



Session Two Stances and Transitions

Taijiquan Core Principles are descriptions of the essential criteria for practice based on natural laws governing human structure, movement, and function. They are trainable concepts meant to be integrated into any and all *taijiquan* solo and partner practices. Core-principles exercises can be used in form-practice sessions as warmups or they can be trained independently. One's experience of the art is enhanced when one practices according to *taijiquan* core principles.

1. Stance

Stance-based movement is a hallmark of most traditional Chinese martial-art styles including *taijiquan*. Stong stance work can be likened to a well laid house foundation—if the foundation is weak or askew, the house will be unstable and its structure-dependant systems faulty.

What is meant by 'stance?'

In a general sense, the term 'stance' is used to describe positions and actions not only of the feet but also of the legs (especially the hip, knee and ankle joints) and waist when performing *taijiquan*. All 'stances' involve a degree of knee flexion that causes shallow to deep squatting in standing positions that are meant to support a wide range of attack and defence possibilities. 'Stances' are commonly identified as distinctive postural forms and have characterizing names; the 'one-leg stance' of 'golden rooster stands on one leg,' for example, is distinct from that of the 'squatting stance' used in 'snake creeps down.'

Naturally proportioned stance

An important principle with regard to establishing a correct 'naturally-proportioned stance' has to do with how one steps out from the support leg. In basic practice, a step should not extend farther than or nearer than the reach of the stepping leg based on the ratio between the length of the extending leg and the bending depth of the supporting leg. Stepping out further than the length-depth ratio generates 'falling' and 'short' steps. When these errors occur, it is not possible to study other aspects of stance.

2. The hip-track

The term 'hip-track' refers to the path along which the pelvis travels when weight is transferred from one leg to another in a primary stance. Moving through the hip-track ensures 'rootedness'—a kind of deep stability, felt by the practitioner as 'connection with the ground' resulting from the alignment between the hip joints, thighs, knees, ankles and the base of the feet.

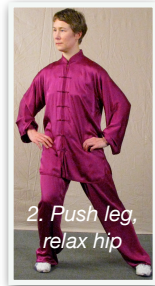
The hip joints do not directly generate movement. Their rotational movement is a consequence of pressure brought to bear by contraction of the hip muscles actions of the legs, especially the thighs. If the hip area is permitted to relax, driving actions from the legs will cause the hip-track to appear during weight shifting.



Generating movement through the hip-track

1. Sink into the 'horse' stance

Standing comfortably with the feet about shoulder width apart, relax the soles of the feet, the ankle area, the knee area, and the hips. Feel the weight of the upper body pressuring down into the relaxed leg joints. Allow the muscles around these joints—the ankles, knees, and hips—to give way, bending gently under the weight of the upper body and settling into a comfortable stance proportionate to the width of the feet. One is now at the neutral centre of a 'horse stance' (*mabu*) and can begin to shift from one side to the other.

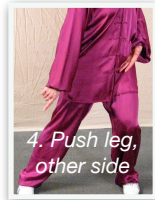


2. Move through the right side of the hip-track

With the left leg, begin pushing directly down into the ground. If the right hip is completely relaxed during the left leg's downward push, there will be an immediate reaction of rotation in the right hip and the body's weight will shift from the middle of the stance toward its right side. If the left leg continues pushing downward, the hip will continue rotating and the stance will move toward its extreme position on the right side. The path the rotating hip takes as it moves from centre to the right is the right side of the hip-track.

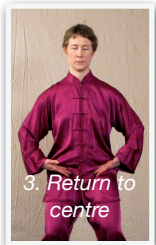
3. Return to centre

Discontinuing the left leg's downward push causes the right hip to 'un-rotate' and the weight to begin to shift back toward the centre of the stance as the right hip returns through the hip-track.



4. Move through the left side hip-track

The stance shifting process can now be repeated with the right foot pushing downward causing the left side of the hip-track to appear.



3. Stance types

Primary stances

Two basic 'primary' or 'natural' stance types are distinguished from one another by the positional relationship between the two feet when both feet are on the ground and bearing weight. The first of these is called 'horse stance' (*mabu*) where the player squats down as if riding a horse. The second is the 'bow stance' (*gongbu*) where the two legs together form a bow-and-arrow shape with the majority of the body's weight is on the front leg. A bow stance can be narrow, medium, or wide depending on its stance proportion.

Secondary stances

Two 'secondary' stances are characterized by extreme weightedness on one leg. The first of these is the 'empty stance' (*xubu*) where one leg is largely free from weight bearing but still touches the floor with either the heel or toe. Next, the 'one-leg stance' (*dulibu*) occurs when one leg is entirely off the ground. Secondary stances—*xubu* and *dulibu*, are typically formalized in postures, for example, the empty stance is found in 'white crane spreads its wings' but they can also be understood as transitional mid-points between and within other stances.

The basic stances

Primary stances

1. horse stance (*mabu* 馬步)
2. bow stance (*gongbu* 弓步)
 - wide bow stance
 - medium bow stance
 - narrow bow stance

Secondary stances

1. empty stance (*xubu* 虛步)
 - on heel
 - on toe
2. one-legged stance (*dulibu* 獨立步)

4. Properties of stance

Other factors to consider when studying stance in *taijiquan* include various properties of the stance, especially, 'stance proportion,' 'angle of base and step,' and 'weighting of stance.'

Stance proportion

Stance proportion refers to the relationship between the *forward-axis* ⇑ and *side-axis* ⇒ relationship in a given stance. In a naturally-proportioned stance (with no over or under-stepping), the percentages of forward and side stepping will add up to 100%.

Stance type	Support leg	Stepping leg	Example
1. horse stance	0% ⇑	100% ⇒	'Opening form'
2. wide bow stance	15% ⇑	85% ⇒	'Part horse's mane'
3. medium-wide bow stance	50% ⇑	50% ⇒	'Brush knee'
4. narrow stance	85% ⇑	15% ⇒	'Single whip'

It is also possible to approach stance proportion in terms of the *angle of base and step*. For example, in a 'medium-width bow stance' (proportioned 50%-50%), the angle of step is 45° away from the base support leg (heel) which is rotated outward 45°. Here the angles add up to ninety degrees.

Stance type	Support leg °	Stepping leg °		
1. horse stance	0° ⇑	90° ⇒		'Opening form'
2. wide bow stance	17.5° ⇑	72.5° ⇒		'Part horse's mane'
3. medium-wide bow stance	45° ⇑	45° ⇒		'Brush knee'
4. narrow stance	72.5° ⇑	17.5° ⇒		'Single whip'

With practice, it is possible to feel if a stance is naturally proportioned or not. In the early stages of learning *taijiquan* curriculum, study of stance proportion should be a major focus.

Weighting of stance

'Weighting' refers to the relative distribution of weight on each of the legs. In *taijiquan* 'postures,' a leg is often designated as either the 'front' or 'back' leg. The leg can also be described as 'weighted' or 'unweighted' referring to how much weight that leg bears. A leg that bears less or no weight is often described as 'empty,' 'insubstantial,' or 'yin,' while a leg bearing more or full weight is referred to as the 'full,' 'substantial,' or 'yang' leg. The two legs are often compared in terms of percentages: a '50-50 stance' a '60-40,' a '70-30,' or an '80-20' stance. An 'empty stance' is usually thought of as '100-0' while a 'horse stance' is '50-50.'

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5. Transitions

Transitions are the actions that take place when shifting from one stance to the next. Some transitions occur directly between two stances oriented in the same direction. Some transitions are indirect such as 'turn-body' transitions that link stances facing in different directions.

Direct stance transitions examples

Transition type

Bow stance to bow stance	<i>gongbu</i> ⇒ <i>gongbu</i>
Empty stance to bow stance	<i>xubu</i> ⇒ <i>gongbu</i>
Bow stance to empty stance	<i>gongbu</i> ⇒ <i>xubu</i>
Empty stance to empty stance	<i>xubu</i> ⇒ <i>xubu</i>
One-leg stance to one-leg stance	<i>dulibu</i> ⇒ <i>dulibu</i>

Example

'Left brush knee' to 'right brush knee'
'Play guitar' to 'brush knee'
'Brush knee to 'play guitar'
'Repulse like monkey' to 'repulse like monkey'
'Kick with sole' to 'golden rooster'

Indirect stance transitions examples

Transition type

Bow stance to bow stance (180°)	<i>gongbu</i> ⇒ <i>gongbu</i>
Bow stance to bow stance (90°/270°)	<i>gongbu</i> ⇒ <i>gongbu</i>
Empty stance to empty stance (360°)	<i>xubu</i> ⇒ <i>xubu</i>

Example

'press' to 'single whip'
'fair maiden' to 'fair maiden'
'retreat tiger' to 'sweep lotus'



An example of a left bow stance to right bow stance transition

1. Left bow stance
2. Sink back, lift left toe
3. Turn left leg from hip
4. Shift weight to left leg
5. Lift right heel
6. Draw in right leg
7. Step with right heel
8. Right bow stance

Photo model: Master Kelly Maclean