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How to Determine Whether the Body Structure is Correct

To determine whether the body structure is correct, we need to examine the relationship between chi and muscle. Tai Chi Chuan does not emphasise chi over muscle, nor muscle over chi. Chi and muscle are complementary. Chi is the internal driver for muscle, and muscle is the chi's external expression. If chi cannot flow freely, the muscle's strength will not express itself.

Take Figure 1, for example. Here, the body structure is incorrect, so chi cannot flow freely. As a result, not only is the figure on the right unable to push the opponent away, but he is also double heavy.



Contrast this with Figure 2, where the body structure is correct. Here, chi can flow smoothly, driving the muscle movement and transmitting strength to the opponent, pushing him off.



Chi is very delicate. Any small deviation in body structure will reduce the volume of chi. All the detailed requirements for the various parts of the body are geared towards forming the proper body structure, so as to ensure the smooth flow of chi. The goal of our daily practice is to reduce deviation and to establish the correct body mechanics in our body. Once this mechanism is established, it is easy to maintain the fluidity of chi in any movement and to let muscular strength be connected and expressed. The attacks our opponents launch on us, be they punches, kicks, throws, deflections, or joint locks, are all aimed at breaking the body mechanism established in our body. Once our mechanism is broken, our chi will not flow freely and we will be easily beaten. If we can maintain our body mechanics at all times, then we will be able to counter an opponent's attack and stay invincible.

Some people may ask when can we claim that our chi is connected? In general, if chi is about 60% connected, then all the movements can start to be connected. At that point, we can say chi is connected. However, this is just the starting point. Think of learning to ride a bike. When we have just learned, we have to ride really fast to avoid falling off. We can only ride in big circles, and we cannot ride on small winding roads. Tai Chi Chuan theory talks about the transition from large circle to medium circle; from medium circle to small circle; and from small circle to no circle. "No circle" means there are internal changes but these cannot be seen from outside. This is advanced level Tai Chi Chuan – but it is still not the top. There is simply no "top" in Tai Chi Chuan. You can practise for your whole life and always find room for improvement.

Based on the theory of large, medium, and small circles, some people consider small frame better than large frame, the assumption being that small frame starts with a small circle, whilst the large frame has to start with large circles. This notion is wrong.

The small frame started with Chen Youben, the 14th generation family master. There were excellent practitioners in the following generations, like Chen Zhongsun and Chen Jisun in the 15th generation, Chen Yao and Chen Miao in the 16th generation. Chen Xin, another Chen family ancestor in the 16th generation wrote “The Illustrated Manual of Chen Style Tai Chi Chuan”. However, the small frame is just like the large frame, in that they both start from the large circle. The “circle” here does not mean the circle made by the movement of the hand or foot. It means the circle made by the internal movement of chi; the circle that enables chi to flow freely throughout the whole body. Form practice is just a means to an end. The final goal is to establish the body mechanism in our body. We can achieve the final goal by different means. Both large frame and small frame are tools to help us reduce movement deviation and eventually achieve the aim of whole body movement, where the entire body moves as one. No matter which frame we determine to study, we always have to start from the large circle then gradually reduce the circle.

Traditionally, training always starts from the Old Style First Form (Laojia Yilu), with no Cannon Fist (Paocui) or weapons forms at all. Only when the clumsy, stiff force has been removed from the body structure, the big circle is formed, and chi can flow freely, should we start to practise weapons, Pushing Hands and Fajin. These later practices are aimed at improving stamina and explosive power release. Once the foundation of the large circle has been established, the transition to medium circle, small circle, and no circle is natural and can be achieved smoothly through regular practice.