

# The Two Circles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan

By Joseph Chen

Photos by Susan Holland

Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Ch'uan) is the art of Yin and Yang. In the Taiji forms that are practiced today, Yin and Yang are represented by two circles.

The understanding of the two circles is thus of great importance to learners of Taijiquan. The correct execution of these two circles is fundamental to the correct practice of all styles of Taijiquan.

Grand Master Hong Junsheng of Jinan, China, spent 66 years learning, practicing, and teaching Chen style Taijiquan.

During the last years of his life, he summarized his understanding of the art with the words, "Taijiquan is the art of Peng. Peng is the result of the two circles."

Hong was referring to the Positive Circle and the Negative Circle. He considered these two circles the basic

Joseph Chen is a disciple of Feng Zhiqiang and the late Hong Junsheng. He teaches in Edmonton, AB, Canada.



Photo 1, Positive and Negative Circles Phase 1 and 5.

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The hand is pulled back naturally by the elbow. Strength is on the elbow, not on the hand. (Photo 2, Positive Circle Phase 2.)

Turn the waist to the left. The hand moves to the center with the palm facing the heart. While the palm pushes up slightly, the elbow sinks further down. The right knee is pushed outward slightly, causing the right kua to open and sink. The strength is on the right foot. (Photo 3, Positive Circle Phase 3.)

The hand does not move. Turn the waist right towards the center. Suspend the head as if it pushes up. (Photo 4, Positive Circle Phase 4.)

The hand pushes out to the beginning position. Strength comes from the left foot and goes out to the right hand. (Photo 1, now Positive Circle Phase 5.)

Other considerations for this circle:  
The hand draws the circle within the area between the eyes and thigh.  
The fingers open naturally.  
The fingertips point up 45 degrees.  
The hand is always higher than the elbow.

The elbow must always be lower than the shoulder.

When the arm withdraws towards



Photo 2, Positive Circle Phase 2.

building blocks of Taijiquan, without which Peng jin (energy) cannot be developed.

## The Positive Circle

(The following descriptions of the two circles are based on a right-handed position only.)

Assume a right medium horse stance. The right hand reaches out to eye height. Loosen the shoulder and sink the elbow. (Photo 1, Positive Circle Phase 1.)

Pull the elbow in towards the body to allow it to almost touch the ribs.

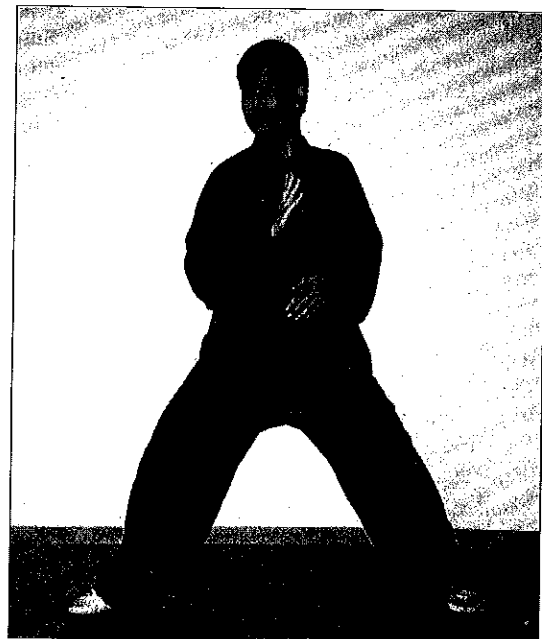


Photo 3, Positive Circle Phase 3.

the body, the power is on the right foot, pushing out to the right into the ground.

When the hand pushes away from the body, the power is on the left foot, pushing back away from the body into the ground.

The center is on the spine and does not move sideways at all.

When doing this circle, the hand should follow an imaginary curve like an egg with the small end of it touching the chest and the large end 45 degrees towards the right.

The elbow leads the arm to the body and the hand leads the arm away from the body.

### The Negative Circle

The description and photo are the same as the first move in the positive circle. (Photo 1, Negative Circle Phase 1.)

Elbow pulls to the front of the body, pulling the hand in slightly. The shoulder must be loose and open. The waist then turns to the left 45 degrees. (Photo 5, Negative Circle Phase 2.)

Turn the waist to the left. The hand sinks down to the top of the navel. The center of the forearm touches the right ribs. The elbow sinks and is outside of the right ribs. The palm faces front-left. (Photo 6, Negative Circle Phase 3.)

Continue to turn the waist. The

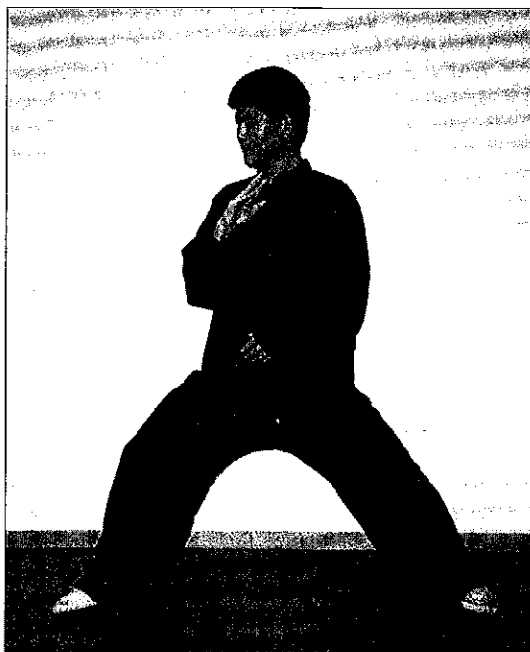


Photo 4, Positive Circle Phase 4.

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When all the joints are moving either in positive or in negative circles, the whole body will become a "gear-box". When all the gears in the gearbox engage, not one gear can move without involving all of the other gears.

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elbow does not move. The hand pushes out to the outside of the knee. The palm faces right and down. The hand is lower than the elbow. (Photo 7, Negative Circle Phase 4.)

Turn the waist towards the left. The left foot pushes to the ground to power the right hand to push up and out to the beginning position. The hand does not move. (Photo 1, Negative Circle Phase 5.)

Other considerations: The hand can be slightly lower than the elbow when pushing out. The imaginary egg has the small end out and the large end touching the

chest.

### Why the Two Circles?

The body of a person performing Taijiquan is full of circles and circular motions. These circles are not simply turns in any direction. They have their own shape, own order and own rules of motion. When looking at them as a whole, they are very complex to understand and produce.

The two circles that Grand Master Hong Junsheng described are simple to learn and they will lead to an understanding of the circular motions of Taijiquan. The purpose of these two circles is to eventually transfer this skill to the entire body.

When all the joints are moving either in positive or in negative circles, the whole body will become a "gearbox." When all the gears in the gearbox engage, not one gear can move without involving all of the other gears.

When all gears are disengaged, the movement of one gear will not affect the other gears. When one can transform the body into the above-described gearbox, one will possess the ability of "one part moves, all parts move."

In the summer of 1994, I had a chance to push into Grand Master Hong's chest during a learning session. I issued power suddenly and felt as if my hands had entered a gearbox. They



Photo 5, Negative Circle Phase 2.

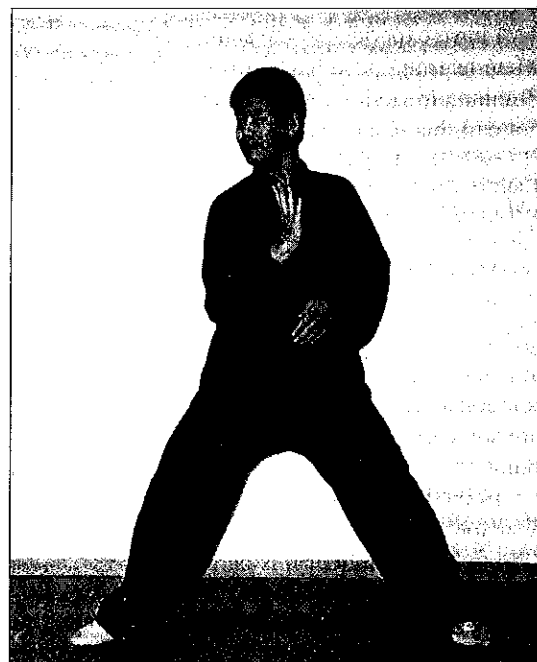


Photo 6, Negative Circle Phase 3.



Photo 7, Negative Circle Phase 4.

were chewed up and thrown out.

I was thrown out downward so quickly that upon landing, I hurt my hip. I suffered over ten small fractures to my fingers and wrists and did not completely heal until three months later.

The hand injuries were from Master Hong's chest and the hip injury was from my own falling.

At the time, Master Hong was 88 years old and was paralyzed from the belt down. He was able to stand on his feet but could not walk.

I have experienced the same power when learning push hands from Feng Zhiqiang in Beijing. Master Feng does not call this phenomenon a "gearbox." He calls it, "The 18 balls of the body." I personally feel that they are different names for a similar skill.

### The Two Circles in the Forms

The forms in Chen style Taijiquan are made up of the two circles. We can say that Taijiquan is the movement and relationships of the two circles. Here are some examples to illustrate this point.

In the third move of Buddha's Warrior Attendant Pounds the Mortar (Photo 8), the right arm is part of a positive circle while the left arm is part of a negative circle. The right leg is part of a positive circle and the left leg is part of a negative circle.

In Cloud Hands (Photo 9), both arms are drawing positive circles.

Grand Master Hong Junsheng believed that all movements in the Taijiquan forms must be either a positive or negative circle.

When this point is understood, the learner will have a clearer understanding of the precise moves in the forms. Learners can even self-correct their forms based on this principle. Of course, there are a myriad of other factors involved.

This might appear to be a simple and minor point, as every Taijiquan student learns during the

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Most beginners can demonstrate the circles at the posture level (where one makes a temporary stop in the form), while skilled masters can be observed doing circles at all times in the form (even during transitions between moves) or in push hands sessions.

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Photo 8, Buddha's Warrior Attendant Pounds the Mortar.

first lesson that Taiji is "an art of circular motions." In fact, for many beginners, this might be the most significant point, as it is not only theory, it is also a basic practice method.

When I was learning the various Chen style Taijiquan forms, Master Hong used to randomly call out "Stop!" Every time he did so, I was expected to freeze my move, like pushing the "PAUSE" button on a VCR. Master Hong would then ask, "Which circle is your right arm drawing?

Which circle is your left knee drawing?" This line of questioning was extended to every part of the body.

Master Hong believed that circles and the precision of the circles in forms and push hands determine the level of skill of the practitioner.

Most beginners can demonstrate the circles at the posture level (where one makes a temporary stop in the form), while skilled masters can be observed doing circles at all times in the form (even during transitions between moves) or in push hands sessions.

In summary, the two circles are fundamental building blocks in Taijiquan. They are important in both Taiji theory and Taiji practice. Learners should not overlook them.●

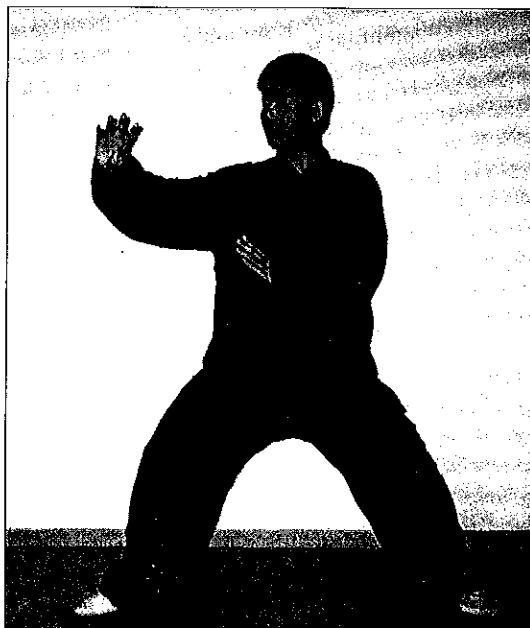


Photo 9, Cloud Hands.