

The Chen Elder Movement, by Caroline Demoise, 2007

If Chen style taijiquan has ever captivated your heart, but you thought you were too old or it was too hard to learn you will enjoy reading about our experience. The birth of the “Elder Chen Movement” had its roots in the hearts of dedicated taijiquan students, instructors of Dr Lam’s in America, and in the enthusiasm of a patient teacher with a passion for teaching Chen style to practitioners wanting to learn this challenging, rewarding form.

Sandra, Shelia and I vowed to learn Chen when Sandra turned 70. Having heard about a teacher who would not teach Chen to anyone in their 60’s, Sandra was determined to dispel the myth that Chen was only for younger students, by learning it at 70. We liked the idea so much we agreed to join her, but we were not destined to wait that long. We planned a workshop at my home during the summer. Susan joined the group and Dan was enthusiastic about teaching us what he had learned about the Chen 36 form.



From June to August we dreamed of learning Chen, savored the thought and planned the week to include a visit to a local taijiquan school, an evening of music outdoors in Carrboro, food from the local organic co-op and several outings to wonderful restaurants. The bond between us was growing as we organized, planned and counted the days until we would be together again. The magic day arrived and when everyone was collected from the airport or had arrived by car, we spent Saturday night beginning our learning adventure. We ate and trained and talked taijiquan from morning until late at night and only went to sleep because we couldn’t stay up any longer. During this magical week, we discovered that with a patient teacher who broke difficult movements down into small absorbable segments, which we repeated until we were ready to add more, we were actually learning Chen and loving the experience. It was like being at a resort, with delicious meals created in the kitchen by our chef, my partner John, and the long breakfast and lunch conversations on the screened-in porch, with the sounds of water flowing from the bamboo fountain and the beautiful North Carolina trees, birds, squirrels and rabbits keeping us connected to nature.

This was a dream come true, for I had always been fascinated with the explosive power and energy of Chen, but felt it was beyond my grasp as an older practitioner of 63 because of the low stances, challenging movements and the internal force generated during Chen, which had always been a mystery. When I spent a day-long workshop in 2001 trying to learn Chen movements I felt discouraged, but the desire to experience Chen persisted and as my ability to touch the internal realm of taijiquan grew over the years, through the focused practice and teaching of Sun style, I was closing the gap between my perceived abilities, my desire and the actual learning of Chen.

In looking at the ingredients required for an older student to learn a form like Chen, it takes a strong desire and persistence from the student along with a patient, compassionate teacher who can break down movements and who is willing to teach Chen slowly at first, almost like Yang is taught, with a higher than normal Chen-like stance, using liberal doses of repetition

and without a judgmental bone in his body at the process required by each individual student to achieve the dream. But isn't this really just good teaching? It is certainly how Dr Lam has encouraged us as instructors to approach the art of teaching, by following the energy of the class, being attentive to their learning styles, modifying movements if necessary to keep students functioning within their comfort zone and, above all, holding in our consciousness the goal and vision of success for each student. An observer may have thought we tested Dan's creativity as a teacher, but in reality it was giving him an opportunity to experience his gift of teaching Chen to older students.



We call ourselves the “elder Chens” or “Chen elders”, an affectionate term meaning older people who are learning Chen style taijiquan. To commemorate the event and inspire other students who have always wanted to learn Chen but thought it was too difficult for their age, we created a tee shirt with the Chinese symbol of longevity and the taijiquan symbol with the words “Elder Chen Elder Chen Elder Chen” encircling the yin/yang symbol as a logo of the new emerging Elder Chen movement.

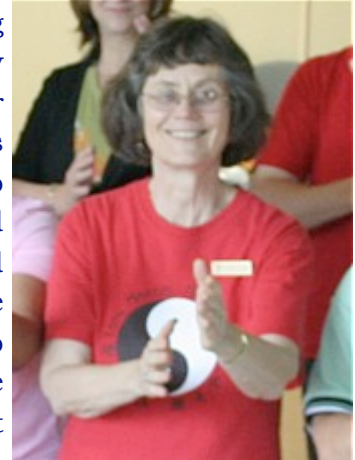
Please keep in mind that Chen may not be appropriate for some people with serious health challenges or balance issues, but it is within the grasp of older students who have been dedicated to practicing other styles of taijiquan and have used taijiquan principles in the gradual transformation of their bodies and their physical health. One does not have to nearly sit on the ground in the movement resembling Yang style's “Snake Creeps Down”, which is called “Dragon on the Ground” in Chen style. We are doing the form with a slightly higher stance and, at the moment we are thrilled with our accomplishment of dispelling the energy that Chen was too hard for us.

During the initial seven-day training, through Chen style, I experienced a deeper level of the heart and soul of taijiquan and felt a stronger connection to the wisdom of the ancients and the roots of taijiquan. My body feels a new relationship to the words of the principles, which tell us to first go left when you want to go right. The masters were telling us to begin a spiral movement by going slightly toward the left before you spiral the movement to the right. The graceful snake-like twisting I observe in Dr Lam's body when he demonstrates forms is beginning to move closer to my taijiquan reality as I experiment with moving my dan tian to lead Chen movements. I now feel taijiquan in a deeper way, as the Chen form is all about developing internal energy and this form will teach your body internal principles like no other form I have experienced. The key is readiness and receptivity. As many wise people have said, when the student is ready, the teacher appears. That must have been why Dan came to North Carolina and coached us on the Chen form. Chen is becoming my new mentor and teacher.

The energy of Chen has a very different feeling from the energy of Sun style or Yang, my first form. During Chen, a strong, passionate energy surges through my meridians and floods my body with a powerful feeling of being truly alive and virtually an unstoppable force. I experience more creativity and connection to my true nature as a joyful spirit. Chen energy seems to evaporate fatigue when strongly flowing. It feels like the juice of universal energy. During Sun style practice the energy I experience is more like the flow of a powerful, silent

river, deep, meditative and spiritual. Sun provides a different, softer connection to the source and feels like the ultimate in relaxation and stress management. The energy of Yang style to me is like a sturdy tree, powerful, deeply rooted and with the ability to clear cobwebs from my mind bringing me to a clear, calm focused state. It is a stately and powerful energy of connection.

Ultimately taijiquan is not about technique, but about reconnecting to your essence. When you allow taijiquan to mentor you by extracting yourself from mental programming and using your awareness to polish yourself on the stones of taijiquan principles during practice, you allow taijiquan to teach you how to return to your essence. Your essence is in reality connected with nature and universal forces. This connection is obscured by the perceptual and cultural programming in your mind from life's experiences and the mentoring of parents and teachers as you progress from childhood to adulthood. To become a sage and express the wisdom of experience in life is the challenge of your elder years. Taijiquan is an excellent mentor in this process.



Chen style taijiquan is represented historically as a founding structural essence from which many branches and styles of taijiquan flowered. My experience of Chen is that it is deeply rooted in the powerful cultivation of life energy. As you learn and follow the Chen sequence of movements, the mentoring quality of Chen invites you to strip away layer after layer of attitude, belief, or life experience that is incompatible with a direct experience of nature's raw power and the tangible connection of your spirit to these forces of nature. Chen calls you to a direct experience of your authenticity as an expression of life force. By allowing Chen's energy to flow freely through your body, you are allowing yourself to unite with the forces of nature and become more powerful.

Learning Chen 36 is an enriching experience on every level. On the physical level, it develops stamina and body awareness in a deeper way and opens the physical body to permit a stronger flow of energy. The spiral energy of the form teaches body coordination at a new level. There are a myriad of details for the mind to focus on, giving it a rich internal component and cultivating a higher level of mental focus. Chen is a form that has deep roots into the earth and a strong pull to harmonize with the power in nature, giving it a slightly different spiritual connection than other taijiquan forms.

For more information about tai chi, visit www.innerpathtaichi.com. Caroline teaches beginner classes in Sun Style Tai Chi in Chapel Hill, NC and Tai Chi instructor training workshops around the country.