

Hun Yuan Taiji/Qigong of Grand Master Feng Zhiqiang

The exciting news is that China's famous Grand Master Feng Zhiqiang appears likely to be coming to the United States sometime in the next year (July 2001) to teach his Hun Yuan system of Taijiquan. This long awaited visit promises to be one of the U.S.'s most eagerly anticipated Taiji events. Most readers have heard of the legendary Feng Zhiqiang in this magazine and elsewhere. I had the good fortune to study with him in Beijing, China in 1981 (see Feb. 1982 issue of *Tai Chi Magazine*). I returned to study with him again in Finland in August of 2000. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet this great man again and to compare his Hun Yuan system of Taiji with the more traditional Chen form of Chen Fake, which I had studied with him some 20 years earlier in Beijing. In the twenty years between my studies with Grand Master (GM) Feng Zhiqiang, I spent ten years searching for a teacher who could continue my education. I was fortunate in 1991 to find Master Zhang Xue Xin of San Francisco, Grand Master Feng's senior U.S. disciple. Although I have been studying with Master Zhang since 1991 and am one of the regional directors of his U.S. Feng Zhiqiang Hun Yuan Taiji Association, I am writing this article as an individual and not as a representative of Master Zhang or Grand Master Feng. The opinions expressed herein are only my own personal opinions based on my own observations and an interview with Grand Master Feng himself.

For those who are not familiar with GM Feng Zhiqiang, he has been designated by the Chinese Government as one of the 13 most outstanding living masters of Taijiquan, along with such other luminaries as Chen Xiaowang (Chen style), Yang Zhenduo (Yang style) and Wang Peisheng (Wu style). In fact, these four masters were commissioned by the Chinese government to present their respective arts in a series of books published in China. These have subsequently been issued in English-language editions, which are available through Wayfarer Publications. The Chen-style book titled, *Chen Style Taijiquan*, features Chen Xiaowang demonstrating his 38-movement shortened form, combining movements from the Lao Jia and the Xin Jia versions of the "Yi Lu" or First Form of Chen-style Taijiquan. This book also has GM Feng Zhiqiang demonstrating applications for all the movements in both the first and second Chen-style routines as well as Push Hands. It was GM Feng Zhiqiang's ability to apply Taijiquan techniques, especially his push hands ability, which brought him such great acclaim. He is considered one of Chen Fake's most brilliant and accomplished students.

Although GM Feng Zhiqiang has authored many books on Taijiquan and Qigong, as well as videotapes, these were mostly produced in China and Japan. They are not readily available in the U.S. and haven't been translated into English. GM Feng Zhiqiang visited the U.S. (San Francisco) briefly in 1985 for only an informal four-day visit. Those masters who met and practiced push hands with him were extremely impressed, to say the least. He is considered one of the few modern masters who can actually apply the skills of Taijiquan along the lines of the great legendary past masters of China. He has been denoted as one of China's "living treasures" and appears in the video series *China's Living Treasures* (also available through Wayfarer Publications).

The words "Hun Yuan" refer to the "original" state of the universe. It can be likened to the "0" that comes before the number "1," or the great void or "cosmic soup" that existed before the beginning of creation. It is like the "Tao that cannot be named," referred to in the first chapter of the Tao Te Ching. Some might refer to it as Primordial Essence. It pre-exists even the state of Taiji where from the void, "Wuji," appeared a state which contained both the Yin and Yang and

is symbolized in the Taiji diagram. It also refers to the circular/spiral movement of the universe, which should be incorporated into Hun Yuan Taijiquan and Qigong practice.

The word "Xin Yi," as seen in GM Feng's name of Hun Yuan Chen Style Xin Yi Taiji, does not specifically refer to the martial art of Hsing I (also spelled "Xin Yi" but with the word "quan" or "fist" to distinguish it as the martial art) as much as it refers to the words Xin (heart-mind) and Yi (Intentional Mind) which when used together also make up the name of that martial art. Grand Master Feng's intention was to focus on the use of the emotional and intentional mind's components. In actuality, the use of these words was designed to focus one's attention on the Qigong component of the Hun Yuan system rather than on the martial art of Xinyiquan, which GM Feng also mastered.

It is important to note that the Hun Yuan system contains more than just the first and second routine of the Chen Taiji system. The Hun Yuan system of GM Feng Zhiqiang includes the following:

- The Hun Yuan Qigong system of 24 movements (also practiced in 12 movements);
- The "Chan Szu Chin" or "silk-reeling" system of 35 basic movements to be practiced repetitively, allowing the practitioner to concentrate more on movement principles, instead of the choreography of forms practice;
- The simplified 24-movement Chen Taiji form for beginners and seniors composed primarily of the basic movements from the "Yi Lu" or First Routine of the Chen-style Taiji;
- The 32-movement (now 38) "Cannon Fist" form created by GM Feng combining many of the beginning and ending movements of the Number 2 form in the Chen style;
- The concentrated 48-movement Chen Taiji form consisting of all the movements contained in the 83-movement Yi Lu routine without repetitions and with some movements from the second Chen-style routine known as "Pao Tui" or the "Cannon Fist";
- The 24-movement Cannon Fist form created by GM Feng Zhiqiang composed of selected movements from the Chen-style Cannon Fist as well as an equal number of other movements from Xinyiquan and even Tongbeiquan;
- The first Chen-style "Yi Lu" routine containing 83 movements as taught by Chen Fake and modified by GM Feng Zhiqiang;
- The Second Chen-style "Cannon Fist" routine containing 71 movements.
- The 24-movement Elbows Form demonstrating all the various elbow techniques;
- The 24-movement Practical Fighting form created by GM Feng Zhiqiang. This form is based on the many different arts which he has studied as well as his own personal experience in the martial arts, which is substantial;

- Weapons forms including the Taiji Sword, Big Broadsword, Spear, and Heavy Staff;
- The short Taiji stick routines for practicing the joint locking and twisting movements of Chin Na and a "Taiji Ruler" Qigong Routine;
- Traditional Chinese Medical and Qigong healing techniques.

In addition, the Hun Yuan system also includes a systemized series of Push-Hand Exercises, Chin Na, and other martial techniques practiced with partners. There are also movements and exercises from Baguaquan, Xinyiquan, and Tongbeiquan just to name a few. Whew! That's a lot of material. However, it represents GM Feng Zhiqiang's distillation of his entire martial arts, qigong, and philosophical heritage and profound understanding. Keep in mind that GM Feng Zhiqiang was born in 1928 (not 1926 as is often reported) and has studied and practiced continually ever since the age of eight (except for a brief period during the Cultural Revolution). He is truly one of Chinese history's "Last Dragons."

The fact that there are so many forms of practice within the Hun Yuan system does not mean that all the forms are practiced by every student. A Taiji practitioner who practices the Yi Lu or long form would not necessarily practice the 24 or 48 form unless short on practice time. Some beginners or seniors might practice only the Qigong or Chan Szu Chin exercises. Martial artists would study differently than those practicing only for health. There is, in fact, something for everyone within the Hun Yuan system.

Perhaps the biggest question regarding the Hun Yuan system is whether GM Feng teaches the standardized Chen style of the Chen village or something else. An even more fundamental question is whether what he is teaching is strictly Taiji as we have come to know and expect it to be. Before answering these questions we need to understand that although GM Feng studied with the world-renowned 17th-generation Chen family patriarch and Taiji master, Chen Fake, this was not his only teacher.

GM Feng studied with Chen Fake (1887-1957) for approximately 7 years from 1950 until 1957. Chen Fake died in 1957 at the age of 70. Feng studied even longer from Xinyiquan and Qigong Master Hu Yaozhen (1879-1973). He began studying from Master Hu when Feng was 20 (about 1948) and Hu Yaozhen did not die until 1973 (at the age of 93). GM Feng has stated that he studied with Master Hu for 9 years. It is also important to realize that Hu Yaozhen and Chen Fake were close personal friends.

It was Hu Yaozhen who introduced Feng to Chen Fake and encouraged him to study Chen Taiji with him. At the same time (1953) that Chen was the president of the Beijing Martial Arts Research Association, Hu was the Association's Vice President. In other words, it can be said that they taught together in the same martial arts school, where Feng was studying under both teachers. He assisted both masters with their classes. It was also at this time that Feng began training with another famous Chen-style master, Chen Fake's son, Chen Zhaokui. Feng became Chen Zhaokui's training partner and friend. Chen Zhaokui always spoke of Feng with highest regard for both his intelligence and ability. He referred to Feng as his "older brother," in Chen Fake's lineage and stated in a letter that GM Feng was the best of all his father's students.

The Hun Yuan system includes elements of both Chen-style Taijiquan and Xinyiquan. Grand Master Feng's system is actually called "Chen-style Xinyi Hun Yuan Taijiquan." The Xinyiquan that Hu taught Feng, which was called Xinyi Liuhe Quan, included standing postures, Five Elements practice, 12 Animals and lots of Qigong. The term "Liu He" refers to the principle of

the "Six Harmonies," which is an important aspect of GM Feng's system. It refers to the importance of externally aligning: (1) the shoulders with the hips; (2) the elbows with the knees; and (3) the hands with the feet, for greater body unification and for proper qi circulation. Internally, it refers to the importance of unifying: (1) the emotional (heart) mind and the will or intention; (2) the mental intention and the qi; and (3) the qi with the power or force.

Besides being a master of Xinyiquan, Hu was also skilled in both Taijiquan and Baquaquan. He was known as "One Finger Hu" for his ability to defeat an opponent with the use of only one finger. It is said that he could defeat an opponent with only a look. In addition to martial skills, Hu was also skilled in Chinese Medicine and qigong, and he authored several books on Qigong and Health, including the "Five Animal Frolics." No wonder GM Feng named his system in such a way as to include recognition of Hu Yaozhen, who, although not as well known as Chen Fake, was, nevertheless, an important influence on GM Feng and on the development of Hun Yuan Taiji and Qigong.

The big question: Is GM Feng currently teaching traditional Chen-style Taiji or some new style combining Taiji with Xinyi, as in the Sun style of Taiji? In my opinion, Hun Yuan Taiji is not traditional Taiji as is taught by the representatives of the Chen family and village. It certainly includes Chen-style Taiji, but is not limited to Chen traditional format and form. Anyone seeing it for the first time would know right away that it is derivative of Chen-style Taiji, but there is more. It is not as different as is Chen style when compared to Yang style. It is different in the way that the Chen Man-Ching style differs from traditional Yang family style. It is more like Sun style in that it incorporates many other influences, especially Xinyi. While it may not be traditional Taiji, in GM Feng's words, it is Taiji "on the highest level."

On the external level, there are important differences in the way that Hun Yuan style movements are performed. Many overlapping, "lead-in" circles are performed prior to the execution of individual movements. These "lead-in" circles of the arms and tan tien serve a very important function: they allow the practitioner to begin to rotate the tan tien in the proper circle (whether horizontal, lateral, vertical, or diagonal). This method clarifies the proper tan tien rotation required for the execution of the movement itself. It has the effect of externally demonstrating the internal mechanics required of that movement or technique. In addition, there are many more sinking movements, allowing the qi to properly sink to the tan tien and the body to properly sink and relax before going on to the next movement. These modifications of execution are of great benefit to students who are unsure of the proper body mechanics which the form requires. The combination of sinking and overlapping also assists in creating continuity of qi flow and mental intention in the transitions between movements, allowing for one continuous flow of energy throughout the entire form.

GM Feng also emphasizes the importance of making movements bigger and more circular. He believes that bigger movements help to loosen and extend the major joints and promote greater and smoother qi circulation. Bigger movements also give the practitioner greater reach and range of motion for martial arts purposes. Bigger and more extended movements lengthen muscles, ligaments, and tendons thereby releasing tension. Extension also creates body linkage for development of whole body connected and unified movement. As movements are maximized, weight shifting is also affected. Contrary to the 60/40 weight distribution favored in most Chen-style postures, GM Feng regularly shifts fully forward and backward toward a 100/0 weight distribution. Certain traditionally standard movements, such as "Leisurely Tying Up One's Coat" or "Single Whip," are practiced with traditional 60/40 weight distributions. Although GM Feng has one of the strongest roots in Taiji, as evidenced by his Push Hands

mastery, he now places less importance on fixed rooting, in favor of greater freedom of tan tien rotation and fluidity of movement.

One of the major differences in the way in which GM Feng's practice differs from traditional Chen style relates to GM Feng's prohibition against excessive use of stamping and the use of shaking power. As far back as 1981, Feng cautioned against too much stamping as being likely to cause injury to the foot, ankle, nervous system, heart, and mind. He also believes excessive shaking movements can be injurious to the health of the internal organs and brain. Just as with repetitive stress injuries, the accumulation of effect caused by stamping and shaking can create physical and mental problems over time. He feels many Chen-form competitors overemphasize stamping and shaking to their own future detriment in terms of health. Although Feng does stamp at times, it is in a very relaxed and less forceful manner. His use of shaking power is very rare and focused, focusing more on the tan tien, rather than affecting the whole skeletal structure and brain. As Feng points out over and over again, Taiji should improve health and not endanger the health of the practitioner.

This concern for health and GM Feng's great reputation as a Qigong healer has also led him to eliminate or modify certain movements from the Chen form which he learned from Chen Fake, and to modify the way in which other movements are performed. An example of this is the movement #59 in the 83 Yi Lu form which requires a slap kick and then a drop into a half split of the legs onto the ground. Although this is a traditional Chen-style movement, GM Feng converts the movement into a lowering half-squat of the body as in "Ground Dragon" in the Chen style or as in the "Snake Creeps Down" or "Squatting Single Whip" movement from the Yang style. He rationalizes this based upon the lack of any real practical martial application and also for health reasons. He believes that splitting so close to the ground in such a stretched position leads to qi leakage, not to mention possible knee problems. For the same reason of avoiding qi leakage from the "Hui Yin" point on the pelvic underside, GM Feng advises against stances which are performed in too low of a "Horse Riding" stance, as commonly seen in many Chen-style competition performances.

These types of changes and comments have not endeared him to many traditional Chen village stylists. Based on the comments and changes made by Feng, as well as certain comments regarding Feng by certain Chen-style practitioners regarding the orthodoxy of his form and Feng's position as 18th-generation Chen representative, certain political problems have developed. This political situation has led to some unpleasantness among some Chen circles. Invitations to Feng to visit the Chen Village and teach on three separate occasions prior to 1980 have stopped. Although many of the leading Chen family representatives have studied from Feng at one time or another, there now appears to be a kind of "breaking off of diplomatic relations" between the two camps, which has increased over the years rather than narrowed. I bring this up only so that others may be forewarned.

GM Feng does not criticize traditional Chen style or try to separate Hun Yuan Taiji from Chen style. He believes that Chen style is also the product of combining many different styles. He points out that Chen style was created by General Chen Wanting based upon a system created by General Qi Jiguang (1528-1587), which was described in a book titled *The 32 Forms of the Canons of Boxing*. This system included 32 martial techniques taken from 16 major forms of Chinese martial arts then practiced in various areas in China. The book was part of a military textbook which was famous throughout Chinese military circles and most probably influenced General Chen Wangting, whom the Chen family credits with the creation of the Chen family fighting style, some 100 years later in the mid 1600's.

It is said that Chen Wangting developed seven sets of boxing routines in his spare time after he retired from the military and that 29 of the major techniques practiced by Chen were derived from the 32 techniques set out in the *Canons of Boxing*. Thereafter, the 7 routines were passed down to Chen Changxing (1771-1853), who then took the best of these routines and combined them into the two routines that we are familiar with today, and which were taught to Yang Luchan (1799-1872), who became famous as the originator of what eventually came to be known as the Yang style of Taiji. It is also said that Chen Fake (1887-1957), who was Feng's teacher, also modified the way in which the two forms were practiced, causing others to refer to his Chen style as the "Xin Jia" or "New Style" of Chen Taijiquan as opposed to the "LaoJia" or "Old Style" still practiced in the Chen Village today.

For this reason, there has been continued difference of opinion regarding whether the New Style was actually an improvement or something less than what was still taught in the Chen Village. To say it is an improvement slights the Chen villagers who did not have an opportunity to study directly with Chen Fake. GM Feng does not recognize this distinction in Chen Styles and neither did his teacher, Chen Fake. While most people, especially Chen villagers, do differentiate between the two, an argument can be made that this is not a separation of two different styles but rather a distinction between the different levels of Chen teachings and development.

GM Feng views these divisive, controversial arguments from another more lofty perspective. His focus is on the "Big Tao" and not on what he sees as petty differences. His aim is to encourage Taiji practitioners to reach the highest level of the Big Tao where form is less important than attaining the highest level of accomplishment and being. In his lecture on the "Origin and Proper Practice of Taijiquan" during his 2000 Finland workshop, he stated,

"What we are talking about is the higher level of philosophical Taoism and Taiji. We are not just talking about Taijiquan, but about Taiji and the Big Tao, the highest level and the Big Tao. What can we do with this Big Tao? We have the essence that transforms into qi and the qi, which transforms into the spirit. We have the spirit, which returns to emptiness, and we have the emptiness that returns back into the void. When you know this, you can get to the highest level and reach the Big Tao. Taijiquan is not just about Taiji boxing. It's about reaching the Big Tao."

Listening to GM Feng is like listening to the explanations of quantum physics. His view goes way beyond the mechanistic Newtonian view of the world. His explanations express the profundity of his genius and experience. He does not see Taijiquan as something different from the higher levels of Chinese Philosophical thought. Although always ready to demonstrate the myriad variations of application in both Push Hands and martial contexts, he prefers the lofty heights of Lao Tsu to the fixed approach of Taiji technicians. Of course, beginners must start somewhere, and for them he offers the simplicity of the Simplified Taiji 24 form. However, for those who want to go beyond, Hun Yuan is like a finger pointing to the moon. The focus must not be fixated on the finger of form lest one miss, in the immortal words of Bruce Lee, "all that heavenly glory."

I think back to an experience I had once when I was reading *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche. After reading, I was inspired to experience a meditation on what Taiji would mean to me if I were lying on my deathbed. Instead of a source of solace, I found that I was still wrestling with thoughts centered around technicalities, such as whether the hook hand arm should be straighter or more rounded and whether the fingers should point down more

pointedly or draw up towards the palm like holding an egg. I found out that I was not getting the ultimate benefit from my art of some 33 years at the final moment of my most important life challenge. However, listening to Feng discuss how one should practice, while he was simultaneously doing the form, was both inspirational and liberating. To study GM Feng demonstrating his form, one cannot help noting the convergence of both Taijiquan and Qigong. As he demonstrates, he sometimes even closes his eyes as if savoring and enjoying the bliss of his own practice. There are those who say he never practices the form in exactly the same way each time. He said practicing Taiji should not be like working on a job. Instead, he discussed the form in these poetic terms:

"What is it like to practice Taiji?"

- *Practicing Taiji is like enjoying a peaceful rest;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like experiencing the sensation of qi flowing smoothly and without obstruction through all the meridians;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like the harmonious balancing of yin and yang;*
- *Practicing Taiji feels like swimming in air;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like a moving form of "standing" skill;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like using the body to draw beautiful Taiji diagrams;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like drawing in the new (fresh qi) and expelling the old (stale or turbid qi);*
- *Practicing Taiji is like the total relaxation of body and mind;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like repairing and healing the mind, body and spirit;*
- *Practicing Taiji is like nourishing the body with the vast, upright qi of the Universe;*
- *Practicing Taiji is achieving the ultimate unification of Heaven, Earth and Man."*

Perhaps these words may not strike everyone with the same inspiration which filled me completely, like cooling waters in a parched and arid plain. Not everyone will achieve the same mastery of Taijiquan which GM Feng has attained. But all of us can be masters of our own spirituality, and, in that regard, Hun Yuan Taiji can be an extraordinary method of self-cultivation. GM Feng said there was a specific karmic reason for why we all found ourselves studying together in Finland, and, after 20 years of study, I believe that I found what I was really looking for all the while... the Taiji journey's final destination... The Big Tao.

There is so much more I could write about, but this was my attempt at an Introductory 101 type approach. I would encourage others to reread Yang Yang's scholarly article in the June 2000 issue of *Tai Chi Magazine*, and I must especially thank Yaron Seidman for his excellent

translation of GM Feng's words and meanings. Yaron's translation allowed GM Feng to talk to us directly as if there were no language or cultural barrier. I must also thank my teacher, Master Zhang Xue Xin, for his patient instruction over the last 10 years, which allowed me to fully appreciate GM Feng and his system. If GM Feng and Hun Yuan are the wheel, Master Zhang and his teachings were my spokes. I now understand what he has been saying all along, "details, ... gold!" I must also thank GM Feng's son-in-law Wang Feng Ming, for hosting GM Feng and GM Feng's grandson Chao Wang, for additional translations, and for organizing the Finland workshop.

I had the opportunity to meet privately with GM Feng to interview him regarding many of the questions I had regarding his Hun Yuan system. The following are excerpts which I felt would be of interest to the reader.

Interview with Grand Master Feng Zhiqiang

JJM: Can you explain the meaning of Hun Yuan as it relates to the name of the Hun Yuan Taiji?

FZ: Why do we call this system Hun Yuan? We call this Hun Yuan (HY) because it is the "Origin" or the "Original." We know that revolves in circles as well. It is the same as with the Sun and the Moon. The entirety of the universe is revolving in circles. Also, we people are also revolving in circles. Everything is revolving in circles together. So this term refers to the interrelated circling of everything in the universe. So HY refers to the original movement of the universe, the original meaning of Taiji.

The practice of Taiji involves the idea of expanding our energy and movement so large that there is nothing that can contain it; so concentrated that nothing can fit inside it. When you practice like this, you feel as big as the universe. So this HY Taiji is the Ultimate Taiji.

HY involves all different kinds of circles. It is the same as automobiles, trains, and bicycles; also planes and boats and rockets. They all rely on engines which depend upon circling motions in order to go.

It is through circles that "4 oz. can defeat 1000 pounds." But this takes time to develop. In Push Hands, if you push me straight, I can turn and make circles to neutralize your force, and you will be thrown away. But if you only go straight and your opponent is bigger and stronger than you, he can beat you with force. You must be completely relaxed and use circles to overcome the attack.

JJM: I have heard it said that HY Taiji places greater emphasis on circling the tan tien than on sinking and standing. Is this true?

FZ: There's greater emphasis in tan tien rotation. It is like the saying that "in stillness, there is movement; and in movement there is stillness."

JJM: In class you said that we should practice the form with bigger movements, but in application shouldn't the movements be small?

FZ: It's not necessary to use small movement in application. You can use bigger movements to catch the opponent's movement first, before he can get to you. As the "jing" energy is getting bigger so are the movements as well. Taiji has the meaning of the "Great" or "Greatest," and so every movement should be bigger. You should practice bigger and wider to practice Taiji.

JJM: I have heard it said that Master FZ has a "Qi Ball" which can go anywhere in his body. Is this true?

FZ: Yes, it is true, it can go anywhere through the "Jingluo" (qi channels).

JJM: Is it a ball that someone could see or something that just happens within the body?

FZ: It is not something that someone can see. It is like water which flows inside the body as a result of long practice.

JJM: Does this mean that when you do an application the qi will flow like a ball in the water to the point of contact?

FZ: That is correct.

JJM: What advice do you have for us on how to practice?

FZ: You must practice everyday. Even more important than the form practice is the Qigong practice. If you want to get to the highest level, you must practice HY Qigong, because it will help you to get to the highest level.

JJM: In the West, people have a strong belief in God. Can one include the concept of God in terms of seeking the highest level? In other words, can one practice HY Taiji as if praying to God?

FZ: Yes, you can include the concept of God (Shang Di) in your practice.

JJM: Thank you, Master Feng. I feel as if you have freed me from the narrow focus on form and made me think that the practice of Taiji is what it means to be alive.

FZ: That's very good.

JJM: Thank you for all your teachings. It is such a pleasure to see you again after so many (20) years. I was hoping to show you that you did not waste your time when you first taught me back in Beijing (1981).

FZ: I am happy to see you again also. Words cannot explain.