What is Taiji Quan?

Taiji Quan, or Taiji Boxing, is one of the traditional Chinese martial arts. It is based on the ancient Chinese philosophy, Taiji. What makes it special is that Taiji Quan is now not only a martial art for defense, but also a way of fitness, relaxation, regimen (养生), health recovery, health improvement, and a way of self-cultivation (修炼).

Ying-Yang Theory of Taiji

Taiji Quan is based on Taiji philosophy, and its acts and movements are the embodiment of the theory. What is Taiji? Literally Taiji means the highest state of the things in the world, or the most fundamental and original nature or most abstract rules of the universe. Taiji theory holds that the universe or anything in the world is composed of two opposite yet interdependent and complementary forces: “yin” & “yang”.

The diagram of yin-yang fish is a symbol of the theory.

The black fish symbolizes “yin”, while the white fish symbolizes “yang”. Both yin and yang are in a state of growth and development, from small to large, from their own to the opposite, in an endless rotation. The white eye in the black fish represents the existence of “yang” element in the “yin” (there is something of yang in yin), while the black eye of white fish represents the existence of the “yin” element in the “yang” (there is something of yin in yang). Both yin and yang are two sides of one thing, which are contradictory, complementary, and interchangeable.

Some Opposite Elements (yin-yang) in Taiji Boxing

- up and down 上、下 (Example: Starting, Crane’s Wing)
- left and right 左、右 (Example: Horse Mane, Cloud Hands)
- front and back 前、后 (Example: Bird’s Tail)
- forward and backward 进、退 (Example: Horse Mane, Back-off Palm)
- open and close 开、合 (Example: Horse Mane, Heel-kicks)
- slow and fast 快、慢 (Example: Horse Mane, Cover and Punch)
- empty and solid 虚、实 (Example: Crane’s Wings)
- attack and defense 攻、防 (Example: Shuttles, Brush-knee Palm)
- dynamic and static (motion and stillness) 动、静 (Crane’s Wings, Single Whip)
• strong and weak 强、弱 …
• hard and soft 刚、柔 …

In Taiji Boxing, all the yin and yangs are relative, reactive, complementary and interchangeable. They contradict each other, echo each other, complement each other, and balance each other, forming a unity of opposites.

■ Why practice Taiji?
As a martial art, Taiji Boxing was no doubt created originally for the purpose of fighting and defense, but now people practice Taiji mostly for the purpose of fitness, exercise, relaxation, regimen, and maintaining and improving health. Taiji theory emphasizes the harmony and balance between yin and yang. According to traditional Chinese medicine, when yin and yang of the body are balanced, health will be in a good state, but when the balance of yin and yang is broken or lost, health problems will occur. Therefore, the improvement of physical qualities and prevention of illness begins with the adjustment of yin and yang, which is the proper function of practicing Taiji.

■ Taiji Quan and “Qigong”
Taiji is also a kind of natural “Qigong”. Taiji Boxing requires players to play in a slow, relaxed, natural and concentrated state. Meanwhile the player’s breathing is required to be natural and even. When in this state (referred to as Taiji state, Qigong state, or Flow state), what is called nei qi, or zhen qi (internal air or internal energy) will be generated and flow and circulate through the “channels” around the body. Meanwhile, the acts and movements of the boxing will help the generation and circulation of the qi in the body. As a result, the “blocks”, “barriers”, “obstacles” or “knots” in the body (namely, the diseases) will be “broken through”, dredged, and finally driven out. So Taiji Quan is also called the Dynamic Qigong (动功), Moving Stake (动桩), Moving Meditation, or Moving Yoga. It’s a special aerobics, and can greatly relax oneself, reduce stress, adjust the yin-yang of the body, and improve health positively and effectively.

■ Taiji: A World View and an Attitude towards Life
Taiji Quan is a kind of world view. For example, Taiji Quan believes in “天人合一” (Nature and man in one), and pursues the harmony of man and Nature. It holds that man is a part of Nature, that man is a small Taiji, Nature is a large Taiji. When Taiji boxing, man is in an open state to Nature, integrating and making exchange with Nature. (That’s why a good natural environment is desirable for practicing Taiji.) Along with it is the respect for Nature and the conformance to the laws of Nature. Taiji boxing not only emphasizes the harmony of body and mind, but also the harmony between man and Nature.

Taiji is also a sort of attitude towards life. For instance, when playing Taiji, a person is required to keep his main body upright, impartial, fair, natural, dignified, open, graceful, not to go to extremes, leave some room, not in haste, etc. Don’t they
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coincide with the way one is to behave and conduct in life?

■ Taiji Quan is a Philosophy
Based on its Yin-Yang theory, Taiji Quan embodies and practices many dialectical concepts, like “中庸之道” (the golden mean, moderation), “过犹不及” (beyond is as wrong as falling short, too much is as far as too little). The tendency of the acts and movements of Taiji Quan is not to go to extremes, but to leave some room (留有余地). Some other concepts like “松而不懈” (loose but not slack, loose but inflated), “刚柔相济” (the integration of hardness and softness), “阴阳转换” (the interchange of opposites), “借力打力”(hit back by turning the opponent’s force), “以柔克刚” (overcome hardness with softness), “四两拨千斤” (to set aside strong force with slight force), etc. are inspiring philosophical principles.

■ Taiji Quan, a way of self-cultivation
Last but not least, Taiji Quan is a way to conduct self-cultivation and improve one’s character. It helps one, or trains one, to learn to calm down, to relax, to reduce the pressure, to get out of anxiety, to keep a peaceful mind, to take things easy, to build up patience, to respect nature, to behave naturally—no rashness or panic, to do things at their natural rhythms—and to be upright, moderate, temperate, collected, tolerant, elegant and graceful . . .

Some people might hope to find a way to self-cultivation in today’s busy and noisy world. Why not try Taiji? It is a healthy and convenient way to cultivate yourself in your common life—not necessarily to be a hermit, a recluse, a monk or a Taoist in the deep mountains or by staying away from society.

Summary
Taiji Quan is a slow, soft, and graceful sport, and a safe aerobic and breathing exercise. It adjusts both body and mind, reduces the stress and pressure, improves the balance of yin and yang in one’s body, and thus strengthens the internal immune system and helps cure and prevent diseases and even cancers. In practicing Taiji, one can acquire a kind of calmness, serenity and relaxation. Taiji Quan combines together the function of meditation, yoga, breathing technique, as well as martial arts, and is therefore one of the most ideal exercises for one’s body and mind, whether man or woman, young or old.

■ The origin and schools of Taiji Quan in China
There are different opinions about the origin of Taiji Quan. Some people believe that it was first created by Zhang Sanfeng, a Taoist of the Song Dynasty (961-1279), but most Wushu (martial arts) historians of China hold that Taiji Quan was first created by Chen Wang Ting (1600-1680), a martial artist born in Chenjia Gou, Wenxian County, Henan Province. Chen integrated his knowledge of ancient philosophy with martial arts, and finally created Taiji Quan (Chen-style). With the passage of time, some other styles later came into being. Up to now, the major schools are: Chen-style,
Yang-style, Wu-style and Sun-style. Among them, the most popular are Yang-style and Chen-style.

**Chen-style**  
Chen-style is the oldest form of Taiji Quan, all the other styles having been derived from it either directly or indirectly. Besides all the characteristics of Taiji, Chen-style contains more explosion of strength, and stresses more the combination of hardness and softness. Its implication of offence and defence is more obvious. As a result, young people in China are more fond of Chen-Style.

**Yang-style**  
The originator of Yang-style Taiji Quan was Yang Luchan (1800-1873) of Yongnian County in Hebei Province. As a boy, Yang learned Taiji Boxing from Cheng Chang Xing in Chenjia Gou. Later he returned to his native town to teach Taiji. To suit the needs of ordinary people, Yang made some changes to what he had learned, dropping or adapting some difficult and explosive acts, and laid the foundation of Yang-style Taiji. Yang-style Taiji is slow, graceful, smooth, moderate, fair, upright, open, easy to learn and practice, and especially suitable for fitness, maintaining health, and self-cultivation (舒展大方，中正安舒，连贯优雅，大开大合，尤其适合养生保健和自我修炼). Today, Yang-style has become the most popular style of Taiji Quan in China.

**Basic Taiji Quan**

- Act 1: Starting 起式 qishi  
- Act 2: Parting Horse Mane (left & right) 野马分鬃 yema fenzong  
- Act 3: Stroking Bird’s Tail (left) 揽雀尾 lan quewei  
- Act 4: Single Whip 单鞭 dan bian  
- Act 5: Closing 收式 shou shi