

# Silk Reeling Exercises in Chen Style Taijiquan

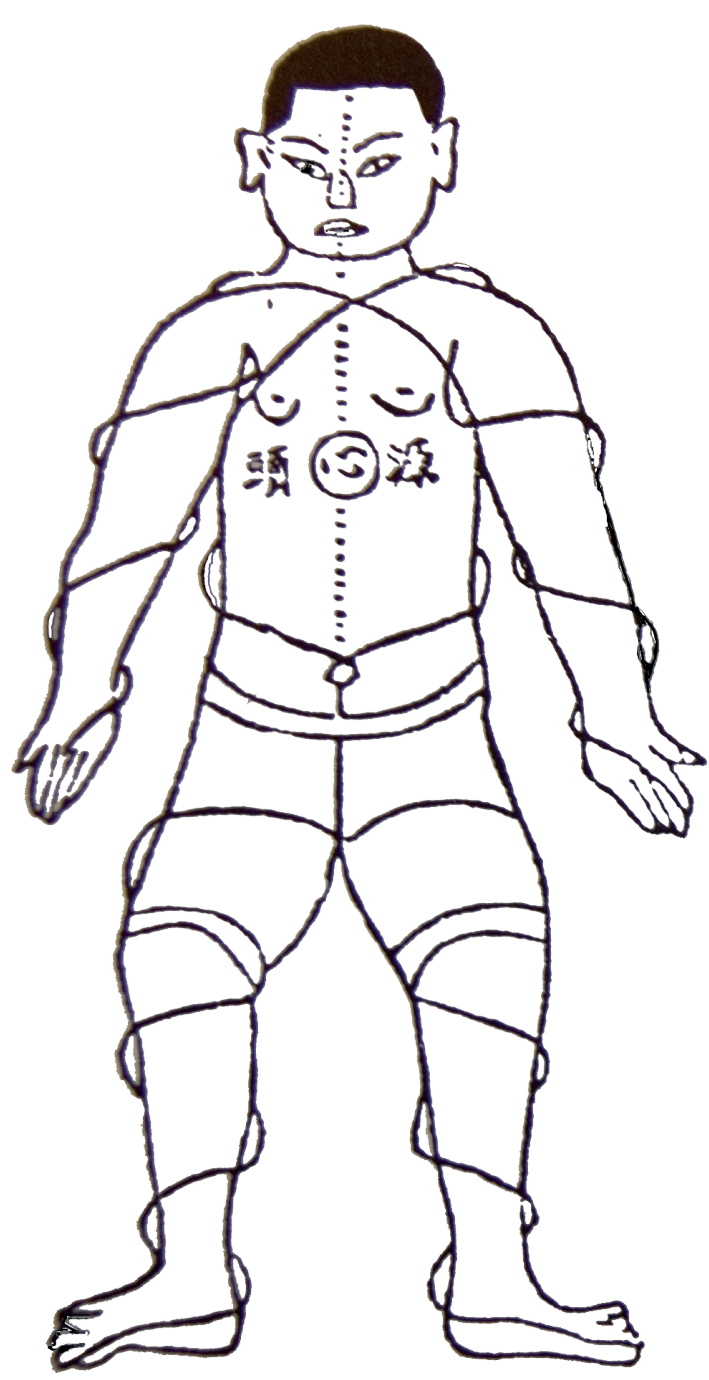


Figure 1: Illustration of Spiraling Power by Chen Xin

## The Essence of Taijiquan

Silk reeling is the essence of Taijiquan. These exercises build the foundation for all further exercises. They are the key to every Taijiquan movement. The term silk reeling (Chin, cansigong) derives from the technique used to unreel silk from a silkworm cocoon. In order to unravel silk from a cocoon, smooth and steady movements are required, otherwise the silk will stick together or the silk thread will tear. Silk reeling exercises in Chen Style Taijiquan follow this smooth, steady, and deliberate procedure both in terms of external and internal movement. The flow of internal energy (qi) is made outwardly visible by steady, harmonious movement. The external movements themselves are relatively easy to comprehend and learn, however, they only gain their true significance when they are connected with the Inner Principle (power and energy teachings).



Figure 2: Standing Pole, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang

## From Standing Pole to Silk Reeling Exercises

During the standing pole exercise, body and mind are calm. This calmness is the prerequisite for the mind to be able to 'listen' deeply inside the body and it is the beginning of the process of understanding what is being heard. This deeper understanding that is the aim of standing pole consists of the development and deepening of an awareness of the (interconnected) planes of the body and the mind. This development and deepening of awareness lead us to the different planes of perception that are well-known to anybody who is versed in this or similar exercises. Thus, once our practice of 'calmness' in the standing pole exercise has allowed us to develop an awareness for the center of our bodies (dantian), and, furthermore, to glean a notion of the three internal and external harmonies (cp. fig. 3), then the foundation is prepared upon which silk reeling is practiced.

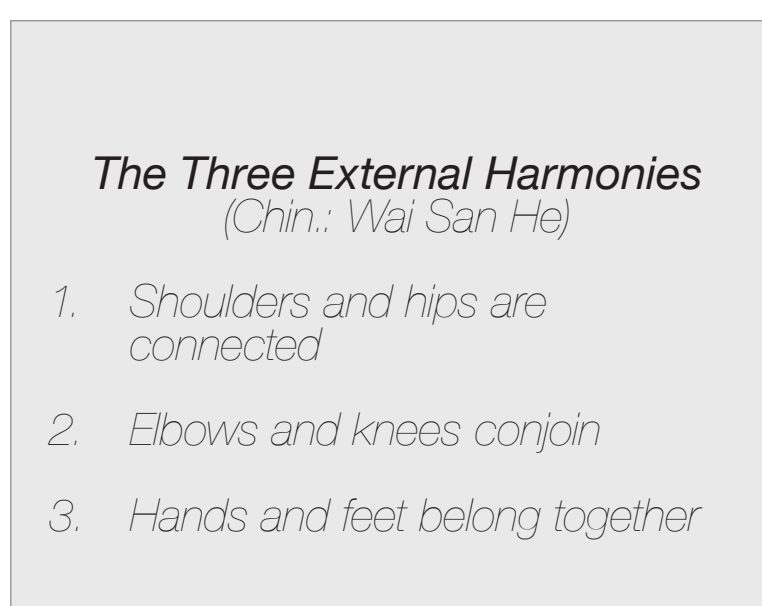


Figure 3: An illustration of the three external harmonies using the Taiji position 'Single Whip'

## The Silk Reeling Exercises

In silk reeling exercises we build upon the skills attained through standing pole and begin to set our bodies in motion. The forms of Taijiquan consist of many consecutive positions. Each position in and of itself is made up of many singular concerted movements. All of these movements can be broken down into an interplay of weight transference and body rotation. Weight transference and body rotation have their origin in the dantian and enable movement in all three spatial dimensions. This is the basis for the development of spiraling power. The value of the silk reeling exercises is their reduction to the bare essentials. The external movements are broken down to a minimum of complexity in order to enable a clear understanding of the movement and the internal flow of force and power. This reduction is invaluable when aiming for the correct execution of movement in Taijiquan. Through the silk reeling exercises and the external and internal movements that they convey, every single movement of Taijiquan can be explained and applied. Silk reeling exercises open the gates to Taijiquan making it tangible and learnable. They are the didactic key that is essential for plumbing Taijiquan's depths.

## The Frontal Silk Reeling Exercise

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the silk reeling exercises, we will now take a closer look at the frontal silk reeling exercise to the left (from the perspective of the practitioner). Using this example, we will illustrate the internal and external movements of the silk reeling exercises and, thus, also of every Taijiquan movement. The preparation consists of five steps, the actual exercise is divided into four stages.

## FIVE STEPS OF PREPARATION

The quality of the exercise depends not least on its preparation. In the preparation, I cultivate the necessary stillness and, thus, the necessary awareness for the following exercise. The better the introduction/preparation, the deeper and the more promising the following exercise will be. These are the five steps of the introduction, described from the starting position onwards:

- 1 Starting position
- 2 The right hand is guided to the right hip
- 3 The body sinks downwards
- 4 The left hand and the left heel lift up
- 5 Look left and take a step that is greater than shoulder width
- 6 The hand is guided into the start position



Figure 4: Starting position



Figure 5: The right hand is guided to the right hip



Figure 6: The body sinks downwards



Figure 7: The left hand and the left heel lift up



Figure 8: Look left and take a step that is greater than shoulder width



Figure 9: The hand is guided into the start position



Figure 10: Stage 1 of the single arm frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 11: Stage 2 of the single arm frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 12: Stage 3 of the single arm frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 13: Stage 4 of the single arm frontal silk reeling exercise

## Stage 1:

### "Energy Flows to the Hip"

A slight rotation to the left and a sinking of both hips cause the left arm to sink downwards. The elbow moves along a lightly circular path backwards and downwards. Once the arm is relaxed and the elbow has reached the height of the lowest rib, the movement is completed. Weight continues to flow into the left leg (vertical weight transference). The palm of the hand is facing front.

With the initiation of rotation, energy spirals from the hand back to the elbow and from the foot back to the knee. The body only sinks lightly. Once energy has reached the elbow and the knee, rotation decreases and internal sinking increases (vertical weight transference). Stage one depicts a sinking movement, out of full Yang Yin begins to be cultivated (cp. fig. 10).

## Stage 2:

### "Energy Flows to Dantian"

Stage two begins with a change of weight to the right. Shoulders, elbow, and hand almost remain in the same position and do not move of their own accord. After the change of weight, a minimal rotation begins. Again, the body is realigned with shoulders and hips parallel and facing front. The palm of the hand rotates upwards during the movement and is guided during the last third of the movement in front of the underbelly.

Energy flows from the left hip into the underbelly. In the first phase of weight transference, the energy makes half the journey between hip and underbelly. The rotation allows the energy to fully flow into the underbelly. Stage two depicts a closing movement, growing Yin becomes full Yin (cp. fig. 11).

## Stage 3:

### "Energy Ascends the Spine"

By rotating to the right the whole arm is lifted. The wrist stays spatially connected to the body's vertical axis during the rotation. The palm of the hand is turned to face downwards. The rotation is over when the body has completed a rotation of approx. 45° to the right and the hand has reached shoulder height. During this phase, vertical weight transference takes place. The body's weight flows through the rotation increasingly into the right leg and foot.

Energy flows up the spine. Stage three depicts a lifting movement, from full Yin growing Yang is cultivated (cp. fig. 12).

## Stage 4:

### "Energy Flows over the Shoulder and Arm into the Fingertips"

Stage four begins with weight transference to the left. Energy flows from the spine into the elbow. Through the subsequent rotation, energy flows past the elbow into the hand and into the left foot. Hips and shoulders are again parallel and face forwards. The palm of the hand turns to face outwards. The arm rests on a horizontal line with the orientation left and outwards as an extension of the right leg. Stage four depicts an opening movement, growing Yang becomes full Yang (cp. fig. 13).



Figure 14: Application of the lateral circle in stage 4 of the frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 15: Application of the vertical circle in stage 4 of the frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 16: Application of the horizontal circle in stage 4 of the frontal silk reeling exercise



Figure 17: Application of the conjoined circles to stage 4 of the frontal silk reeling exercise

## Circles in the Silk Reeling Exercises

In the silk reeling exercises there are three different circles that are produced through different combinations of rotation and weight transference. For the beginner, it is important to be aware of these three circles. For the advanced practitioner, however, the circles conjoin in three-dimensional space into a sphere upon which each circle can be produced in all directions of rotation and at all angles.

It is a fundamental learning goal of the silk reeling exercises to comprehend these circles externally in movement and internally with the conscious direction of energy/power, and to gain an in-depth understanding of them. The interplay of rotation and weight transference, which produces the respective circle, assists practitioners in perceiving the body mechanics of the exercises and the associated energy flow in Chen Style Taijiquan.

## Conjoining the Circles into a Sphere

All movements in Taijiquan are made up of connections of the three circles. In silk reeling exercises we deal with each circle in an exemplary fashion, learning how the circles come about through rotation and weight transference. In the different exercises the circles are executed to a different extent. The undiluted first, second, or third circle can only be found in partial movements. Only when all levels and rotations are conjoined does the 'real' Taiji movement begin (conjoining of circles). The body moves on orbital paths through three-dimensional space as if it were inside a sphere (cp. fig. 17). From rest, a sphere can be moved in any direction. From the middle of the sphere to any point on the sphere's surface there is an equal distance. The body becomes a sphere, integrated within itself, interconnected, but still capable of transforming itself in any direction. The preliminary three circles practiced in their mostly isolated form are an aid to comprehend three-dimensional space in its full complexity and depth.

In the Taiji Classics it is written:

"One part of the body moves, the whole body moves. There is nothing that is not moving."

Alongside the purely mechanical understanding of rotation and weight transference in movements, the classical Taiji treatises also constantly refer to the internal direction of movement:

"The mind directs qi and through qi the body moves."

Breaking down the silk reeling exercises into the different external and internal movements serves as an illustration of the circles and helps to comprehend the very complex and difficult Taijiquan movements. Thus, the silk reeling exercises facilitate the acquisition of the correct body mechanics and lead to a better understanding of the internal movements (cp. fig. 17).