for taking students suffering from serious chronic illnesses and curing them with approximately six months of tai chi practice. He says they do it themselves with internal training from the tai chi form. Some of them have become international push hands champions.

“The form is the most important part of tai chi training,” he notes. “Some people spend too much time practicing push hands, forgetting that the form is the root of all tai chi training. Push hands practice is like comparing branches of a tree to its roots--- secondary. First you must have the internal training. Internal or chi development can only come from inside the body--- from the tan tien (the collector of chi, located approximately three fingers below the naval ) and the mind. Practicing the form correctly is how you develop the mind and body,” adds the internal teacher.

According to Chern, the real root in tai chi terminology is an internal concept. Most people associate the term root with stability coming from strong, solid footwork. Chern says the basis of the tai chi root comes from the mind, not the legs. It is a strong, relaxed mind that combines with a strong, healthy body to produce good tai chi and martial arts.

### Tai chi characteristics

The characteristics of good tai chi form practice start with relaxation. Chern prefers the Cheng Man-Ching form, because he feels it is the most relaxed. He believes most other tai chi forms are still a little tense for his kind of internal training. Remember, he uses only the form for internal development, while other types of tai chi use their forms in conjunction with standing meditation to achieve the same results.

Relaxation means that every joint in your body is completely at ease. To Chern, this means you should not have your hands above shoulder level--- in any tai chi posture. The wrists should be straight for true relaxation, not bent and breaking the energy flow. The waist and hips are loose and relaxed, allowing the tai chi stylist maximum flexibility in any direction. Chern demonstrates the results of relaxation and correct body alignment when he withstands a student's push--- while standing only on one leg.

## Discovering fa jing

The next level of training in Chern's school is where all the form principles are put to practical use with the development of fa jing or discharge power. This is the martial art part of tai chi training that puts everything learned in form practice together with sudden power. The result is a difficult combination to beat--- fighters who use no hard tense power, but have enough force to literally send their opponents flying.

Chern's students get part of their fa jing training by bouncing off a wall . That's right . Bouncing off a wall. Chern pushes each student against a solid wall at his school. Not only do the students escape without injury, they come away feeling better. Each time they hit the wall, internal organs are massaged and stimulated, allowing the students to produce a variety of different vibrating sounds. The type of sound indicates the level of each student's training. Although it sounds rough, the wall exercise isn't dangerous. Chern's students don't participate until they have developed a high degree of relaxed physical strength.

According to Chern, "Without exercise to build chi power is like having a car without air in its tires. The true way to develop chi is by making it fill your body like a ball of energy."

The ball-of-energy theory is exactly what keeps Chern's students from feeling any pain when bounced off the wall. Their bodies are a balanced combination of hard and soft energy, just like the ball of chi.

One step beyond the wall workouts are the way Chern's students handle getting punched in the stomach or abdomen. Nothing happens. Since they directed plenty of chi into their abdomens, they simply don't feel much. To the person throwing the punch, it's like hitting a sponge.

## Dispensing fa jing

Absorbing fa jing is one thing. Putting it out is another. Chern tai chi stylists describe it in various ways. Their tai chi form contains ample amounts of fa jing movements. However, Cheng Man-Ching's form does not. It is totally relaxed and slow. Fa jing power training must come from other sources. According to Chern, the form does, however, develop body connection, which is essential to moving the body as a unit rather than just the hands and arms doing all the work.

"Most tai chi practitioners understand the theory of fa jing," contends Chern. "However, in practice and competition, few can apply it. Fa jing requires relaxation, timing and distance training before it differs from an ordinary push."

He adds the position of your lower back is important when using fa jing power. All tai chi stylists can recite the tai chi rule of thumb that the root of power comes from the feet; power is generated in the legs; magnified by the waist and hips; and released through the

hands. What they may not realize is that it means nothing if the lower back is not straight and relaxed. If you cannot control the lower back, power is broken and stops at the lower back.

Chern's students set their lower back training from the tai chi form by learning to keep their back straight and head erect. The wall-bouncing exercise teaches them to relax, using the vibration sounds that they make as they hit the wall to strengthen their internal organs.

### Tai chi fighting stances

Chern is one of the best push hand teachers in Taiwan because his students use internal power along with tai chi tactics. Unlike many push hands players, Chern's students stand relatively erect when sparring. He says they should stand upright with a short stance, letting their chi and intention sink into their feet, making them more rooted. According to Chern, if your stance is too low, your body weight shifts backward until it is over your knee. This isn't good for your knee and makes it difficult to maneuver with much wrist and hip mobility--- a must for push hands sparring.

Stances that are too wide and low cause the lower back to sway outward, breaking the connection of power coming up into the hands. Higher stances place the body weight over the sole of the feet, where it should be located for better stability and quicker footwork.

Chern differs from traditional tai chi thinking that mandates most stances should have 70 percent of the body weight on the front foot and 30 percent behind. He believes, however, it should be 100 percent on one foot and nothing on the other. This can be done only with a short stance and upright body position.

Chern explains that 70-30-weighted stances require two weight shifts for each movement. In other words, you must first shift your weight forward onto the front leg, before picking up the back--- a two-part movement. With two movements, the footwork becomes broken and you risk losing the trademark tai chi flow. However, 100-0-weighted footwork requires only one movement. You simply pick up your foot. This is true mobility. Chern's form is no different from his push hands. Each uses the 100-to-0 percent footwork rule.

Although he sounds unconventional, Chern is actually a staunch traditionalist, believing that too many of today's tai chi stylists look for only tai chi's external side. In doing so, they lose any tai chi root. If they want tai chi the way it was originally intended, they should forget what it looks like outside and remember what it feels like inside.