

The Concept of Central Equilibrium in Taijiquan

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Translated by Rick Halstead

This article is drawn from a talk given by Liu Hsi-heng in Taiwan; it was also published in *Taijiquan Zazhi*. This translation originally appeared in *T'ai Chi Player* No. 3 (1985) pp. 7-10, and is reprinted with permission of the author, with minor edits added. The Chinese version of Zheng Manqing's *Thirteen Treatises* mentioned in the article can be found in both *Zhengzi Taijiquan Shisan Pian* (Cheng Tzu's Thirteen Treatises on T'ai Chi Ch'uan) and *Zhengzi Taijiquan Zixiu Xinfu* (Master Cheng's New Method of Taijiquan Self-Cultivation).
—Editor

What is "Central Equilibrium"?

Central Equilibrium (*zhongding*) is the last of taijiquan's thirteen postures. Zheng Manqing has three explanations of this term in his book, *Cheng Tzu's Thirteen Treatises on T'ai Chi Ch'uan*.

The term "Central Equilibrium" can be found in Zheng's afterword to the *Thirteen Treatises*, which reads: "Physiologists state that the navel is the body's center of gravity. The position of the navel and its significance is exactly the same as that of the *dantian*. The center of gravity is what

in taijiquan is called Central Equilibrium. Central Equilibrium cannot be divorced from the *dantian*. It is said in the Taijiquan Classics, 'The essence of life originates in the waist,' and 'the mind should be focused on the waist at all times.' The Taijiquan Classics also state that, '[everything is] controlled by the waist,' and 'the waist is like an axle.'"

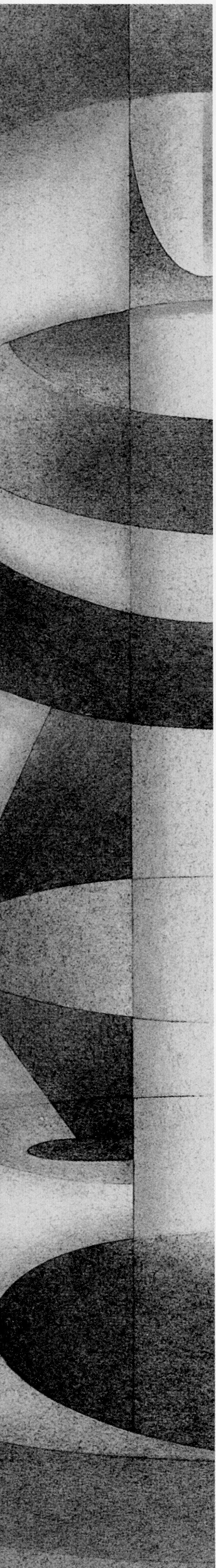
In Zheng's Chapter Ten, we find another explanation of Central Equilibrium: "The outside of a grindstone turns, but the center does not turn (move). The turning of the grindstone is analogous to the turning of the waist. That the center does not turn can be equated with Central Equilibrium, in which the qi sinks to the *dantian*."

An even more detailed explanation of Central Equilibrium is contained in Chapter Twelve of the *Thirteen Treatises*: "That which is unchanging amidst external transformations is the most essential principle of the Thirteen Postures. That which is called the transformations is the mutual interplay and evolution of the yin and the yang, the hard and the soft. In the manifestation of the Thirteen Postures, there is nothing which is unchanging. In the 'essence and function' (*tiyong*) of the Thirteen Postures, Central Equilibrium is the only one which embodies the principle of unchanging solidity. The Chinese term 'Central Equilibrium'

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Illustration: David Chen

chen (ch'en)	sink
dantian (tan-t'ien)	Elixir Field
gongfu (kung-fu)	skill, achievement
song (sung)	relaxed
zhongding (chung-ting)	Central Equilibrium



is composed of two words, *zhong* and *ding*. *Zhong* means to be 'balanced and centered at all times.' *Ding* means 'to be secure and stable, but not stagnant or immobile.' By not losing one's Central Equilibrium, the *ding* will be strong. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, it is said that one should not be of a partial or changing disposition. This is the unchanging principle of Central Equilibrium." From the preceding words of Zheng Manqing, we can make the following generalization: Central Equilibrium, simply speaking, is the ability to maintain a stable and secure center of gravity and to sink the qi into the *dantian*. This kind of Central Equilibrium is eternally unchanging and must not be lost even for an instant.

Central Equilibrium's Benefits

What are the benefits of Central Equilibrium? Central Equilibrium is the most fundamental of the thirteen taijiquan postures. All of the other postures (Wardoff, Rollback, Press, Push, Pull, Split, Elbow, Shoulder, Forward, Backward, Look Left, Look Right) have Central Equilibrium as their basis. Without Central Equilibrium, they simply cannot exist. Therefore, it can be said that taijiquan without Central Equilibrium is not true taijiquan. From these words, we can understand what an important position Central Equilibrium holds in taijiquan.

Regarding what benefits can be accrued from the practice of Central Equilibrium, I would like to briefly mention the following few essential points. First, according to the universal rules of physics, whatever has a fixed and secure center of gravity is stable and at rest. If an object's center of gravity is tilted or inclined in any direction, it will collapse and fall. Central Equilibrium is that which causes the center of gravity to be stable and secure.

In an exchange with an opponent, Central Equilibrium does not allow one to lose one's center of gravity and be toppled.

Secondly, if one can maintain one's center of gravity, one's posture will be straight and centered; in this way, one will be able to "hold the body balanced and upright, tranquil and relaxed." This idea is also expressed in the phrase "to support the eight directions." Therefore, having a fixed and secure center of gravity not only enables one's own body to be stable and firm, but at the same time is also an excellent method for dealing with an opponent.

Another benefit of Central Equilibrium is that it allows the qi to sink to the *dantian*, the basic method by which qi can be cultivated. To focus the qi in the *dantian* is also the "gongfu of the Dao of nurturing life." Zheng Manqing frequently mentions the benefits of the proper cultivation of qi in his book *Thirteen Treatises*. For example, in Chapter Eleven, he writes that the sinking of the qi down into the *dantian* is the foundation upon which to cultivate the qi. In Chapter Three, it is said that to focus the mind and the qi together in the *dantian* is the gongfu of harmonizing the water and fire [elements]. The Taijiquan Classics go one step further when they say: "The mind should be concentrated on the spirit, not on the qi;" and also: "Without dependence upon the qi one will be like pure steel. This [becoming like pure steel] will take place after one's taijiquan has attained the level of unobstructed oneness." This is the same as Laozi's expression, "concentrate the qi to bring about the pliability [of an infant]." It is also said that, "if one gathers the mind and qi in this way one can drive away sickness and lengthen one's years;" however, this is of secondary importance. In addition, in all of the chapters except Chapters One and Four can be found valuable explanations of the center of gravity

and of the qi sinking to the *dantian*. I hope that each of my fellow practitioners can further research and expand upon the ideas I have just discussed.

What are the Methods of Practicing Central Equilibrium?

The method of practice is both the most important aspect of Central Equilibrium as well as the most difficult to explain. What I would like to discuss here are those few aspects of Zheng Manqing's words and theory concerning this topic that I have been able to understand and personally realize. First, I will examine the phrase, "diligently seek the balanced and upright." In the afterword of Zheng Manqing's book *Thirteen Treatises* it states: "The Taijiquan Classics say that one should stand balanced and support the eight directions. Remaining centered and straight, tranquil and relaxed—this is what is called 'seeking the balanced and upright' and 'not losing one's center of gravity.' Although these two words 'balanced' and 'upright' are very ordinary, they are the basis of Central Equilibrium. Regardless of whether one is practicing the form or pushing hands, it is necessary to diligently seek the balanced and upright. Only if one's postures are centered and straight can the entire body's muscles and tendons open up and relax. As a result of this opening up and relaxing, the trunk of the body will sink down and in this way be able to achieve the ability to *song* and *chen* (relax and sink). This is Central Equilibrium."

Furthermore, because *song* and *chen* arise from being balanced and upright, we can say that being balanced and upright is the most fundamental prerequisite for the practice of Central Equilibrium. In addition to seeking the balanced and upright in the body's postures, the mind must also seek

these two attributes; only then will one's *gongfu* be thorough and complete. Only if the mind is level and calm and only if one's thoughts are upright and straight will it be possible to put everything extraneous aside and avoid nervous agitation. In this manner, one can achieve a state of completely relaxed Central Equilibrium.

Maintaining Central Equilibrium

The next point I would like to talk about is the practice of maintaining one's Central Equilibrium at all times. Zheng explains Central Equilibrium in his Chapter Twelve as follows: "*Zhong* is to be balanced and centered at all times. *Ding* is to be secure and stable, but not stagnant or immobile." By not losing one's Central Equilibrium, the *ding* will be strong. That is to say, at all times and in all circumstances one must not fail to "maintain one's Central Equilibrium." This point is extremely important, and it is also very difficult to achieve. It is absolutely essential not to overlook the practice of maintaining Central Equilibrium at all times. Zheng gives very important instructions on this practice in his Chapter Thirteen:

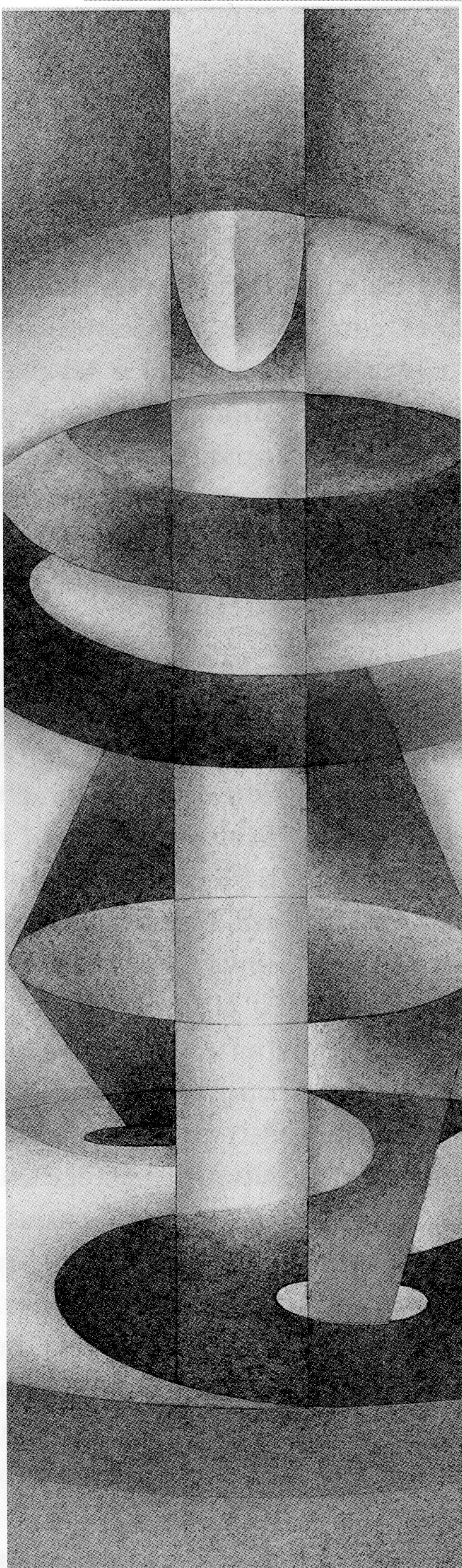
1. ["The outside] of a grindstone turns, but the center does not turn (move). The turning of the grindstone is analogous to the turning of the waist. That the center does not turn can be equated with Central Equilibrium in which the qi sinks to the *dantian*." This means that no matter how the waist turns, one's Central Equilibrium remains centered and stable. Two phrases often come to mind when I think of Central Equilibrium: "Unmoved amongst the changing circumstances," and a sentence from the *Analects*: "To hold to the Middle Path without being influenced by circumstances—this is to hold to the One." I

find these statements very similar to the concept of Central Equilibrium and perhaps easier to understand.

2. In Chapter Thirteen, it is stated: "Before utilizing *an* and *chi* it is essential to first gather one's *jin* and not lose one's Central Equilibrium." This means that even when one is not releasing *jin* or is remaining stationary, Central Equilibrium is absolutely necessary. Furthermore, when one is releasing *jin* it is even more essential not to lose one's Central Equilibrium. This method is called "gathering the *jin*" and is no different in meaning from "seek the balanced and upright," and "do not lose your Central Equilibrium."

3. In Chapter Thirteen, it says that, "in the process of changing from 'insubstantial' to 'substantial,' the right hand is the substantial hand, and the internal strength is transferred to the insubstantial left hand through the spinal column. When the left foot is substantial, the internal strength is transferred to the right foot through the spinal column. The spinal column must be straight and upright—only then can one maintain one's Central Equilibrium." When maintaining fixed, stationary postures one absolutely must have Central Equilibrium; and in the process of change and movement one also needs a straight and upright spinal column and back. This is one of the secrets of maintaining an unchanging Central Equilibrium.

As can be seen from the preceding three examples, Central Equilibrium must be maintained at all times and in all circumstances. Central Equilib-



rium has its own unchanging uniqueness which Zheng Manqing describes as follows: "One can [easily] walk on naked blades, but to understand the *Doctrine of the Mean* is very difficult." The "difficulty" mentioned here is the difficulty of maintaining Central Equilibrium at all times and in all circumstances. The methods of practicing Central Equilibrium mentioned above appear to be very simple and ordinary. However, as I learned from a period of very careful study, the more one practices the methods, the more one realizes that these words of Zheng Manqing really have something to them, and are not merely casual, off-the-cuff remarks. Each of you need only carefully examine and diligently practice these methods and then you will be certain to gain something from your efforts.

Moving Gongfu

Next, I would like to raise a point which I think should be particularly emphasized—namely, the method of practicing "moving *gongfu*." This so-called practice of moving *gongfu* not only refers to the practice of keeping balanced and straight and retaining one's Central Equilibrium while in *stationary postures*, but also includes the idea that one must at all times be balanced and straight and remain in a state of Central Equilibrium when in the *process* of moving. Moving *gongfu* differs from stationary *gongfu* in that the former emphasizes practice within movement while the latter stresses stationary postures and methods of practice. By ignoring the practice of moving *gongfu*

and merely giving one's attention to stationary *gongfu*, it is absolutely impossible to maintain a state of Central Equilibrium at all times.

Mind and Qi in Dantian

There is one final method of practice which I would like to bring to your attention—that is, gathering the mind and the qi together in the *dantian*. I have already mentioned this practice as being the basic foundation for cultivating the qi and also as the “Way of nurturing life.” Zheng Manqing gives the following instructions in the “Introductory Discussion” in his book *New Methods of Self-Practice*; “Let the qi sink to the *dantian*. The *dantian* is located 1.3 inches below the navel in the stomach region between the back and the navel. The *dantian* is closer to the navel than to the back in the ratio of three to seven. First use the mind to direct the qi so that it easily and gradually sinks downward. The sinking of the qi should not be sudden or abrupt, for this will cause the qi to rise up. The secret to this is contained in four words: *xi*, *chang*, *jing*, and *man* (thin, long, calm, slow). By being in accord with these four principles, one will become quite adept and the mind and the qi will at all times be focused in the *dantian*. In this way, there will be true cultivation of qi without harm.”

In another chapter of Zheng's *New Methods of Taijiquan Self-Cultivation* it is said: “The ancients said that no matter whether walking, sitting, standing, or sleeping, the mind and the qi must not leave the dantian, just as a mother chicken cannot leave her hatching eggs. The Way cannot be divorced from this [principle]; that which is separated from this [principle] is not the Way.”

In today's talk I have mentioned a few methods of practice. In the Thirteen Treatises there are many other quite detailed references to this subject which I have not time to discuss now. Although there is nothing particularly mysterious or mystical in these explanations, they refer to the methods by which each of you should practice.

Concluding Remarks

Central Equilibrium is the only one of the Thirteen Postures which is unchanging. I believe that the principle of “yield oneself to others” which is found in the Taijiquan Classics can be applied to any of the Thirteen Postures, such as Wardoff, Rollback, Press, Push, Pull, Split, Elbow, Shoulder, Step Forward, Step Backward, Look Left, and Look Right. The only one of the Thirteen Postures to which this principle does *not* apply is Central Equilibrium. When an opponent wants me to Wardoff, then I Wardoff (in the same way, that I would Rollback, Press, Push, etc.). If an opponent does not want me to Wardoff, then I don't Wardoff (and the same goes for the other postures). If my opponent wants me to have Central Equilibrium, then of course I oblige him; but if my opponent wants me to lose my Central Equilibrium, I must still maintain my Central Equilibrium and must not change. Therefore, it can be said that Central Equilibrium is eternally unchanging and must not be lost even for an instant. This meaning is expressed by the Buddhist phrase: “While in accordance with [external] conditions he does not change [internally]. Not changing [internally] he accords with [external] conditions.” In Confucianism there are two phrases, *you suo bu wei* (to be ethical and upright) and *shizhong* (Correct Timing), which are very similar in meaning. The taijiquan association which Zheng Manqing founded and formerly headed took *shizhong* as its name. The essence of these two words is no different from the practice of maintaining an unchanging Central Equilibrium at all times, from upholding the high moral integrity expressed in *you suo bu wei*, or from the practice of focusing your mind and qi on the *dantian* at all times. The essence of these two phrases is, in fact, a basic guide for the practice of taijiquan, for the nurturing of life, and for leading one's life. To completely understand these truths is the real *gongfu* of Central Equilibrium. 