



## The Importance of Form Practice in Tai Chi Chuan

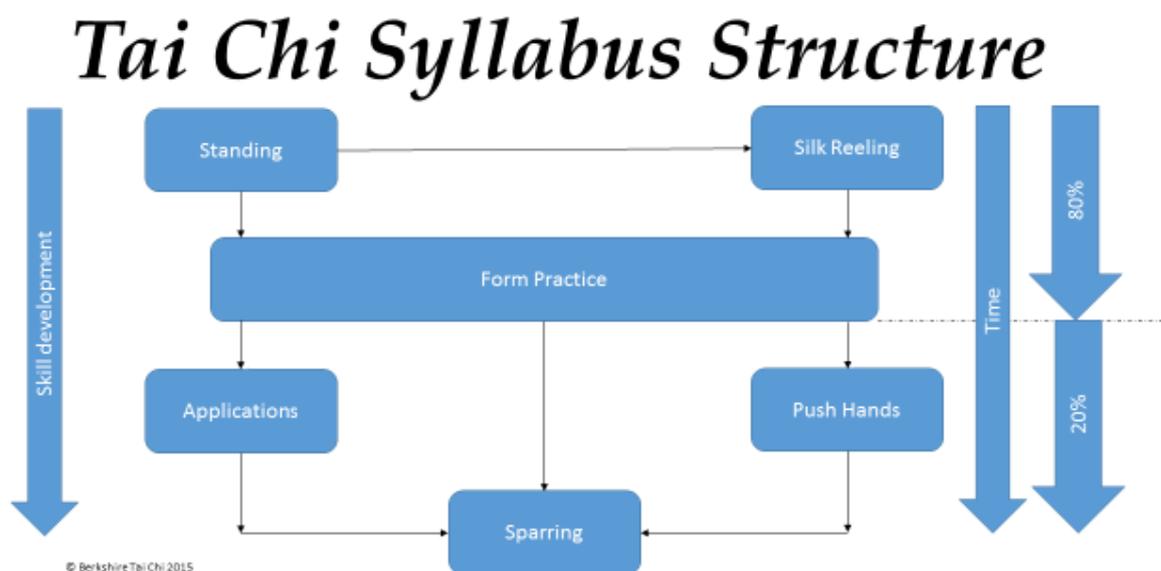
*Good instruction which is not supported by conscientious training will achieve very little. But what to train, especially if time is short? Traditionally, Form training provides the foundation of a systematic Tai Chi Chuan training curriculum. In this article, we place the form in the wider curriculum context and attempt to explain the reasons for this pivotal role.*

### The Place of the Form in the Tai Chi Syllabus

*The purpose of learning Tai Chi Form is for its fighting skill.*

(Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang.)

The Tai Chi syllabus has been carefully designed to develop step-by-step all the skills and attributes necessary, both mental and physical, for effective self-defence. The following diagram shows the overview of the system.



Each element<sup>1</sup> has one or more specific contributions to make to the overall skill development of the student. The different components are inter-related and interdependent, and must all be practised in order to maximise the benefits of training.

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, this excludes individual supporting drills, of which there must be several tens, if not hundreds.

**Standing** is the first stage. As Chen Xin<sup>2</sup>, the great 16<sup>th</sup> generation theorist of Chen family Tai Chi wrote, “*To train in Tai Chi, one must begin at Wuji*”. Standing, be it in *Wuji, Zhan Zhuang*, or in any posture from the Form, develops *calmness*, which helps to concentrate the intent; *structural alignment*, which develops the ability to relax and let go physically, increasing stability and boosting core and leg strength, which in turn contribute to *connectedness* and the development of *power*.

**Silk Reeling** builds on these capabilities and qualities to further develop a good root, leg strength and whole body connections in order to produce spiral energy. It is said in Tai Chi circles “*if you have no stillness, you will not see the wonder of moving*” but moving involves co-ordinating the whole body from the centre to generate spiral energy. Hence the second adage; “*if one does not know spiral energy, one does not know Tai Chi*”.

**The Form** consolidates the capabilities from Standing and Silk Reeling and introduces a range of fighting moves based on the Eight Energies (of self-defence) which equips students to practise **Pushing Hands**. The latter develops sensitivity and adaptability, enabling structural, psychological and mobility weaknesses to be corrected and fed back into Form training, whilst **Applications** help provide intent and purpose to movements from the Form. Understanding of the energies (derived from a close study of the individual movements from the Form, from Pushing Hands practice and from Applications training) leads directly into **Free Sparring**.

At this point the Form becomes formless, the practitioner being able to adapt and apply elements from the Form, depending upon the circumstances. It is said one should practise the Form as if fighting but fight as if practising the Form; in other words, the intent when practising should be on the application of the postures in order to give the mind focus and the movements purpose, but when fighting the mind should remain calm, focused and the Tai Chi principles should not be abandoned in the heat of the moment.

Master Ma Hong cites Chen Zhaokui<sup>3</sup> as follows: *The practice of the Form is the most important foundation work because the Form is the end result of the accumulated fighting experience of past generations of practitioners who used the techniques in real combat situations*. Through continuous repetitive training the individual develops the correct postural framework and learns to incorporate the correct movement principles into every action. Once he or she has achieved this, learning how to apply the techniques contained within the Form will, be far easier. At this point, when the mind decides to move swiftly, the body can react in an instant. Once the movement principles and the energies are understood and have become ingrained (but only then!), formality can be abandoned.

Consequently, at a higher level, Tai Chi practice is not unlike playing jazz music. The musician learns to play scales and arpeggios smoothly, starting slowly at first and then speeding up as

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<sup>2</sup> 1849 - 1929

<sup>3</sup> The youngest son of Chen Fake, who devised the New Form and returned to teach in the Chen village in the 1940s

proficiency improves. This enables him or her to play scores more capably. As the player relaxes and becomes more adept and the score more familiar, they do not have to worry about the technical demands of the music, they can devote more time and energy to artistic interpretation. Eventually, through a clear understanding of the structure and chord sequences contained in the music, they can free themselves from the score completely and extemporise around the theme, reacting to and working with, other players in a completely impromptu fashion, without sacrificing any instrumental technique or losing the heart of the melody.

The Form, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the development of both one's physical constitution and Tai Chi combat skill. The traditional approach to developing fighting capability emphasises the need for a prolonged period of empty hand Form training. Chen Xin advises students to *"practise ten thousand repetitions, and you will come to understand Tai Chi Chuan"*. The legendary Chen Fake was reputed to have practised 30 repetitions a day, whilst Master Ma Hong recounts how Wu style founder, Wu Jianquan, was said to have asked his students to aim to do the hand form ten thousand times in three years.

Without training in **all** the elements of the syllabus, we cannot develop our Tai Chi skills to the full - but Form training is the foundation. Without conscientious Form training we cannot hope to train effectively in Pushing Hands and Sparring and so progress. There will be nothing to "apply" in Applications training. It is sometimes hard for students who want to develop fighting skills to accept that it is better not to concentrate on applications when in the early stages of training, but to focus exclusively on building a sound postural framework and correct body mechanics. By internalising the correct principles, the body eventually becomes highly adaptable and flexible; capable of adjusting to a wide range of circumstances and feeling comfortable whether attacking or defending. To quote Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang: *"Tai Chi Chuan has thousands and tens of thousands of permutations. Its techniques are rich and multi-dimensional. If one tries to remember [each one] by rote and memorise rigidly, one would not be able to learn or memorise [them all] in a lifetime. Simply memorising movements would be like water without a source or wood that does not come from a tree. Although Tai Chi Chuan is profound, in the end ten thousand methods come from one principle. One action leads to all actions, surging through each part in sequence."*

Chen Fake worked on the basis of Form training accounting for 80% of his training, with 20% allocated to Pushing Hands and Sparring. The Tai Chi Form should, therefore, account for the core of our training, with everything else that follows being seen as necessary but supplementary.

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