

The *four squares* and the *four corners*

No topic is more fundamental to an understanding of *taijiquan* than the theory of the four squares and the four corners. The art's essence, even its *raison d'être*, is entirely bound up in the theory, function and philosophy of what in Chinese language are called the *si zheng* and the *si yu*.

It has been said by past masters, "Without an understanding of the *thirteen powers* one's art cannot properly be called *taijiquan*." The entire underpinning of the thirteen power model is anchored in the association between the *four squares* and *four corners*, known collectively as the *ba men* or *eight gates*. One of the opening statements in the 'Yang Family Forty Chapters' reads as follows:

It is indispensable to understand the *si zheng* and the *si yu*. The four-squares techniques are *peng, lü, ji, an*; the four-corners techniques are *cai, lie, zhou, kao*.

Understanding the relationship between these two elemental power archetypes is vital to apprehending the purpose of the *taijiquan*, and for evaluating and reconciling the art's vast array of methods, techniques and stylistic variations—even its history. Once having understood the premise of what might be called the '*four-four*' theory, even subjects falling well outside the topical range of *taijiquan* per se, can be opened up to principled abstract analysis.

Defining the *four squares* and the *four corners*

A very cursory summary of the *si zheng-si yu* theory might go as follows:

'When properly cultivated and effectively employed, use of the *si zheng* is preferable to the *si yu*. If the *si zheng* is ineffective or inadequate, employ the *si yu*.'

This simple statement sketches out a martial arts formula having to do with a theoretically superior combat strategy. But it has much broader implications. The ideas offered in these few words can be applied to any type of interaction whether or not conflict is present; to how events are understood and experienced; even to spiritual metamorphosis. They hint at something of the great and universal human story and the nature of the universe in which that story unfolds. They imply something about self-cultivation and the consequences of walking a lesser path. They are truths which, rather than begging to be embraced, offer themselves for embodiment.

The terms *si zheng* and *si yu* are rife with meaning. '*Si*'; the number *four*, and '*ba*'; the number *eight*, are richly connected to much in Chinese symbolism. Four is a number related obviously to direction. The notion of the cardinal directions—*north, south, east, west*—as related to the 'four-squares', and the four-diagonal directions—*north-east, north-west etc.*—related to the 'four-corners', reinforce a sense of primal significance. While the number four taken on its own can connote bad luck, the number eight is considered to be supremely fortunate. The idea of two components of four working together as a single module implies good fortune overcoming negative fates.

The compass points and *bagua* demonstrate the principle of cyclical exchange of *yin* and *yang* that operates endlessly in its course.

The *thirteen powers* for example, are almost always portrayed as; the five steps and the *eight gates*, and never as; the five steps, the *four squares* and the *four corners*. Possibly part of the reason so little discussion is devoted to them has had to do with this superstition. Whether or not this is the reason that the *si zheng* and *si yu* are generally lumped together into undifferentiated groupings of *eight* or *thirteen*, it is important that an effort be made to disentangle them so that they may be reassembled in a useful fashion.

Si zheng (四正)

In taijiquan push-hands curriculum, all roads lead to the study of '*sizheng tuishou*', the single most important technical drill in the art. In a perfect world—at least from a martial artist's standpoint—we would never need the four-corners. Our 'peng' would be perfect and our 'ji' would never get us into trouble. We would 'stick' perfectly to our opponents and be peerless masters. *Sizheng tuishou*, better known in English as 'four-hands', is a partner training drill essentially comprised of the four basic 'square' energies: *peng*, *lü*, *ji* and *an*. The drill is named for the concept which gives purpose to its existence.

'Zheng' as a quality, should inform four-hands practice both as to its method and its aims. With a consistent expression of the concept of *zheng* at the heart of one's study, the possibility of eventual mastery exists. On one level, commitment to the ideal of *zheng* makes attainable advanced levels of 'sticking and adhering' energy, qualities which hold the promise of high pugilistic achievement. But adopting *zheng* as a practice standard provides something else; an ethical frame of reference to temper martial prowess.

So what is *zheng*?

正 The word *zheng* as an adjective means: 'straight'; 'upright'; 'correct'; 'honest'; 'orthodox'. As a verb it means to: 'rectify'; 'set right'; 'correct'. The word implies decency, virtue, uprightness and righteousness. Its literal opposite '*buzheng*' means: 'askew', 'crooked', 'devious', 'lacking in integrity', 'improper', 'immoral', 'illegitimate'. *Fangzheng*, meaning 'square-shaped' or 'straightforward', is one of dozens of words that *zheng* combines with to give the impression of either physical or moral justness and directness. *Zhengdao* and *zhengde* (the same *dao* and *de* as *Daodejing*) mean respectively; the 'right way' and 'virtue'.

Undoubtedly the association of this word with principled practice is intentional. *Zheng* implies not only that expressions of power are clear and direct, but also that technique is guided by a moral compass. That the means to skill mastery also be a way toward inner awakening is explicitly stated in the *Taijiquan Lun*:

If the opponent's movement is quick, then I am quick.
If the opponent's movement is slow, then I follow slowly.
Although the variations are infinite, the principle remains the same.

In mastering movement, one gradually acquires '*Dong jin*'.

From the acquisition of *dong jin* one can reach *shen ming*
Without long, persistent and arduous practice one cannot understand.

Zhan-nian jin, the subtle energy acquired through *si zheng* practices, fosters perfect connection with an opponent or partner and a subtle mastery of movement, leading the practitioner toward self understanding (*dong jin*) and illumination (*shen ming*).

Taken together, the words *si zheng* evoke an elegant and high-minded image of four noble, decent, upright, honest qualities. When the subject of the four-square energies arises in practice or in research, the discerning practitioner will look for nuance in the notion of *zheng*, discovering: straightness inside the round *peng*; honest receiving in *lü*; a remedy for deviations in *ji*; and in *an*, forthrightness and directness. *Zheng* expresses itself differently depending on the form, the condition, the structure or the situation through which it is embodied, but it always *means* the same thing. What that is, is the lesson for every taijiquan player.

Si yu (四隅)

Well along in the taijiquan curriculum, a practitioner encounters one of the art's rarest and most challenging push-hands practices: '*da lü*', the 'large roll-back'. Although commonly over-stylized, sometimes to the point of near parody, *da lü* is a detailed study of the four 'diagonal' energies and is, properly speaking, an extended variation of 'four-hands'.

The four '*yu*': *cai*, *lie*, *zhou*, and *kao*, fulfill a number of important but potentially vital secondary functions in the thirteen powers theory. Like an army reserve, trained for unforeseen or overwhelming contingencies they await, ready to do battle, but only if the necessity arises. This is stated in the Yang Family 40 Chapters:

When (we) are unable to sensitively execute the four-square techniques, errors of lightness, heaviness, floating and sinking appear, thus the need for the *si yu* arises.

Without association to *zheng* they are crude, reckless, compulsion driven urges, lacking civility or a reasonable frame of reference. In affinity to *zheng* however, they are heroic in their potential. The *Yang family* material adds:

Practitioners with faulty technique have no choice but to compensate by using the corner techniques in an attempt to return to proper roundness and squareness. Although practitioners of the lowest order must resort to elbow- and shoulder-stroke to compensate for their deficiencies, even the most advanced practitioners must acquire skill in pull-down and split to return to proper form.

隅 The character '*yu*' is comprised of the left radical '*fu*' meaning 'hill' and the identically pronounced phonetic component '*yu*', which is often defined as 禺 'spider monkey' and is considered by etymologists to depict a beastly, demonic face, drooping arms and a grasping, prehensile tail. It may possible that the choice of *yu* by past masters, is reflective of this construction, especially considering the paramount role of '*cai*' or 'plucking' in bringing the *si yu* into play in *tui shou*.

Yu in its most general sense means ‘corner’. But it is possible to be *inside* a corner or *outside* a corner. *Yu* also means: ‘nook’, ‘angle’, ‘border’ or ‘outlying place’. It is related to *jiao* which also means ‘corner’. The words *yu* and *jiao* are closely related but whereas *jiao* either refers to the outer aspect of a corner (lit. ‘horn’) or tends to describe ‘corner’ in terms of mathematics and geometry: eg. *sanjiao*; *sijiaoxing*, meaning ‘triangle’ and ‘quadrangle’, *yu* implies both the *inner* and *outer* aspects, as well as the *function* of a corner—and also more abstract connotations of corner(ed) such as exasperation born of remoteness, confinement and isolation.

Just as *zheng* infers character qualities beyond mere physical alignment, the word *yu* in some way transcends the description of simple lateralness and is bound up in conditions which might well be described as emotional and psychological. Here in the corners a sense of risk is present. What are the emotional and psychological factors which come into play when one is *cornered*, or when one *corners* another? In diagonal play the potential for straying from uprightness, composure and fair play is great, as emotions become charged.

The image of an animal in a cage, pacing restlessly from one corner to the other, trying to find a way out, shaking its constraints, suits the interaction of the grasping, rending, jostling qualities found in the energies of the *si yu*. These are energies born of unchosen conditions; the sense of being impinged upon, pinned down, unstable, confused. Arising unconsciously and instinctively as they are wont do in the untrained individual, the lateral energies are mindlessly willful and can lead to a complete unravelling of guidelines, becoming self-defeating in their grabbing and lurching.

Some seeming headway may be made employing this ‘method’ in the short term but taking the long view, the corner energies, if relied upon excessively, put dramatic limits on progress toward mastery in *taijiquan*. Like the caged creature mentioned above, practitioners frequently wind up endlessly repeating the dramatic and emotional cycles incited by *cai*, *lie*, *zhou* and *kao*—‘wrestling’ with problems rather than engaging and transforming them.

When properly cultivated, the corner energies are doggedly purposeful and can be powerful and dangerous weapons. However, even in cases where these energies are mastered to a significant extent and employed effectively, use of the corner energies as a main means of solving predicaments has the effect of escalating strife and provoking conflict. This produces directly, the twin undesirable outcomes of: giving birth to vicious cycles of frenzied but uninspired interplay; and promoting strategies of pre-emption—both antithetical to the purpose and spirit of the *taijiquan*.

For this reason *si yu* must be tempered by *si zheng*.

Contrast and compliment in the *si zheng* and *si yu*.

Square energy by its nature, approaches centre by settling into *where centre is* and supporting or maintaining it. Some master instructors have even gone so far as to translate *tuishou* as ‘join hands’. Success with the *si zheng* requires and engenders

qualities such as ‘sticking, listening, comprehending and receiving’, traits which must be embodied if they are to be put to dependable service. For this reason others have dubbed *tuishou* ‘sensing hands’. By focusing on such anti-egotistical qualities as joining, sensing, supporting, trusting etc. four-squares study furnish direct and immediate results with regard to self-cultivation.

In contrast—even by definition—lateral activity rouses movement *away from centre*, pulling, dividing, extending and leaning. The *si yu* therefore is characterized by energies which attempt to hang onto, recover or compensate for what has been lost, traits which must be either well contextualized or even overcome if relationship to centre is to be meaningfully established. As a tool to personal transformation, study of the four-corners is more an exercise in the regulation and sublimation of raw instinct—how to bring fervent impulses under control that they may be channelled into service.

Both facets of the *ba men* are reflective of issues related to spiritual progress and the quest for personal freedom. In completely different ways, each requires letting go and each possesses the potential for remarkable tenacious power as a consequence of such release. The *si zheng* and *si yu* challenge the dominance of the ego by reframing such issues as: relaxation and tension; trust and control; consciousness and instinct; helping to redefine power in terms of Tai Chi values and soft-power principles.

Owing to this discourse, one might arrive at the notion that the *si yu* are antithetical to the *si zheng*. But this is not the case. From a purely technical standpoint the four-corners are extensions of latent diagonal aspects within the four-squares. For example: *cai* and *lie* are organic extensions of the somewhat lateral *lü* (which is itself born of *peng* and *an*). They represent continuance beyond the range of the square and, when are studied in this context, are directly connected with the *si zheng* concept as a contrasting but complimentary part. They are counterparts—yin and yang—and, as far as the thirteen powers theory is concerned, indispensable to one another.

The problem is, that owing to factors of human development and make up: survival anxiety, the acquisition impulse, xenophobia, dominance cravings etc; default to the diagonal *si yu* mechanisms as an initial response to scenarios involving questions of self-assertion, seem not only natural but necessary. Until a process of intentional self-cultivation is embarked upon—one which which simultaneously curbs grasping impulses while providing an alternative to them—deficiencies inherent in the uncultured diagonal tend to deteriorate inexorably into even more desperate variations. *Taijiquan* practices, while rooted in martial arts aims, are designed in such a way as to overcome this tendency—but this can only work if the practiced remain grounded in the basic four-four theory. Understanding the *si zheng* as a basis for proper study of the *si yu* is at the heart of the *taijiquan* method and makes possible free improvisation with the ‘thirteen powers’:

First perfect the *si zheng* hand techniques; then learn *cai*, *lie*, *zhou* and *kao*.
When you can execute the *si yu* techniques, the *shisan shi* can go on endlessly.

Buzheng

Some individuals are possessed of a near complete inability to de-structure their competitive intention, to the point where little or no learning ever takes place in their *taijiquan* practice. In this environment, crude habits, born of instinct but honed by heedless egocentricity, dominate, leading to such ugly forms of escalation that it is impossible to describe the results as even 'bad' *taijiquan*. Where such conditions exist that both *si zheng* and *si yu* energies have degraded into an utterly polluted state, we may speak of '*buzheng*'.

Training *taijiquan* under *buzheng* conditions is virtually pointless. Aggressive grabbing, torquing and clinging, or cheap-shot lunges with hands, elbows and shoulders may provide a certain measure of reward, but only in a vain-glorious mission. When these are the prime strategies, the practice is *buzheng*. It is, to state it generously, improper or illegitimate as *taijiquan*. But such practice (and often the accompanying practitioner) is not merely askew, it is lacking in integrity, often devious and perhaps even immoral. It leads nowhere useful except to the occasional reinforcement of its own deluded justification and is roundly criticized both in classical texts and by traditional instructors. A pervasive quality of desperate interaction, while perhaps in some circumstances understandable or even useful as a test condition, is antithetical to the principles and values of the art.

The *si zheng* arise in and give birth to, conditions of sufficiency. The *si yu* arise in and reconcile, conditions of deficiency. But desperate *buzheng* practice is to be avoided as is well stated in the Yang text:

You may expand and contract as you desire but never violate the principle of *taiji*.

The line between overly lateral and flat-out *buzheng* practices and practitioners, can be quite thin from a technical standpoint. Sometimes this is distinguishable only by subjectively perceived character traits such as ratio of 'good-will to malign intention', or by factors such as level of experience, awareness or even intelligence. Occasionally a practitioner might have learned and trained a technically *buzheng* method believing it to reflect the art's core values and may, although being out of touch with central tenets, be so in a well meaning way.

Other players, trading on physical or personality based attributes (e.g. quick, rangy, strong, aggressive, sneaky or belligerent types), forsake soft-power principles for the ego-jolt provided by momentary superiority. In some cases this is due to a lack of awareness as to other approaches (the quality of instruction in *taijiquan* is by no means uniform) but in the worst instances it is little more than mean-spiritedness masquerading as *taijiquan*. Often such 'taiji impersonators' camouflage their hostility in difficult-to-challenge rhetoric and, especially if the rhetorician can back up claims with some degree of ferocity, reasoned discussion or appeals tend to be sidetracked, misconstrued and returned with enmity.

In any case the long term remedy is always the same. A return to the guidelines and principles of *taijiquan* always provides a solution to problems of any type and magnitude encountered along the taiji path. Finding one's way back to the *si zheng* path need not necessarily be such a difficult undertaking. Often, for dedicated players who will devote time to the art one way or another, a few minor shifts in focus and priority can go a long way. In a sympathetic environment progress can be made fairly quickly. For the sincere practitioner willing to divest him or herself of a few cherished habits the process can be revelatory. If, owing to unalterable *buzheng* conditions of either the technical or ethical variety, one cannot make progress, another path toward mastery must be sought—perhaps even a change of study and learning environments. Practitioners entirely attached to their *buzheng* practices tend toward ego-based isolation anyway and are best left alone, saving in the event of some amendment to their temperament and way of going about things.

Si zheng and Wu bu

Simply summarized, it is impossible in *taijiquan* to make significant progress in *si zheng* training when errors predominate basic stance-work. In fact, it is largely due to misconceptions in stance structure, that deficiencies arise which force practitioners unnecessarily into the four-corners, and beyond into *buzheng*. This issue is addressed in *taijiquan* by study of the 'wu bu' or 'five steps'. The five steps, combined with the 'eight-gates' (*si zheng* and *si yu*), comprise the 'thirteen powers'.

The *si zheng*, *si yu* and *wu bu* must thoroughly reinforce one another: corporeally—in actual training and martial application; and conceptually—for the devising of valid methods and the furtherance of *taijiquan* theory. Lacking reinforcement from proper stance behaviour, the four-four theory is untenable and practices will become unavoidably distorted. Hence the statement, "Without an understanding of the *thirteen powers*, one's art cannot properly be called *taijiquan*."