

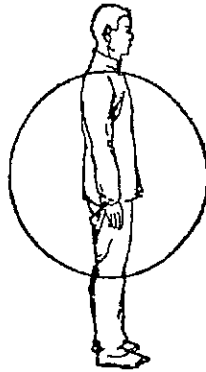
Chen Techniques for Rotating the Dantian

By Martin Mellish

Rotating the dantian connects internal power to your external form. If you practice traditional Yang Style, you focus primarily on rotating the dantian in a horizontal plane around a vertical axis.

One of the reasons for keeping the torso straight, for instance, is to create a vertical axis around which this rotation can occur.

If you practice Chen style, you face the more complex challenge of rotating the dantian in all three dimensions. You rotate the dantian horizontally as in the Yang style and, in addition, circle it in two vertical planes, one facing forwards and one facing sideways. The following diagram shows the circles in the three different planes, superimposed on the human body:



Side Facing Circle

On one level, the rotation of the dantian in a horizontal plane is a core concept of T'ai Chi, involving basic physical actions such as pushing forward out of the back leg into the hip, folding in the opposite groin crease, and so on.

Slightly more advanced practices use visualizations, such as imagining you have a stick coming out of the dantian just a little below the navel and are sweeping objects off a table by moving that stick left or right using the dantian as a pivot.

A more subtle level of practice concerns the energy flow around the Belt Meridian (Dai Mei). The ch'i (qi) in this meridian flows around your body at about the height of the waistband of your trousers. To feel this flow, it helps if you wear loose trousers, or even a robe, and keep the whole abdominal area extremely relaxed.

The flow in this meridian depends on the individual, but typically the ch'i will flow through 270 or 360 degrees in the course of a movement, even though the actual rotation of the waist may be only 45 to 90 degrees.

In Yang style right Brush Knee, for instance, if you visualize a stick coming out of the dantian, that stick will start out pointing right and then sweep left through 90 degrees until it is pointing straight forward.

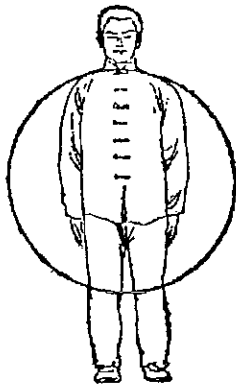
The ch'i flowing around the belt meridian, however, typically starts out just above the right hip, then flows all the way across the front of the waist, around above the left hip, and finishes at the mingmen point in the back, opposite the navel. This energy in the mingmen helps to create an equal and opposite reaction to the forward thrust of the

push, as flow patterns around the Belt Meridian often do.

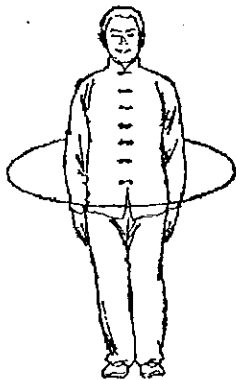
This use of the belt meridian feels wonderful when it happens right. Encourage it to happen by noticing your sensations in the waist area very closely, but don't try to force it or it won't happen.

The Front Facing Circle

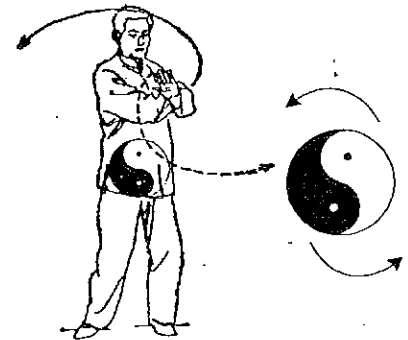
The easiest way to visualize this circle is to imagine a T'ai Chi diagram superimposed on your tummy. Imagine the two small dots within the diagram rotating. The rest of the pattern is a liquid "wake" left behind by the rotation of the two dots. The movement of the two dots in their vertical plane generally drives the motion of the hands, though not always as precisely as in the movement shown in the figure below (which shows part of the preparation for the Chen Style movement, Lazily Tucking in the Robe).



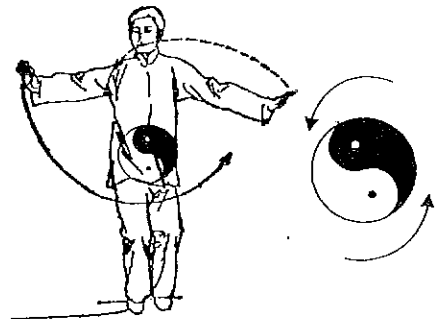
Front Facing Circle Horizontal Circle



The Horizontal Circle



Part 1



Part 2

Martin Mellish teaches in the Seattle, WA, area.

Do not just imagine the whole T'ai Chi diagram as a fixed rotating mass. Instead, feel it as a bowl of jello, half black, half white, stirred by the motion of the two dots. Keep the dantian relaxed and create the rotation using your intention rather than by tightening the abdominal muscles.

Give slightly more of your attention to one of the dots (in this example, the dot corresponding to the right hand) and treat the other dot as a counterweight that balances the main dot.

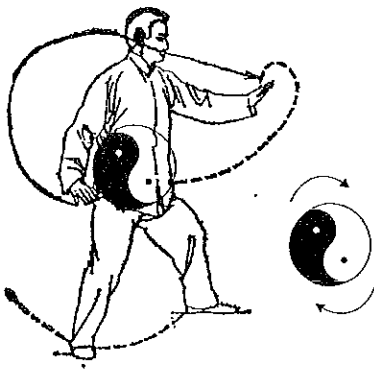
This type of vertical circling is very common in the Chen Style and very rare in the Yang. The only possible Yang Style examples I can think of are 180 degree transitions, such as the one that follows Fan Through the Back in most Yang Style forms.

The Side Facing Circle

This circle is a vertical circle running through the body from back to front. It is similar to the Small and Large Orbits used in ch'i kung (qigong) and Chinese medicine except that it is restricted to the dantian area.

The energy in the vertical circle goes from Hui Yin (the perineum) up through the coccyx and the lumbar area to the Ming Men point (Gate of Life) on the back opposite the navel, then forward through the body and down the front.

The Chen Style movement Step Back and Wheel Arms and the corresponding Yang Style movement Step Back and Repulse Monkey both use this type of circling (see illustration).



Even though the above figure refers to the Chen style movement, Step Back and Wheel Arms, the same idea is also useful in Yang style Step Back and Repulse Monkey.

This circle requires both relaxation and awareness if it is to happen in a natu-

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ral way. Among the elements that make it work are:

A slight tensing of the pubococcygeal muscle in the perineum

A slight lifting of the pelvic floor

Breathing in using a rising wave motion that causes a wave of expansion to move up the lower back

Allowing a wave of relaxation to move down the front of the abdomen as you breathe out, from the navel down to the pubic bone and then to the perineum.

This movement can be harmful unless you do it in a natural and relaxed way, so you should practice it only under the guidance of a competent teacher. You may be able to master it without personal instruction if you have considerable experience with the Small (Microcosmic) Orbit.

However, one difference from the Orbit is that you have to imagine not a single energy going around the circuit but rather two complementary energies, corresponding to the two dots in the T'ai Chi diagram.

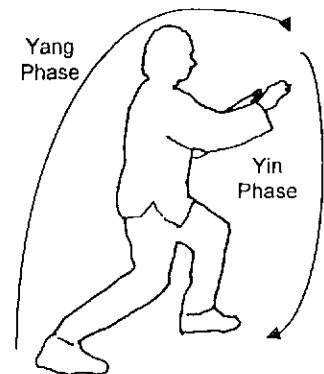
Coordination with Whole Body Energy

Obviously, the circling of the dantian is not the only internal process going on in T'ai Chi. For instance, some T'ai Chi

players use the Large Orbit, an energy path that runs up the back of the body and down the front. When you use the Large Orbit, your movements consist of:

A Yin (relaxation) phase in which the qi returns from the arms, drains out of the head, and runs down the front of the torso and the legs into the ground. This relaxation phase is indispensable if the following expression phase is to happen right.

A "Yang" (expression) phase in which the ch'i comes up from the heels, up the backs of the legs, up through the spine, and then splits at the shoulder girdle to flow out through the arms and the fingertips.



The following diagram illustrates the process:

You can coordinate this Large Orbit flow with the side facing circle in the dantian. During the Yang phase, feel the qi in the dantian rising up the small of your back; during the Yin phase, feel it sinking down from your navel to your perineum.

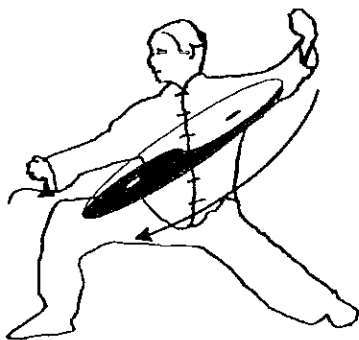
Slanted circles

Some movements use a circle that slants at about a 45 degree angle. One example is a move toward the end of the Chen form called, "Sink Waist with Elbow Down."

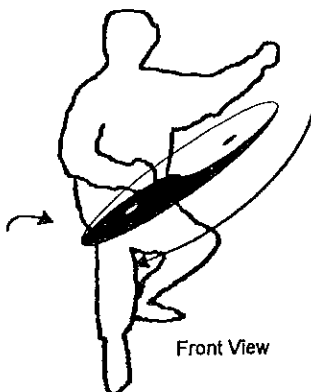
In this move, the right forearm rolls forward, down, and out, while the left arm comes a little forward and diagonally up. It is as if the two arms are holding a disc about 5 feet across and rolling it diagonally down to the right.

The corresponding circle in the dantian also slants by the same angle. Another Chen Style example is Flash the Back. The following diagram illustrates the slanted circle in, "Sink Waist with Elbow Down." The circle tips down not only from front to back but also from left to right.

Yang Style Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain (after Cross Hands) is a good



Sink Waist with Elbow Down- Side View

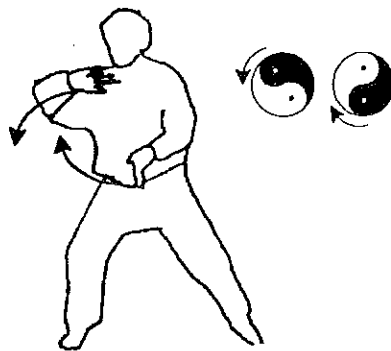


Front View

example of this type of slanted circle, slanting from top left to bottom right. The slanted circle is particularly clear in the variant where the right hand remains palm up, which is also more effective from the applications point of view. Brush Knee is another example, slanting from top right to bottom left.

Independent Circling of the Two Sides

As if all this were not complex enough, in some movements the left and right halves of the dantian do different circles. For instance, in Cloud Hands, the circles in the right and left



Double dantian rotation

halves of the dantian drive the interlocking and opposing circles of the hands and arms, as shown in the figure below:

Cloud Hands is the clearest examples of this separate circling of the two halves. This idea is most useful for movements where the relationships between the arms are relatively complex.

Practice with Commitment but not with Effort

Mastering this circling requires focus, body awareness, and much dedicated practice. Take my teacher, Madame Gao Fu, as an example. Madame Gao is not by any means a T'ai Chi hermit. In fact, she is well known for out-partying her students.

But any time she is sitting in a car, or people are holding a conversation in English that she doesn't understand, she will start to focus inside and circle the energy around the dantian.

It is a spooky experience to sit next to her for a while thinking that she's just taking it easy, and then suddenly to notice the intensity of the internal processes that are going on.

Mastering this type of three-dimensional circling requires awareness and

practice, but except in the very beginning it should NOT take physical effort. Mrs. Gao demonstrates this circling by having her students touch her belly and lower back.

When she exaggerates the movement for clarity, it feels as if a bagful of restless squirrels are running around in there. But when she practices for herself, the movement is smooth, soft, and totally relaxed.

As in other aspects of T'ai Chi, the key to improving is not to use more effort but to systematically identify and let go of everything that is impeding the movement. When that is done, the movement happens all by itself with no muscular effort or tension at all.

A Short Cut

Rotating the dantian in three (or more) planes requires competent instruction and dedicated practice. On the other hand, I've found that everything flows from the basic principles that all movements are circular and that the outer body and the dantian are in harmony.

For me, the best way to practice these principles is to imagine that there is a tiny person a few inches high inside the dantian who is doing the movements, and that the rest of my body is following that movement without my having to get involved.

You can visualize that tiny person inside the dantian as being a T'ai Chi master, or as a benevolent presence of some kind, your 'fairy godmother' or someone like that, or even yourself.

Of course the visualization depends on that little person inside the dantian having some idea what the right circles are, so this visualization is most useful once you have some feeling for the different circles. •

Acknowledgements

Madame Gao Fu, senior student of Feng Zhiqiang, taught me this material. Some of the diagrams are based on illustrations from Feng Zhiqiang's book on his Chen 24 movement form. Andy Dale helped me clarify Gao Fu's teaching about the circling around Dai Mei.

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