

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

The following Anthology is a collection of past Questions and Answers from 1998 to 2006 dealing with the Body-Being and T'ai Chi aspects of Cheng Hsin. You will find a great deal of knowledge and can receive a valuable education through studying Ralston's accumulated responses to a wide range of questions.

~~~~~  
John Stone  
Madison, WI

~~~~~  
Peter

I have a question for you about intrinsic strength. It seems to me that some important piece is missing in my understanding/experience. I outreach, I relax completely, I move into my hands, I move my weight underground ... and I can see that I move people much more effortlessly than the students I'm trying to explain this to, but I still feel that my understanding is small. Perhaps I am stuck in expecting some kind of "breakthrough experience." With other principles, like listening, joining and following, I have had such experiences where I suddenly became aware of the immensity of the principles. Now when I am able to open up to the principles, they're always "there," in a way. Sometimes it feels like bathing in a sea. (Actually, I can see that the principles always "are"-- opening up to them is akin to becoming more conscious of "is".) And if I can surrender enough to the principles, my effectiveness increases dramatically. (The principles are easy in a sense -- effortless, in fact! It's the surrender and the constancy of the demand to surrender that are hard!) It's kind of strange.

I can't really "do" or "perform" the principles. They "do" me. But that hasn't happened with intrinsic strength. I still feel that I'm "doing" intrinsic strength, like a technique. I'm afraid I don't know how to ask this question correctly, but could you give me some suggestion of how to expose myself more completely to intrinsic strength and to the root principle underlying it? All my breakthroughs with the other principles have come after I have followed some piece of advice or really immersed myself in some consideration or played with a certain disposition you have suggested, so I'm hoping you can provide me with the same opportunity here. (Lately, I've been trying to get in touch with the springiness of the body and trying to work with that)

Much thanks,
John

John,

Intrinsic strength is different in nature than the principles you mentioned, but I would still recommend approaching it with the same disposition -- and at the same time be open to it being different. Principles such as following, listening, joining, etc. are operational principles of interaction. They determine a method for interaction, and a state of mind that is appropriate and consistent with this method. Intrinsic strength also needs a strong disposition, yet it does not determine an interactive method. It is a way of using physics (albeit unusual physics) to produce results. This requires a very different way of thinking and body impulse, and an immersion into the state and principle behind it can be no less complete than any of the others, it's just going to feel different.

I recommend searching for intrinsic strength within complete relaxation, and I mean limp. Without any strength -- less than what it would take to lift a limb -- can you find it? You can see that this would not feel familiar, and would be quite psychologically dominating. If you could move staying relaxed, and without ANY strength, still produce results, this would feel different and kind of "magical" wouldn't it?

One of the main obstacles to making a big leap into intrinsic strength for people is that they just don't believe in it. This is normal since the brain is raised on impulses trained for contractive strength -- anything else is unbelievable. It is useful to investigate your deep sense of possibility (or impossibility) in this matter, and create the possibility of using no strength. Then embark on finding that possibility.

As with the other principles, you do not "do" intrinsic strength, and so you will find a similar quality in that it also feels "outside of your control." It is as dominating as any of the principles. You really have no choice:

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

if you want to use the intrinsic strength of the body tissue, you must be dominated by the "laws" that allow the use of intrinsic strength -- such as precise alignment, total relaxation, a connection to the ground throughout your movement, and a sensitivity to channeling the appropriate feeling-sensations, which relate to all that is occurring in the process and which bring it all together. But because intrinsic strength is not determined by another's action, it seems primarily subject to our decision to use it or not. Yet if its use is predetermined and real, we still have no choice but to let it occur. We still cannot "do" it.

Peter

~~~~~  
Julius Deslate  
Philippines

~~~~~  
Peter,

I've been savoring your book and have some questions:

1. How do you combine the ball and chain and water drop with sinking the knee to the center of the foot? The way I visualize it, the end of the chain is attached to the sacrum so in effect the ball pulls the whole spine and relaxed upper body down. But what happens when you shift the weight on one leg and-- following your suggestion -- press the center and knee to the center-heel of the foot? Should I imagine that the chain swings from the sacrum and passes through the whole leg and through the center of the foot?

As for the water drop, does it occupy roughly a foot beyond and all around the waist and legs? I need to clarify these because I want to know what "image" to hold and feel while practicing.

2. When I try to hold this image, the tendency is for me to see it in my mind. Is that being in your head and not being here and now ? If so, how do I deal with it?

3. When I visualize ball and chain and water drop the mind also tends to concentrate on the legs and ignore everything else. You know, that " glazed look" happens. How do we address this? A bit of digression and I don't know if it applies, but when I was taking Alexander Technique lessons I was repeatedly reminded not to focus purely on the specific body part but to maintain attention on everything else. Supposedly such isolated focussing tends to cause us to contract and stiffen. Does this bit of advice apply to Cheng Hsin?

4. You mentioned that the lower must direct the upper or words to that effect. Does that mean that you sort of "swing" the upper body parts using the center and legs as fulcrum much as a whip handle swings the rest of the whip from above base to tip? I can see this if you just swing your body here and there but if you execute a specific technique like white crane spreads its wings in which arms go in different directions how does this apply?

I know that you can probably demonstrate all these to me in person and even direct my body in the correct alignment, etc. But I'm out here in the Philippines trying just to figure this out by reading your book and trying to apply it in my tai chi practice. Do your students go through the same difficulties or am I just particularly dense as far as mind-body dynamics are concerned ?

Julius

Julius,

1. You seem to have the right idea. But try attaching the chain to your center and relaxing the pelvis (mostly psoas muscles - see anatomy book) and so allow the pelvis to fall and the spine to straighten. And yes, when you are on one foot, the chain passes through that leg and the center of that foot.

The waterdrop, as with any of these kinds of exercises, can be imagined in any way that does the job. I view the bottom two-thirds of the waterdrop more like a sphere, the top of which is at my center and the bottom point being an equal distance from my center to the ground underneath the ground. In other words, half the sphere is above ground and around the legs (like a big hoop skirt), the other half is underground, beneath the feet. The upper third of the waterdrop goes from the top of the sphere like a cone that bends inward slightly as it rises up to a point at the top of the head.

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

2. Don't hold the image in your head, hold it in and around your body, in other words, in the place where it is supposed to be. Imagine it, feel it, as if it is actually occurring and you are merely perceiving it and adjusting to it; and in so doing make it more and more real, and more and more solid and present.

3. Such developments as these proceed in stages. First you have to find some sense that matches the description you're working on, then you need to make it more solid and real in an objective sense. As you try to do that, at first it is good to feel restricted by the limitations that such an object would provide if it were indeed real for example, if it's heavy then you may feel its difficult to move, or that its hard to hold up and constantly pulls you down, etc. This helps the mind take it seriously and so force the nervous system and psyche to develop certain abilities. Later, when it is both real and familiar, then you can begin to lift the restrictions, such as focus or immobility, since they are not necessary except for development. And yes, it is usually better to be aware of the whole instead of focusing on a part, but it depends on what we're up to at the time.

4. Moving the upper with the lower could be like a whip as an exercise to find the connection or as a means to relax, but this is not what we do when unifying the whole body in our motions. Using the whole body is not like a whip, since in a whip the handle stops before the end does so it is not unified, it is a wave. This is not the same as moving the whole body as one piece, but this does not mean the body should in any way be rigid or not be able to perform different motions and shapes. Using the whole body in various ways needs to be worked out. Find a way to do the movement with the center. Be creative, experiment. In the end, if you can't use the whole body that way then change the move.

Remember, principles can be applied in many ways and will appear differently in different circumstances. Our work has many considerations to it. Although one way of doing something may be legitimate as an isolated concern, taking it in the context of all the other concerns of the body-being and principles of interaction might change how we'd prefer to do it. When you are first trying to work out one principle or dynamic, its best not to worry about the rest -- just throw yourself into it until you have an understanding and feeling of the thing you're working on. Then consider how it fits in with the whole.

Everyone has challenges with this stuff. I've spent decades working it out. That's why the fastest and surest way to move through such things is personal contact with me. There are just too many ins and outs that can't be explained easily, and too many misunderstandings that need to be corrected, and this happens best when I can address them in person. What you could feel from me in one movement is worth at least 5 pages of explanation. But I understand not everyone can attend workshops. I hope the video helps.

Peter

~~~~~  
Jesse Marandino  
Austin, TX

~~~~~  
Peter,

What are some of the pitfalls I should watch out for in such a structured system as taijiquan, what will deter me from attaining the skills instead of just admiring them?

Jesse (two more questions follow, but I will address them one at a time)

Jesse

Jesse,

This is a good question. The best thing to do, of course, is to get yourself down here and study. This will change the way you look at your practice and the art, I guarantee it.

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Two of the main pitfalls are fantasy and belief. In order to develop skill, you must get past the fantasies that accompany any art. These can be subtle at times. Also, you will need to challenge every belief you have that is presented in the art. Most of the beliefs about T'ai Chi are handed down through people who don't have the skill, so they should be suspect to begin with. If you read the T'ai Chi Classics, translated from writings by skilled people, you will see they don't always agree with or mention things a t'ai chi teacher or book will. Dogma is everywhere, and it is not useful for attaining skill. All dogma and belief is detrimental to experiencing whatever is true about anything.

Every structured system has flaws. It is unavoidable. Since we need some structure in order to practice an art, our task is to keep a vigil on the structure and be aware of its weaknesses. One weakness every martial art has, especially the more "traditional" ones, is that they only practice with like-minded people doing the same things with the same goals in mind. For real skill you must go beyond any practice or training in an art. You need to understand the principles and methods used in your art and be able to apply them broadly to any martial encounter. This usually means playing with people who practice other martial arts.

When playing with people in your own art, be mindful of falling into winning the game versus developing skill. It's very difficult for people to get that these are NOT the same. The "game" or practice is an invention of that art and is restricted to the goals and rules of the game, arising from the mind set of the inventor as well as the limited understanding of the practitioner. Figuring out tricks that bring success in a game isn't the same as developing skill in principles that work in every encounter. Regardless how good you are compared to the people you play with, your focus must be on improving your skill, not beating the opponent.

I could go on and on, but so much will be cleared up with just one visit. We're a friendly bunch and our only agenda is to develop real skill in the Cheng Hsin work. One camp has changed the direction of many practitioners of martial arts, including taiji, aikido, and even hard styles.

~~~~~  
Gerry Galway  
Ireland

~~~~~  
Peter,

I have been working on what I learned at Camp since some of my perspectives and understanding changed a bit since then. You covered this at the Camp but I want to be clear in my distinctions when I start teaching. It seems most of our work in Cheng Hsin has to do with feeling. There is feeling as in feeling my whole body, and feeling as in outreaching to my partner's feet and balance, and then there is what you referred to as feeling as an emotional reaction. It is this last one that bothers me. When I feel my whole body using my awareness and moving my attention from my feet to my head, including everything, there is an experience that I can call feeling my whole body. Now if someone were to ask me at that point how do I feel; what I am most likely to communicate is the emotional reaction (i.e. I feel good, happy, sad, light, aware etc.). This is where I see the difficulty in teaching, how can I communicate feeling the whole body or outreaching experience without it being filtered through the emotional reaction. What is the experience of feeling? I feel that I am getting mired down in my question. Can you comment on this please.

Thanks,
Gerry

Gerry,

Emotions and sensations we already do. First make a distinction between what you feel emotionally (love, hate) and feeling as a sensation (touch, heat, etc.). If you can recognize that there is no emotional component necessary for mere sensation then you have at least two domains of feeling you can work

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

with. Draw people's attention to the fact that they can feel a sensation without reacting to it emotionally, even subtly. If they can get that, at least they have a way to relate to feeling other than as emotion. Then the work is to discover/create new domains of feeling that we don't already have or at least don't already acknowledge. These domains are varied.

Among them are:

1. Outreaching, or feeling the other person's whole body, which branches off into such dynamics as joining, etc.
2. Turning each perception (sight, sound, thinking, and even emoting) into a feeling so that you can relate to what's perceived more directly, since your body's movement occurs as a feeling sensation. Working off of this is the ability to feel what the other perceives in any given moment.
3. There is also feeling conceptual images made up to train such principles as grounding or three dimensional awareness (examples: Ball and Chain, Energy Extension, or 8 Attitude Awareness exercises). This is important, since without feeling these images and feeling them as "real" they are ineffective.
4. There is the feeling that is associated with each technique, that tells you precisely how to relate to ever-changing circumstance so that the process that is that technique can unfold successfully. Simply trying to memorize movement or go through a routine will never lead to skill. The feeling must become sophisticated and sensitive and you need to realize that it is the feeling of every factor involved (weight, distance, movement, perception, etc.) and your relationship to it all that inform your actions exactly how to proceed in order to create a particular result.
5. Feeling your whole body usually takes repeated contemplative work to achieve and can always be improved or refined. This ability is necessary in order to know exactly where you are and what you are doing in space from moment to moment, as well as to be able to command your body effectively and also to be sensitive to your relationship to others at any given time.
6. Also, being able to generate the flow or presence of any feeling-state or the command of your feeling-attention is important in order to create relationships too subtle or sophisticated for simple physical action to achieve by itself.

And we could make more distinctions but this is enough for now. Some feelings are becoming sensitive to what is there, or translating what's perceived into feeling. Some are generated and are not there to be found but must be created. So there are many feelings and domains of feelings. Our culture doesn't readily make these distinctions so we need to invent them for ourselves.

Let me know if this helps, or has helped clarify your question for you.

Peter

~~~~~  
Julian Leviston  
Surry Hills, Australia  
~~~~~

Dear Peter

Why is it so hard to re-align my body-being? I'm finding it extraordinarily hard to unlock my hips. I've been told all my life that I'm a flexible person, but aligning vertically so that my knee doesn't turn in and yet still relaxing is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

Also, I got a lot of energy from reading your book "reflections" (which I've now passed on to a friend) and doing meditative body-attention exercises. Now though, the energy is gone. This is always

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

strange for me. I have a question about that: is it because I didn't work with it enough?

Julian

Julian,

Look to see (feel) what muscles in your body are pulling you out of alignment. For example, if some muscle on the inside of your leg is tight but the muscles on the outside are loose then when you relax your leg overall your leg will fall inward. The problem could be anywhere from the hips down to the feet. Each issue needs to be specifically handled. You need to discover what is keeping your body out of alignment. About the locked hips, like I said above, deep tissue massage can be helpful.

Regarding your energy high: this is an effect. Don't worry, it will come and go. You were probably high on some new insight you had or from working in a new way with the mind and body. Just continue to work, go deeper, keep contemplating. The highs will come and go, but questioning in this way will eventually change everything.

Good luck,

Peter

~~~~~  
Mike Thomas  
Notts, England

~~~~~  
Hi Peter

I've been working with some friends over here on introducing as many of the Cheng Hsin principles as I can, and although they're both fairly open people the question of belief keeps coming up. Chief amongst these: 'But do you really believe effortless power exists as a phenomenon?' Now, I believe it, because I've had experiences of it. But did I already have the 'will to believe' or was I just open to experiencing something new and unknown? And have you got to believe before you can realize the Cheng Hsin principles?

So, I think my question to you is really 'What is the place of belief within Cheng Hsin?' Have you got to believe in the principles to have them work for you?

Looking forward to seeing you again at the Wales camp this year.

Cheers

Mike

Mike,

As a matter of fact, I suggest that people DON'T believe in Cheng Hsin. Believing or dis-believing are not what we are about. Belief is an intellectual matter, it is thinking that something is true. Cheng Hsin is about experientially discovering what is actually true. The principles are either true or effective or they aren't. Effortless power is whatever it is. You and your friends must discover for yourselves what is the case. You do not need to believe in anything.

If you've had some experience on the receiving end of what I call effortless power, you can tell that there is something going on and it may seem easy enough and effective enough, but from that experience you still don't know how it is done, or what the experience is like on the other side. So you will conjecture about how to accomplish it and go down various roads on your way to discovery.

The thing is to be open to the possibility that there is a way to achieve results with less effort than normal, and perhaps no effort at all. Then you set out to realize this possibility. No belief is necessary. Just the idea that it may be possible. I of course help this process by offering what I have experienced and understand. You don't need to believe me, simply take into account what I say, and consider whether you assess that I am lying or not. If you don't think I'm lying or mistaken, then what am I pointing to? Getting

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

there may not be easy, and that's where most people run into problems. They want it to be an easy answer already accessible to their minds and bodies, something they can apply immediately. This is not the case with effortless power. The power is effortless, learning to find and use it takes work. It requires changing both mind and body. Without the possibility that it could be found, however, you would never search.

You need to experience the principles to have them work for you. Belief only gets in the way.

Good luck with your investigations,
Peter

~~~~~  
Joe Moran,  
Brandon, Florida

~~~~~  
Peter,

I've begun reading your book and I have a question to make sure my understanding is correct. Being Calm, "the presence of being," is where my question arises from. The way I am understanding being calm is that calm is not a state of mind but more like a place. When we experience not being calm the mind tries to fix that situation but it is futile because calm is not something that can be fixed but is something that just is. Am I understanding this correctly?

Joe

Joe,

I wouldn't call Calm a "place" really, it is a state. However, I think your impression of "place" comes from my description of "shifting into the sea in which all things float" (particularly all those non-calm things). This does make it sound like a place, but it isn't.

For example, with regard to the state of relaxation, what is the principle from which the condition of relaxation arises? We could call it "letting go" or some such. When the principle of letting go is active, the body relaxes, since tension and contraction are released.

So it is with calm. What is the principle there? We might call it "freedom" or "non-attachment." Such a principle allows the mind to remain undisturbed by any event. I was speaking as if calm were a place in hopes of pointing the reader away from the conventional method of trying to obtain calm through the use of control. A "control" method frequently becomes a struggle against uncalm elements and as such it is a repression rather than a freedom, or actual calm.

"Being" just "is." Whatever form is occurring at the moment does not change "being" in any way. When we accept this, it is easier to remain unattached to disturbing elements.

Peter

~~~~~  
George Parides,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

~~~~~  
Peter,

I have a question dealing with words you used at a t'ui shou workshop in Erie, PA many years ago. You said "compress, compress" when speaking about moving forward during a push, moving from one leg to the other. After playing with what I thought you meant and then from some other thoughts, this is what I came up with to describe the concept-feeling. Through good body alignment the body rests on

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

the ground through the leg and foot -- no leaning forward or back, just on the ground. In a relaxed, calm state, the tissue of the body and leg is in some state which keeps the posture. Releasing this state causes the tissue to drop. This dropping tissue hits the ground through the alignment of the body/leg/foot on the ground. This compression on the ground causes an opposite force up which can be used to move the body to the other leg without having to push off the foot which carried the body on it. Now the tissue has also 'bounced' off the ground which now can be dropped through the new alignment over the other leg/foot which compresses again, causing another bounce which can be issued into something through proper body alignment. Any help with this?

Thanks,
George

George,

If we are talking about simply shifting the weight then there is no bounce nor a drop-and-compress in the back leg. Rather the back leg simply releases and the front leg catches the weight. In pushing someone else, however, some of what you describe is in the ball park, but there are some misconceptions.

The first is one that many people make. It is the idea that somehow compression is something we DO. It is not. We must remember that when we speak of compression or using intrinsic strength, it is the other person's weight and mass that compress us. Making a connection with their body, we trace this down to our feet. If our weight is in the back foot then the compression begins there. The moment we move, take a step or begin to shift weight, compression is occurring. We get "squeezed" from our hands to our feet. Since we start on the back foot, this compression goes down there; as we shift our weight, it shifts to the front foot. Once we are near to fifty percent between back and front foot, we CANNOT compress into the back leg (which is to say we will not BE compressed) since we are moving away from it. We can only get compressed into something we are moving toward.

We might think, then, that we could not be compressed into the back foot since we are moving toward the front. Yet if we look, we see that as we are taking a step our weight must actually go into the back foot even though we are stepping forward, and as we squat to make our shift we are also pressing our weight primarily into the back foot. This means that we can use our connection in the back foot to begin compression, and as we shift to the front foot, compress there. If we think of squatting as we shift, like describing a "U", then we can think of compressing into the back foot, releasing that and compressing into the front foot. This should be a smooth "passing of the baton" from one foot to the other, even if it is distinct. This is the "compress, compress" that I was talking about. But remember, stay relaxed and let the other person compress you.

Peter

~~~~~  
Peter Payne,  
Rochester, Vermont

~~~~~  
Peter,

I do have a question that relates to stepping in general as well as stepping or shifting forward into a punch. Let's say I am standing with my right foot forwards. You had us stepping forwards by dissolving the left leg and compressing into the right one. What about the idea of compressing into the left leg, the reaction to which shifts you forward towards the right one; as this happens you dissolve the left and compress into the (now) weighted right. This feels to me like it develops a strong springy power from the earth which can move me quickly; and in your book you seem to describe it this way. I felt that in teaching the uproot you really underemphasized the role of the back foot in initiating the step in: I assume this was to discourage people from pushing off the back foot. But isn't the compression into the back foot very important in generating the ground reaction force from which to move forward? I do understand that you do not push off the earth, but rather induce the earth to push against you (I hope?). Center presses earth!

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

As I believe you said, you do have to use muscle to initiate movement, in order to get the body to move into the position to apply intrinsic strength (or just to move). What of this? How is this done? How do you get the center to push against the earth more strongly, or in a different direction, or very quickly? My own understanding is that you do have to use muscle, and that you should use the biggest and strongest ones around. What's your reaction?

Peter

Peter,

Some of the confusion here is rooted in the same considerations that we encountered with George's question. We must make a distinction between moving our body and delivering a force (moving someone else's body, striking, or whatnot). When we move our own bodies it is only our own weight that presses down into the foot. We can call this compression, but when we speak of using intrinsic strength it is not our own weight that does the compression it is another's. It is our tissues that get compressed, but it is the mass or movement of someone (or thing) else that does the compressing. Gravity is useful in moving our own body. We use it to drop and press into the feet. We do use our own muscles to move, but this should not be our focus. It is better to put our attention on relaxing and feeling. Movement is not created from an intellectual understanding of how the physiology works, it is created through feeling impulse. Being in touch with how to produce the feelings that result in various body actions or what feeling states help our movements is very useful.

The next point is that different actions require different methods of movement. There is not just one. For example, a striking motion is done differently than a push uproot. Your first description is for punching. The second is about uprooting, except we do not use any bounce or spring back. Instead, it is like sitting on a big balloon, as the weight goes down, the balloon is compressed. The power of this compression occurs right away and as a result of the downward squeeze, NOT afterwards or as a secondary reaction. It is only one, and in the same moment.

All horizontal movement is a function of vertical movement, so the center pressing down onto the earth (feet) when you want to move anywhere quickly or change directions quickly is very helpful. Try to relax, let gravity do as much of the work as possible and intrinsic strength do the rest.

Peter

~~~~~  
Justin Sharp  
Essen, Germany

~~~~~  
Dear Mr. Ralston,

My name is Justin Sharp. I am a professional musician living in Essen, Germany. I play the French Horn. While visiting my family back in August of this year, I was buying my stock of English books to take back to Germany, When I came across your book. The title was very interesting and it was just what I was looking for in terms for horn playing.

I have been a professional player for several years. For a few years I have been playing with a lot of pain in my face due to over exertion. After having read the first part of your book about how to let the body sink into the ground and about the ideas of sinking and rising (fire and water), I suddenly was able to release a tremendous amount of pressure and pain in my skull. It was if my head was tightly wrapped and somebody was unwrapping the cloth freeing me from a good 50% to 60% of my pain.

This was only the beginning. I then began to work with your other ideas and began to improve my horn playing. Horn playing is physically very demanding, especially when playing high. It is all about AIR, keeping everything open enough to let the tone come out.

I must be honest, that I have not read your book to the end yet; however, I have been rereading and contemplating all of it along the way. I have held myself back from emailing you several times, because I felt like I should read it all first. I just wanted to go ahead and thank you for all that you have

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

done for me up until this point in your book. I have studied with the absolute best horn teachers in the world. Since August you have been my new teacher, giving me as much or even more than them in many cases. Each day I read in your book, the more I open up and play better horn.

I do have a couple of questions that are a little puzzling translating Cheng Hsin into horn playing. I would be very grateful if you could reply briefly to my questions, so that I might avoid developing false concepts on my own. I hope to one day soon come to one of your workshops. I know this is the only true way to transfer your art to mine.

Again, Thank You for your book. You have truly helped me!

Sincerely, Justin Sharp

Q1. When I play in an orchestra obviously I must sit. I have been attempting to ground myself, however this seems to be a little strange for me. I have both feet equally on the ground while sitting forward on the edge of the chair. I understand the water drop concept; however I visualize it from my center going down through my seat, through the chair. Your writings mainly talk about grounding while in a standing position. Could you give me a tip how I could change my thinking to better fit your concept?

PR: Justin,

Sounds like you are doing fine. Ground through the chair and feet, invent any feeling imagery that serves. Clearly with the horn as with martial actions, the power comes from areas prior to where the result is produced. In other words, without the actions of the lungs for example, the lips would be worthless; just as without the whole body moving, the hand would be rather meaningless in a martial technique. We desire to connect with the ground and be well supported by every body part that leads up to point of interaction; in this way the result is produced with greater ease and effectiveness. Perhaps in horn playing the same consideration can be applied. It is the whole body that must relate to the lips, with various body parts serving differing functions -- the hands manipulate and hold, the torso pushes air, the ass grounds, the feet stabilize, etc. Generally letting the weight sink down, connecting the body through the chair and feet to the ground, and using the whole with emphasis of power being placed on the "below parts" rather than on the "result place" seems a proper order to me.

Use whatever feeling image serves you. Waterdrop may be one, but you can modify to suit your needs. Just remember that what is important is that it feels real to you and does what you need it to do; but it may take some practice to discern these things.

Q2: My contact point...my opponent, is where the horn comes to my lips, at the mouthpiece. This is constant pressure, that one can begin to fight, or force. The higher the tone goes, the more one must press, the lower one plays the less pressure is needed. You talk about yielding to the force when it is applied. What I do not see is that the force that comes at me is always connected to my lips. It is a constant pressure. Not one that comes and goes. I have attempted to trust on the intrinsic energy of the tissues, but I must tense the muscles enough to at least keep from hurting myself. Metal against lips and teeth!

One of my biggest challenges in general is when attempting to relax while playing. If I am not careful, I will lose the tension in the lips and then I crack a note. Splitting notes is the nightmare that horn players have to deal with all the time. The goal for me is not only to create a big sound effortlessly, but to also play free of cracked notes. This fear of cracking is where the pressure of horn playing get very intense.

PR: I don't play a horn so not really qualified to reply. However, following the thoughts I suggested above, try playing with your whole body not just the lips; back away from the lips and see if you can spread the effort and tension throughout the body somehow so that it feels like the whole body is blowing the horn. Then I would also try playing the whole horn. Spread the event out to the whole of both sides rather than focus exclusively on the point of contact. Just like in martial interaction it is often powerful to not focus ones attention and energy on the problem or point of contact, but instead to realize that the "problem" is only the place where the relationship collides. It is the whole event that is actually creating the problem,

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

and when we narrow in on the "symptoms" of the relationship rather than adjusting the whole relationship, we miss much and must frequently use "force" to resolve the matter. Feel your whole body, the ground and chair, and feel the whole horn, all at once, and "feel" how these things can relate so that the lips aren't burdened with the whole result.

Another thought: though it may not seem rational, try shifting your efforts away from tension wherever and whenever possible, and instead toward movement. Postulate that wherever there is tension what is actually taking place is some form of movement in opposition. Release the tension and turn it all into pure movement, with opposition kept to a minimum -- and even then held as movement moving into movement, a joining if you like, rather than a tension.

Hope this helps in some way. Let me know if it does.

Q3. I have developed a very active and loud inner voice. Sometimes I feel that all the good information that I have read over the years turns on me. Would you have a suggestion for me?

PR: I suggest that you just stop thinking things that get in the way. Turn everything into one sophisticated but simple feeling. Also there is more stuff on mind later in book, maybe it will help.

Peter

~~~~~  
Joel Salerno  
Cape Cod, Massachusetts

~~~~~  
Peter,

In your writing you talk about creating an image (standing on two poles, the ball and chain, etc.) that you use to help set up the body posture, improve alignment and so on. Do you still use images in your work today when you "train" and do you use images when you are sparring, doing free play or fighting?

Joel

Joel,

When we fight generally our attention should be on interactive principles, and always on the relationship that is taking place moment to moment. In training it is a different story. Whenever we train we might take on working out any number of things. So one might work on such images while sparring -- to train them, and to force the brain to make an association between what's being trained in the body-being and the interaction, or just to see what occurs when combining the two.

Personally I don't use the images all that often anymore, unless I'm training them. But we should be clear that this is only because they have become so ingrained that I don't need to conjure up the images. The principle behind the image is the important part, and after years and years of training these feeling-images I can tap the principle through a simple shift in state requiring no specific image. But I don't recommend trying this without a decade or two of serious feeling-image training under the belt. I didn't.

Peter

~~~~~  
Jamie Schardt  
Chicago, IL

~~~~~  
Master Ralston,

At the workshop, I asked you twice about fa jing, and I'm going to ask you again... sorry.

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Hopefully, I can finally set this thing to rest in my mind. I want to ask, is your objection to using fa jing based on the fact that it doesn't really work, or that it decreases mobility in the same way an "external" strike does and so it wouldn't work in application? So what I'm asking is: do these tricked-out palm strikes really vaporize internal organs in a whole different way, or is just a more complicated way to cause the same kind of damage that compression from a fist/foot would cause? Or is the more important point here that to issue power by fa jing is too slow and it limits mobility too much?

The last question I have on power delivery relates to qigong/neigong exercises. In "The Principles of Effortless Power," you seem to give credence to Iron Shirt training by mentioning how exercises and chi flow can make one resistant to strikes. Right? Also, in the last newsletter you were hesitant to endorse specific qigong practices (I think it was the microcosmic orbit idea) as being true in themselves. (In other words, that meditation concentration may yield effects, but the model we have for it may or may not be true.) I also keep hearing about people "issuing chi" -- it is implied that this is beyond the realm of physics --and bouncing people away. These people tend to recommend standing meditation exercises. From my experience, standing meditation helps me with "hand up-you down" and is an opening for presence, from that it seems like wonders will emerge. But it seems like the wonders will still be in the realm of physics. Physics can do a lot, right? What do you think about this idea of issuing chi?

Jamie

Jamie,

Regarding your first question:

It is a different system of power, but don't be lead astray by fantasies and complications. I'm sure it has merit; it just isn't my way. When you speak of fa-jing, what you think is one thing is actually different things depending on who you're speaking with. Like every other human invention, there are many varied ideas and methods that are claimed as that one. With each school things change. So I would have to know exactly what the method is in order to respond accurately. But don't tell me, I really don't care. I know it will be one thing or another that I don't care about.

The thing for you to do is to test it out for yourself, in practice and in thinking it through. Does it limit mobility? Is it too slow? When you need to change and be fluid, responding to fast changing circumstances, is this method useful? Do you use strength, bind up, tense up, go through unnecessarily complicated processes? Work it out.

As I've said before: in any study, the teaching or system itself does not determine the value or usefulness one can get out of it.

About your second question:

Sounds like fantasy to me. But the developments that help people engage subtle physics are usually feeling trainings (ch'i if you like). I don't speak of "energy" or "ch'i" or "ki" because no one understands what we really mean when we say such things, and so always must make something up -- a fantasy of some "alternative reality" to what we normally or objectively observe. This may be fun and sometimes useful but it rips us away from our own experience and inserts instead an idea and hopeful beliefs.

At best it provides a re-interpretation of perceptions had, such as: "this sensation is energy coursing through my arm," or some such. Perhaps this re-interpretation allows greater freedom or creativity or an easier way of looking at or working with certain things, and so is useful or a good and healthy development. Yet when we get honest and take a look, we can notice that the perceptions that are interpreted as "energy" are all feelings. And the ability to move or to create these feelings seems to be provided by our awareness and attention. This is why I talk in terms of feeling-attention or feeling-awareness. It is what we move around or play with that we used to call "energy." And this is less likely to fall into fantasy and become detached from what we are really doing or experiencing in our bodies.

Through creating very sophisticated uses of specific feeling-attention activities, it is possible that we can evoke a subtle system of physics that can produce objective results in a way that our gross mental

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

awareness can't fathom. How ever it happens, we can produce "feelings" in the body that make a difference to our actions and abilities. This is why we work with this domain. Yet we need not "believe" in any particular dogma or belief system in order to do so. That is the direction I prefer.

Instead of talking about what others do, I would prefer to speak more about what I do; so I will follow this response with a few selections from the Art of Effortless Power that speak to some of yours and others' recent concerns.

Peter

~~~~~  
Joe Ou  
New Hampshire

~~~~~  
Dear Peter,

I have three questions:

1. How important is hip flexibility as it relates to competency or mastery in an art like bagua or tai chi? (I'm hoping you'll give me some insight that really pushes me to keep at the yoga and stretching.)

PR: Flexibility is always a good idea with or without any art. Although being flexible shouldn't be confused with being relaxed, it often accompanies it. It provides greater range of motion and freedom of movement. It also assists in relaxing since stretching helps get in touch with the muscles and any tightness in the muscles and this assists in being able to feel them and relax them. Actually trying to relax a muscle as you stretch it, increases your ability to stretch it. So being flexible anywhere, including the hip, is useful for body movement and body movement is useful for bagua, t'ai chi, or life in general.

2. I just found a new teacher with 44 years of martial arts experience, much of it in the internal arts. I've had two classes with him and he's given me some really interesting insights (that is if they are correct.) First he said that in tai chi, the upper body moves by first coiling at the hip so that the spine forms a modest 'c' shape and then ripples its way up. The second tip he gave me was that the coiling and subsequent rippling is initiated by muscular contractions in the lower belly that ripple upward or side to side, depending upon where you want the torso to go. He said this was the 'chi ball.' In fact, he let me feel the spherical muscular cavity in his lower belly. This is very exciting to me, because it really gives me something to concentrate on as I learn the form. He said that most people don't teach this because they're either hiding something or because they don't know about it. His arguments are convincing but I still wanted to ask you about it before I get ahead of myself.

PR: People have invented all sorts of ways to do things. That particular training is not my way since it is a method of using muscular strength, and this rippling method decreases unity and integrity. I prefer a more natural and relaxed method, not the use of isolated muscle groups to achieve snapping power. Various schools use differing forms of this kind of movement for power but, if pure intrinsic strength is what you're looking for, I wouldn't go down that path. There are many ways to do things, however, so if you find something that excites your interest, by all means look into it. All of these things need to be experienced and proven for oneself.

3. Every time I pursue an art like ba gua, I find the teacher telling me that the road as a ba gua student is one fraught with boredom. One teacher, a 20 year student of B.K. Frantzis who resides in Boston, told me it's a boring art with a lot of boring exercises and eventually, I believed him and quit taking lessons. This can't be true. There's something I like very much about the internal arts and I don't know what it is, but I'm beginning to wonder if I am cut out for this particular martial arts path. I'm hoping you'll give me some insight into the pure thrill of ba gua that gets me looking in the yellow pages again, or perhaps relocating to an internal arts mecca like California.

Most respectfully,
Joe Ou

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

PR: Sounds like these teachers don't enjoy the art, or perhaps they don't really know it. Either way, why would you want to study with them? An art like ba gua should be a fascinating and fun study. But why insist on that art? The art is only as good as the teacher. Actually I've come to see that the teacher is more important than the art. Certainly some arts are better than others, but perhaps you should be shopping for a good teacher rather than a good art. Good luck.

Peter

~~~~~  
Frank LaManna  
Rochester, NY

~~~~~  
Peter,

Is it right to assume that in yielding we are moving in the same direction as the incoming force, and that any turning, twisting, etc., is other than yielding?

Frank,

In essence, yes. Yielding is yielding. When you twist, are you yielding to "that" particular force, or are you simply escaping from it? For now, it is best to simply go away from it every time. You can twist or turn, but only if you are completely yielding to the pressure. For most people, the desire or habit to "escape" will cloud their sensitivity to the exact direction of the force. So think of it first, as moving away. Then, as you move away, if you can turn without allowing any more pressure to come anywhere on your body, you are yielding. Remember: YIELDING IS YIELDING. It is not "defending," not "escaping," not "thwarting," not "winning," not "losing," not a "technique," not anything else but yielding.

Peter

~~~~~  
Boris Brodsky  
Houston, TX

~~~~~  
Peter,

In your newsletter, you've mentioned that Cheng Hsin is spreading, and there will be about 80 new teachers added within the next couple of years. This is a very good news for me. However, I am curious about the present training process: Where do the new teachers come from, if the only instruction you presently provide is through workshops and camps? How do potential trainers practice for the rest of the year? Are they only doing solo training, or learning to apply Cheng Hsin principles while studying other arts (like T'ai Chi and Aikido)? In the intro to your T'ui Shou book, you gave an example of Ali's punch: For him it isn't the same as for most of us. From your book, it appears that your present mastery is the result of several decades of virtually full-time training and exploration (aside from, perhaps, some natural talent for this kind of inquiry). Yet the new teachers' development period (even that of the most devoted ones) would be only a fraction of yours. In other words, your "body-being" is probably extremely different from that of most others, even of those who have developed some grasp of your art's principles. How do you expect potential teachers to reach the level at which they can convey "your" comprehension of Cheng Hsin to their students?

Thank you,
Boris Brodsky

Boris,

Cheng Hsin isn't simply the skills and development or even the discoveries that I've had. These discoveries create the foundation, the structure upon which we investigate and study, and my skills simply

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

get people's attention -- they make a point. But Cheng Hsin is first the "way" or "method" in which these things came to pass, even in me. It is "how" I discovered them and developed myself. This can be shared and engaged wholeheartedly by anyone who understands what Cheng Hsin is about enough to begin such work.

It is analogous in some ways to the invention of the scientific method. Once this method of investigation was developed, countless discoveries could be made that could not have been made prior. The method itself is rather simple, and anyone can study it enough so as to apply it. Certainly those that have done much work with it will have valuable feedback to share about traps to watch out for and ways to help out. And of course a budding scientist can't hope to grasp immediately all of the discoveries of physics or biology that people have devoted lifetimes building, but they can apply the very method that allowed each of those people to make such discoveries.

Cheng Hsin is a bit like that. I don't expect people to match my skill -- you are all welcome and encouraged, but you have to work at it -- but I do expect them to grasp the direction and spirit of Cheng Hsin and apply it. This isn't done simply with the intellect, and itself requires a certain amount of contemplation and training, but it doesn't require decades of daily practice to become useful.
Peter

~~~~~  
Robert Smith  
Hampton Roads, VA

~~~~~  
Hello, Mr. Ralston,

I have been working to align myself with the principles in the Cheng Hsin and Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou books. For a familiar basis to work in, I used my T'ai Chi form. I started by trying to align myself to the energy-concepts of circulating, radiating, and collecting at my center and below, and also the feeling of my knee pressing the heel, or walking on pilings.

I ran into a problem almost immediately.

In two cases I could not retain the vertical force of knee pressing heel; when I was turning my extended foot on the heel (the force always seemed to go diagonal, as my leg was diagonal), and when in the Plow Oxen stance (the back is straight and aligned with the back leg, at an angle. Weight is about 80% on the front leg. Like a bow stance but with the body tilted forward), where the force seemed to be almost horizontal on my back foot.

My question is: are these positions simply incompatible body structure, or is it more likely that I am simply failing to incorporate the principles correctly? I have the sneaking suspicion that I'm going to have to scrap my old forms entirely.

Thank you for listening.

Robert Smith

Robert,

There are posture differences in every set, but what's more important is the difference in principles behind the development of the sets. Decades ago, I tried to teach people to apply the Cheng Hsin principles to sets they'd learned elsewhere. Since, in my view, a good set need simply offer a structure in which to train and provide a cross section of movements and shapes, it seemed feasible that people could learn to apply Cheng Hsin principles to sets that were already familiar.

Not so.

I soon discovered that not one person was successful at breaking their old habits. What turned out to be faster and more effective was learning a set that was founded on and designed by the very principles they wanted to learn. Once the nervous system, body, and mind get into certain ruts, it is difficult to free them.

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Although you might try to do something differently, the old habits usually take over. The ideas and purpose motivating you as you first learned a movement will remain as the foundation for the movement, and continue to influence the movement even though you think you are thinking something else.

In any case, experiment with it. If a technique can't be done the way you've moved in the past, change the movement. Totally dismember your set, and rebuild it slowly from the ground up, making sure that all of the principles and structural points can apply to each movement. Don't even think of the old set or style of movement, simply use the choreography (but not precise style or shapes) to give you a structure to play with. And feel free to have it look completely different. As you play with it, you will go through stages. The set might continue to change its look and design. This is fine. Stick to the principles -- damn the look.

I recommend that people do their sets concentrating on various things at various times -- such as doing the set tossing limp body parts around from the center, like a rag doll. This won't look like a t'ai chi set, but it will teach many good things. Another time concentrate on hand up/you down, or water drop, or body structural points like knee in heel, pointing with toe, shifting weight underground, etc. In this way you will more genuinely find these things outside of other concerns. Then you can begin to do more of them at once and eventually bring them all together. I recommend that you work such specifics individually and in groups, but from time to time also attempt to do them all as one. Even if you find it impossible to remember all of the details at once, try to do it anyway. This helps you stay on track with where you want to go. Eventually it will come together.

Good luck,
Peter

~~~~~  
Olusola Adebisi  
London, England  
~~~~~

Greetings Peter,

I have a query. I am confused with one of the posture points from "Effortless Power." You have said that when practicing one must move the arms in the same direction as legs, knees with elbows. Does this mean that when walking, the right arm must move in accord with the right leg? This feels unnatural. Perhaps it is that the right arm moves with left leg in walking and the right leg in martial practice? Thank you for your book again. I am finding that the study and practice of what I understand from your book is helping me develop what you call feeling-attention, especially with the water drop conceptualization. I am deepening my experience of "now" and it is exhilarating sometimes and strange most of the time. Also my balance has improved and my fluidity in my martial arts practice. I am looking forward to engaging in a month long intensive.

Thanks again
Sola

Sola,

Regarding moving the same foot with the same hand, etc.: this is only an exercise to help coordinate the whole body, but it is also used many times in application. Switch from doing the same side to the opposite side as is natural. But check out using the whole in this way at times that may seem "unnatural" and it may add something to your understanding and use of the whole body. For example, when martial artists throw a roundhouse type kick, invariably the arms will swing in the opposite direction as the foot in order to counter this motion and maintain balance. At first this seems like the best course of action. But in Cheng Hsin we actually toss the hand with the foot, as well as the pelvis and every other part of the body, so that the whole body is literally moving in the same direction. This proves awkward at first, but with practice, one finds a balance in the motion of the whole rather than as a countering of the parts. There are other examples, but mostly ask yourself the question: Is the whole body directed for one purpose, or are parts being used for various inconsistent purposes, or for none at all?

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Good luck, and let me know how it goes.
Peter

~~~~~  
Peter Payne  
Rochester, VT  
~~~~~

Hi Peter,

I really enjoyed the workshop with you in Rochester. Since I requested it, no surprise that I liked the work on creating sensation. I've continued to play with and teach it. Anyway, one of my questions is this: I really do get it that we can create any feeling we want (though I guess I have to add, within limits; my self-imposed limits probably). I get that chakras, meridians, etc. are not absolutes, but just feelings and images we can create. Various systems will try to tell you "This is how it is", and if you follow them it seems that, yes indeed, it is like that; but this is just because you have accepted their definitions and created according to their ideas. Of course, as you said, people prefer to be told "this is how it is"; it's much easier than confronting the openness and responsibility of creating whatever you want.

And yet...for example, there is something special about creating a ball in the lower abdomen as opposed to the little toe or the left nostril; that's worth pointing out to students. I don't think one could create the experience of coordinating the body well from the tip of your right elbow. So some things are more useful to create than others; and I suspect that many of these useful things could end up being very much like what a lot of systems will tell you is "how things are". So...what things are worth creating? After working with creating the pillar, a ball in the belly, the ball and chain...what next? Is there a structure to this in Cheng Hsin? Work on the heart next, or the center of the head? Center channel? In many Qigong systems, there is a fairly systematic and, I think, useful progression through various inner feelings and images.

Mind you I am not primarily interested in the development of martial skill, but in becoming a more mature and complete human being--heart, emotional openness/vulnerability, clarity about truth, integrity, etc (obviously that's why I'm coming to the Ontology part of the month-long).

Thanks for your time Peter, and for your generous and profound teaching. I wish it hadn't taken me so long to connect with you after I first read your book back a long time ago.

Peter Payne

Peter,

Yes it is my view that much of what is said to be a universal "so" in the more metaphysical fields is not so much an absolute but a suggestion -- and sometimes a good one.

Whenever a system of thinking or outlook -- what we might call a cosmology -- is created (astrology, myth, psychic phenomena, philosophy, science, art, prejudice, religion, chi kung, etc.) it provides new possibilities within one's perception and thought than were held previously. One will think and view things slightly differently than before, and so will also feel new things. What also happens is that new distinctions will be made. In other words, the sensations and perceptions that arise will be interpreted using the new cosmology as a map and so will appear as different than what was viewed previously. Totally new sensations or perceptions may arise and these will also be categorized in terms of the new system, reinforcing it further.

I've found that generally people don't like to be completely responsible for their outlook or for what they think and feel. It is more comfortable to be told by a believable authority what is so in the universe. People want there to be one reality and for all things to be explainable within that reality. But this may not be so. Or if so, certainly not "conceivable" within the systems of mind and thinking thus far created by humanity.

So Cheng Hsin as a system of development doesn't advocate one set-in-stone progression for training

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

body-mind sensations and experiences. On the other hand, I do find it useful to begin with the more basic and central functional aspects, such as feeling the center of the body, connecting to the ground, developing a detailed and clear sensation of the whole body all at once (this takes time), and so on -- those images and trainings that bring us closer to understanding and aligning with the central principles to which we adhere (centered, relaxed, whole, grounded, calm, honest, perceptive, sensitive, and so forth).

It must be said repeatedly, since few hear it right away, that exercises such as "ball and chain," "hand up/you down," and "three dimensional awareness," must be trained. Just as physical development requires training, so does the development of a powerful body-being or presence. Most people are interested in learning about such things, but once the novelty wears off, they neglect continued practice. They study a little and glimpse a more refined way of being a body, but they don't really know how to claim it or take it on. They think there is some mystery.

It's really quite simple. You become more grounded by training grounding. You learn to move from the center by training centering. Your awareness will expand to naturally include the three-dimensional space all around you if you practice such an awareness. The more you work on these kinds of feeling-experiences the stronger they become. The specific imagery or training method developed by me to work these things out isn't necessary, but some method is.

I advise people to continue such work as Standing on Pillars or Energy Extension, since the goal is not to master the images, the goal is to align with the principles that these images are designed to elicit. Once one has a very real and strong Ball and Chain and Waterdrop, then grounding is right there. You can make up any image that works for you, as long as it strengthens the principle you are working with. Then it must be trained, until the principle is experienced in your mind and body as real and active. It'll take time, but gradually it becomes possible to access the principle directly and powerfully, without recourse to any technique or method.

Do we have other trainings? Yes we do. But you'll just have to keep studying to find out what they are. The main thing is to understand what it is you're trying to accomplish and create real and attainable goals towards accomplishing that. I can usually help. As one of my teachers (Wong) said: "Always study with the best. They may cost more but they will save you so much time and money in the long run." This is true. They also save you more than time, they open doors that others don't even see.

Good luck with your sensations.

Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Ricky Henderson  
New York, NY

~~~~~  
Hi Peter

I have a question. I have had quite serious neck and shoulder pain for quite a few years now. I am 27. In my own work and body work with a physical therapist I have become very aware of a breathing pattern that has a whole physical and energetic consequence on my body. I have in the past had little AH HA moments where I have really felt it and thought this is where the problem comes from. I also have asthma and don't really breathe from my belly at all. The breath is all coming from upper chest throat and neck area. It's as if I don't trust that breath could come from my belly. This whole pattern seems anti to the Cheng Hsin body being you speak of. So finally to my question: How can I work with this? I have tried the water drop with some success but it feels like holding a blow up ball under water, the moment I let the feeling attention go, the energy flies up to the top as if it were never down. How to stabilize groundedness with such a strong influence in the body?

Thanks for taking the time to read my letter, missed you last year --look forward to seeing you this year.

Sincerely, Ricky

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Ricky,

Sorry I can't advise you regarding your neck and shoulder pain since I don't know the circumstances or cause. I suspect you've worked on relaxing them. If not, try it. As with most things it takes time to do such relaxation, especially since the condition is chronic. But with constant attention over days and weeks it should begin to relax more deeply. This may help.

Regarding your breathing, here's a good exercise: Lie down on your back and relax. Breathing slowly, first rest your hands on your chest and feel where the breath comes in. Now rest your hands lower, over your stomach area, and breathe in there. Try to have the breath move your hands, but don't strain yourself. When you can do that, put your hands lower. Keep doing this until you find your breath in your lower abdomen, which may feel at first like a collapsed or unused breathing area. Finally, resting your hands on your center or lower abdomen (just below the navel), practice relaxing the upper torso and breathing into your hands, letting your lower abdomen swell and lift your hands, then relax and let the hands fall. In a short time, it will feel more natural.

About the grounding: If your waterdrop pops up like a beachball in the water then perhaps we need to do something else. Such as holding a beachball on top of the water, for example. At least this way you are starting with where you are, and it sounds like it should be easy to do. Once you've joined with what you are already doing, then we can consider doing something else. But if you simply resist what you are doing then you will likely just pretend something else rather than do it. The image of waterdrop or ball and chain or anything else serves to draw mind and energy to adopt qualities that you want to obtain. If you are doing "beachball" on the water, what would work to have it go down? Maybe you could begin to feel as if your beach ball is deflating, filling with lead, or turning into a rock, something that in your experience will fall down in the water. Of course we are talking of abstractions here, we aren't even talking of particular images, but feelings in your body and mind. Join what you are doing, then work to feel something else. Don't make it too difficult. Find something you can relate to, something real for you. If you want to be like a mountain, feel like a colossal bag of dirt.

Good luck,

Peter

~~~~~  
Quincy Rabot  
Hindhead, England

~~~~~  
Hi Peter,

I have some questions. I was saving them for when I saw you in Holland but I realize I should ask them now in case other trainers are wondering too. They mostly relate to moving the weight under the ground.

1. Should the weight be under the ground at all times?
2. If so when moving forward or backward should I move the weight deeper as I move to the foot I am moving to, and arrive on it at the same depth I started at?
3. Is it right to move the weight under the ground at constant depth in movements like evading and setting up to do a technique, and move deeper only when doing a technique?
4. Is it incorrect to do a push (if one had to) with the arms almost extended as opposed to letting them flex completely during compression?

I look forward to your reply and any other input.

Quincy

Quincy,

Interesting questions. Regarding grounding and shifting the weight: we are talking about several things

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

here. One is the mechanical shift which can be accompanied by a feeling image or some such to improve and empower the shift. Another thing we're talking about is general movement, and also general grounding.

Regarding shifting: we use the image of shifting underground to help set up the proper mechanics in the movement. In this motion we want to fall down right as we begin the shift, and in the feeling-image this looks like dropping under the ground. Then we shift the weight to compress on the other foot. Although the image looks like a "U" under the ground from one foot to the next, there is no thought of rising up when coming to the new foot. We simply compress into that foot and the falling down is met with compression, and no more dropping of the pelvis takes place, this is like an upward force, but don't stand upward, the relation is still down. In practical terms it is a bit like your second question, but what's important is the direction of the motion and the intent. Both direction and intent are down, and the design is such to connect the activity of the body to move into the ground (to compress the intrinsic strength).

Regarding your first question: our weight can't actually be under the ground. What is under the ground is our feeling-attention. This brings us to our second consideration. Grounding in general, and so movement in general, can be done at any depth you like. But yes, some degree of grounding is useful at all times. When we use such images as ball and chain or waterdrop, we are increasing our depth and realness of grounding. For more power, use deeper grounding. Your depth of grounding will depend on your level of ability to ground and the needs of the moment.

Cheng Man Ching told a story of walking with Yang Cheng Fu on a bridge in China when a rickshaw driver ran into Yang. According to Cheng, the rickshaw man was knocked back and Yang hardly noticed. What occurred here? I imagine that Yang's grounding was generally quite deep and his habit to ground and compress so automatic that upon being stuck he immediately channeled this force into the ground and so the man bounced off. This might be an example of constant deep grounding and an ingrained habit of using intrinsic alignments. Of course, we shouldn't rule out the fact that Yang was also a rather large fat man.

Regarding your last question: In practicing a push, don't keep the arms extended. You will use strength and go rigid. It is possible, to compress with very little bend, just don't try it for many years to come. It is confusing enough to try to find real intrinsic strength without doing things that will elicit rigidity.

Good training,
Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Stefan von Leesen  
Hamburg, Germany  
~~~~~

Hello Peter!

Some new questions are arising out of training sessions. When I'm working with images like walking on poles or the water drop it seems to me already quite a big deal to create these images as real as possible. What I think is that even if this is so, I still have to stay aligned to most of the body-being stuff. Sometimes this seems to be too much to handle. Is it better to start from making these images as real as possible and then when they are quite real start to integrate the body-being stuff?

Where I think is the most lack of understanding is especially in shifting the weight. Although I know that you have already talked about this topic a million times, could you please say something about this once again? Especially in the Walking-on-Poles image it's not quite clear. As far as I understood it, if I start on my back leg I should actually feel the whole pole and the connection to the ground. When I shift my weight I should just drop it downwards and then through compression it will come up on the other pole (front leg) Is this right?

Thanks in advance,
Stefan von Leesen

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Stefan,

The purpose of exercises like walking on poles is to rearrange the mind and nervous system so that the mechanics can be realized or realized more easily. They are part of the same effort. This is why you must get such exercises to feel "as if real" otherwise no real changes will occur in your body. These two approaches using images to direct the feeling-attention and aligning the body mechanics shouldn't be seen as independent but interdependent, they are working toward the same goal. This goal is aligning the body-being to the principles. Often many mechanics need to be changed, as well as ways of thinking about the body and whatnot, in order to do this. Probably the best method is to go back and forth. Do some feeling exercises, not worrying about mechanics but noticing any changes that are brought about, then work on mechanical training. Sometimes try everything all at once, even if you can't do it. This helps keep your awareness on your overall goal.

About the weight shift, if you think of the poles as slippery, then you are not likely to use strength to push off of one to go to the other. Instead, you will keep the weight going straight down into the pole. Other than that, see my response to Quincy's above question about shifting weight.

Peter

~~~~~  
Mike Hart  
Wales, UK

~~~~~  
Dear Peter,

I've been training the principles in the mini tai chi set and just want to run something by you if I may.

1. When I shift the weight underground and keep knee in heel and knee with toes while doing ward off, roll-back etc., my center doesn't seem to move very much. I still try to get the hips moving the elbows. If I shift my weight and/or center too much, it drags the knee off the toes, so my center moves at the most about 4" to 6". Does this sound correct?

2. When I keep the alignments of knee with toes and in heel, the crotch area feels strong and arched but the legs also feel tense. I don't know if it's because the legs aren't used to this and will adjust and get flexible or if I really am tensing up a lot. Could you help with any pointers at all.

Many thanks for your time Peter, it's much appreciated

Warm regards

Mike Hart

Mike,

This sounds normal. Most of the time when people try to move from the center they sway their pelvis past their feet, like a tree ready to topple in the wind. It is imperative that every movement be done literally by moving the whole body (and every part) from the center, but there are other considerations as well. When someone is first introduced to those three mechanics of Cheng Hsin -- shifting underground, knee pressing heel, and knee pointing with toe -- it is common to feel as if his movement is very restricted. But I do these things naturally now, and you can see in the video and in person, that my movement is far from restricted.

One challenge comes about because people's hip joints are usually too tight and they make up for this tightness by swaying the pelvis and twisting the knees. Look into stretching the hip joints. They are ball and socket joints and should freely rotate and swing in many directions. But it may take some stretching, not just relaxing, since you may need more range of motion. Four to six inches is often plenty of center movement to move everything into place, if one's movement is efficient and the center is used effectively (like the inside of a record moving a little to move the outside of the record a lot). Mechanical adjustments

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

like these (which at first might seem restrictive) can gum up the works and produce tension, etc.. But this should diminish as you transform your nervous system, become comfortable with the movements, stretch the tissue, and relax. If this doesn't happen after some time, we'll need to address the problem in person.

Good luck,

Peter

~~~~~  
Wes DeMarco  
Stillwater, Oklahoma  
~~~~~

Dear Peter,

A question about compression: I'd been imagining that compression for a punch could refer to compressing the back foot into the ground and transferring power through the hips with good alignment. I'd worked on this and was starting to loosen up considerably, but your responses to Pieter and Christian in the last newsletter sent me back to the bag. I'd noticed from the video that you plant the front foot before pivoting, but didn't take this to be the essential compression. Your newsletter remarks led me to think otherwise. Having experimented for a few days, I'm dying to ask the following question in three parts:

(a) If I keep the back foot into the ground at contact, will this keep me "pushing off the ground" (even if it feels sunk) rather than properly compressing? Is this compression of the front foot into the ground the main compression you want us to get the hang of?

(b) I can't seem to get it at all on the jab. I'd tended (with both jab and cross) to hit the bag just before the front foot smacks the floor---again, I'd thought that was 'hitting with the legs' and 'compressing' (with the back foot, at least) and all, but now I wonder... (I'm a flyweight, well-nigh addicted to that push.)

(c) I've been doing a "rag doll" Thai kick, keeping the striking leg dead weight and using pure loose rotation. It's feeling pretty good--hits harder than the way I was trained! This obviously needs compression into the front foot. Thing is, the way I'm now doing it, the rotation starts first (with a shoulder dip and a bit of push off the rear), and then I drill down with the front foot into impact with the other shin. Granted that front foot compression is plainly essential on this one, is it essential to plant it first, before the rotation begins?

These worries come from your comments to Pieter and Christian, plus revisiting the video. I see the front-foot-first compression right there, at least on your cross. It's so easy for students to take something inessential in the movement of the Master (I use the term affectionately) to be the "real thing," and the question, in sum, is about whether front-foot compression is the essential compression to work with in these strikes, and if it is, whether it typically needs to come first. I'd be grateful for any hints, and will experiment with any suggestions you might care to offer.

Best Wishes,
Wes

(My first response, sent to Wes earlier:)

Wes,

Quickly: if you are on your front foot, facing and hitting the bag, and using the back leg for power, it is not compression, you must be expanding (pushing) from the back foot (since you are moving away from it). Compression is getting "squeezed," which can only happen moving into, not away from (unless you are stretching and using the stretch to compress the legs).

Think about it.

Hope this helps for now.

Peter

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

(Wes replies:)

Dear Peter,

As a result of your remark I now see that I was indeed confusing the self-sinking that prepares to welcome compression with the compression itself. I can feel the difference in a push/uproot, but can't at all in these strikes, whether because it happens too fast for my fledgling sensitivity, or because compression and sinking are actually simultaneous in certain cases. In the uproot, I sink, then there's a moment of compliance; my consent to the compression makes room for adjustment. In the punches, when I go off the back leg I can sense, dimly, a compression into the rear on impact. But when I plant the front foot (in imitation of my body-movement guru) the only compression I feel is a bit in the shoulder--and I suspect that's due to a misalignment I'll have to work out. The cross is all pivoting spiral, pure momentum; I feel some sinking but suffer no extra compression--down on impact, and--more surprisingly to me--none into the rear foot.

Folks might find it useful if when you address this confusion in the next newsletter, you'd make some remarks on the distinction between *sinking* and *compression*. (Conceptual refinements help express the nuances of experience!)

Presumably, it's not that I decide to sink but allow compression to occur, since I can allow sinking to occur by relaxing and 'giving in' to the ground. Nor is it that sinking is solo while compression is a result of other people's bodies impacting on my body, since when I jump off the chair (after my 'feel the floor thru the chair' exercise!), it feels more like compression than sinking.

As you use the terms, sinking and compression both seem to be species of grounding (or better, aspects of the occurrence of grounding). What on the whole distinguishes them, if not the difference between active and passive, interplay and solo, gravity and momentum? Driving, when I hit the accelerator and stop leaning forward but allow my back and ass to relax into the seat, in what respect am I sinking and in what respect am I suffering compression? Is it that the tissues undergo compression but the body-being as a whole sinks? (That makes it a part/whole distinction in the main.) If that's so, then is there no case where I as a whole suffer compression? Is the locus of compression limited--as 'sinking' is not limited--to the physical facets of the body-being?

The experience fills me with questions, but I'd better stop there. Gratefully,
Wes

Wes,

Yes, when you push off the back leg in the punch you are not compressing. Some martial arts (certain styles of T'ai Chi and Western boxing for example) use pushing with the back leg for power. It does have power. But it is not compression.

Moving back to your first concerns:

One confusion people have who've read the T'ai Chi Classics (probably the best works on T'ai Chi to date) comes about by how a certain line has been translated:

"Power comes from the legs, is directed by the waist, and issues out the fingers."

This may be true, but it draws attention in the wrong direction. Let me restate it a bit:

"Intrinsic power is a function of the whole body compressing into the feet from the point of contact, all necessary motion and alignment is directed by the center, or pelvis."

The point is, that although we get our power from the ground, by starting there in the description we are apt to think of starting there in our efforts, and so push from the ground and into the hands. But really what we want to do is start from the hand (or whatever) and be compressed down into the feet. This is accomplished by moving our whole body (via the center) towards the target, and setting up an alignment that will allow compression to occur throughout the body all the way down to the feet. We don't "do" compression we "get" compressed. This means that the tissues must be squeezed into the foot, and this squeezing should be vertically descending at foot level, otherwise you are using friction, and undoubtedly

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

shoving rather than being compressed.

Either the front or back foot, or both, can be used for compression, yet it depends on the alignment, weight, movement, and function of the technique. If you aren't moving the whole body into the foot, you can't be using compression. Don't get me wrong, I didn't say you have to squat down or even move a great deal, but the direction of movement must be into the compressing foot, which means that most of your weight (generally 60% or above) should be on that foot at the time of compression. If you shift to the other foot in the motion, then the compression should naturally move to that foot as the weight moves onto it.

Regarding your Thai roundhouse kick: the compression occurs when the kicking leg hits, and I don't plant the grounding foot until right about that time. I wouldn't plant it before rotation, since if you are using your whole body in the rotation you are likely to twist the knee. I pivot on the ball of my foot and swing my whole body as one unit, landing the heel (which is most often facing the target) just at impact so that a spiral compression down to the ground can occur at that time.

Regarding sinking versus compression: Once again you ask too many questions at once. So let's work on this distinction for a bit. Yes, I put both sinking and compression under the heading of Grounding. We can see a difference in the use of that term as in grounding a tent by tying it to a peg hammered into the earth, and grounding an electrical circuit by allowing the current to run down a wire planted into the ground. Each gives a slightly different view. In simple, sinking is done "by" us, compression is done "to" us. The work we do such as "ball and chain," "waterdrop," etc. is grounding work that we could call sinking. In other words, we are changing our awareness and nervous system, and so also our body design and engineering-- so that we are more connected with and relating to the ground. The more we do such things the stronger it gets. Allowing yourself to relax and letting your tissues fall or be further pressed into the ground is sinking. Sinking creates a stronger base from which to access a more powerful compression. Compression, on the other hand, is getting squeezed or squished into the ground (setting up movement and alignment so that the tissues of the whole body are compressed into the ground). This is done as a result of how you do your movement. Hands-on teaching is required to go any further.

Regarding your driving analogy: sinking is what you do, compression is what is done to you. Our challenge is finding a way to use the body so that, without effort, the body is compressed and power is achieved. But this takes training. Well, that's enough. Hope this helps and hope to see you at a workshop soon!

Peter

~~~~~  
Paul van der Lee  
Eindhoven, Holland  
~~~~~

Hi Peter,

I notice that in pushing hands, boxing and any other practice like just moving around for example, I'm not standing very grounded. I would really like to improve that. Do you know a great practice for improving balance and grounding besides standing in certain poses or pushing hands? I realize that there probably isn't such a thing as an ultimate practice for grounding but could you then please explain to me what helped you a lot while training on this subject?

Hope to hear from you,

Paul van der Lee

Paul,

Yes. You have to change your mind. And what I mean by that is you need to be able to control your perception and feeling-attention so that you can move much of it down into the ground. Practices like the

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Ball and Chain and Waterdrop (see the book: Principles of Effortless Power) are very good for this, but they have to be strongly felt and as if real, and this takes training. Most people don't train such things as they should. They think that merely knowing about it, and doing a little work on it once or twice should be enough. It is not. Training this kind of thing is like doing push ups. So you learn how to do push ups, fine. But does that make your arms stronger? Not at all. You need to train with the push ups, do them until your arms get strong. Just so with grounding trainings. The good thing about trainings done to increase your ability to shift your mind and feeling-attention is that once you can do it well you don't lose it so quickly and don't need to exercise forever like you do with push ups. Yet it is good to keep improving on it, this also keeps it fresh and strong.

Also it's useful to develop exercises to do at various times during your day and during different activities. We will be doing some work along these lines in the upcoming Holland camp. Hope to see you there and we can talk more on this subject.

Peter

~~~~~  
Teresa Kelly  
Taos, New Mexico  
~~~~~

Hi Peter,

Just a couple questions, curiosity mostly.

In videos and pictures of you I notice that you are frequently wearing a cape. I've heard you tell someone to "walk like you have a cape on" so I wonder if that is the reason for yours. Do you wear it to extend the space behind and around you?

I also notice that sometimes when you're reaching out in the videos, your hands appear larger than normal. This could be due to camera placement, but I don't think so. Also, when you're talking about being grounded and your energy is in the lower body, that part appears smaller in proportion to your upper body. If there is any correlation, I would think it would be the other way around--that places where your energy is concentrated would appear larger. At least that's what I figured could account for the appearance of "big hands." Am I just making all this up?

Teresa

Teresa,

Very observant questions.

As for the cape: yes I have had people walk "as if with a cape flowing out behind them" because it helps bring energy and attention to the back and creates a more filled out presence. But that's not why I wear one. The history of the cape: in colder climates the back of my neck gets chilled, especially when I sweat, so I used to wear an old yellow towel, sometimes tied in a knot when very active, but that wasn't too comfortable. (You can see it in some of the older video footage.) Some of my closest people thought I shouldn't be decked out in a ragged old towel so Doug Chambers made the cape for me several years ago. He even put some ties in the front but soon it became clear that they only served to choke me, so mostly I just throw it over my shoulders. I forget it's anything unusual, it's just become part of my uniform.

The hands and the lower body changing visually is not frequently noticed. Yes they do. When one makes a real shift in "energy," meaning changing the normal perceptive perspective by directing the feeling-attention in a specific way -- such as grounding with the water drop, extending feeling out the hands, outreaching, eight attitude awareness, and whathaveyou - it will show up visually. Strange, but true. Often it is quite subtle and hard to perceive, but if you stand in front of a mirror -- usually back a bit so that you can take in the vision of your whole body -- and adopt some state (like ball and chain), as it becomes real and present for you, you should see some change in you body image. Don't look for specifics, try to take in the whole and sense a difference from your normal image and then the image after you've shifted your

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

feeling-state. This is a good method for training such things. If you look at your body or some action you're doing you should be able to sense when something is off perhaps your back isn't full enough, or you are squeezed on the left but open on the right, or maybe your action is not fluid enough, or large enough, or balanced enough. Clearly these sound like subjective assessments, yet with practice you begin to pick up flaws or limitations in your body and movement by "sensing" what a whole and balanced condition should look like. Change the feeling in your body and/or movement until it looks full and balanced, and it will be.

Regarding my hands becoming larger and legs smaller, we can talk about that after a few more years of Cheng Hsin study. It wouldn't be useful now. The main thing is to train your feeling-attention in yourself by mastering the many Cheng Hsin energies and practices. Good luck and thanks for the questions.

Peter

~~~~~  
Mike Hart  
Swansea, Wales

~~~~~  
Peter,

While we were out in Holland you corrected my mini set by raising my elbows (in grabbing the ball). At the time I believe you said it was functionally more effective that way. I was wondering if you'd be able to expand on this part of the structure of the arm. I was originally taught to keep the elbow hanging downward but after experimenting a little it does seem to work a little better in elbow pull but I don't understand why.

Also you said your speed was attributed to 3 things: relaxation, moving from the center and mind control. How do you use the mind to help with speed? I can understand the benefits of relaxation and moving the centre as I have experienced them to some extent but I don't understand where the mind control affects speed. Are there for instance particular visual images you use to create faster movements of energy or feeling impulses or something else? My brain simply can't translate mind control and speed at the moment and I was hoping you could clarify this.

There is one thing that I noticed about myself in particular while we practiced pressure-no pressure, touch-no touch, or game A. Although I was aware of my body-being and alignment to gravity, when I come to move in relation to my partner I seem to get caught "on the hop" so to speak. I want or feel to move in a certain direction but seem to just get stuck where I am for a short while (maybe a second). However this short while is then getting me into trouble as I am too late to do the motion originally intended. I feel that somehow I am not relating effectively to my partner's movements but I don't seem to be able to figure out why. Numerous ideas have arisen like: I'm thinking what to do and by the time the intellect has dealt with it it's too late or, I'm trying to lead my partner but this causes me to mess up my neutralization-yielding or, maybe not outreaching or listening effectively.

Could you help with any pointers please?

Thanks for your time Peter

Best regards

Mike Hart

Mike,

In regards to your first query, raising the elbow: As I said, it is a matter of function. If the most effortlessly effective alignment demands the elbow be raised then it needs to be up, not hanging. Otherwise, everything should hang unless it's called upon to do something else. In a move like an elbow pull we can see that the force is rather horizontal and so the elbow should be aligned in the same horizontal direction as the pull, since the elbow is the focal point of the pull. An easier example in which to see this reasoning might be a hook punch. If I were to hit you with my fist moving horizontally into your head, I need the elbow to be in the same horizontal line as the fist and its movement. This is strongest and easiest. If the

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

elbow hangs down it will bend the wrist and the weight of your body will be moving through the elbow and under the fist so to speak, and so put great strain on the wrist. Whenever the pressure or force of the forearm movement is designed to do something horizontally then the elbow should be up. It's more effortlessly powerful and it also is better for the wrist if the hand is involved. Play with it and I think you will see what I mean.

About speed. Spend some time focusing on relaxing more and using the center more literally and efficiently. Without these, the mind aspect doesn't have enough to work with. Controlling the mind simply means that what you think and feel (and so the impulses you send) are deliberate and not the usual knee-jerk concerns and distractions that normally buzz through the brain. When speed is required mind activity must be very precise and fast. Which is to say, more attention is on what one doesn't think, or even allow into the mental-feeling space, than on what one does think. What one thinks of course must be the same as the action and be over before it can be thought. Thus the speed. This should give you something to play with.

Finally, about your inability to move when needed: This could be due to many things. Of your list of ideas, the second one, leading and so not neutralizing, should not be the case. Leading and other such "following" activities have inherent in them neutralizing and yielding, so this should never be a problem. You can't lead without also being in tune with neutralization. I'm not saying neutralizing an attack or dodging after the lead, I'm saying that the leading itself is moving with the opponent's actions and intent and in so leading you are also neutralizing what they "are" doing, or what they first intended or thought to do, in favor of drawing them into extending or changing their action into some new form. One component necessary for this is neutralizing or yielding. Therefore, if you decide it's time to stop leading and evade or neutralize, it should be readily available. And so can't be what keeps you stuck.

Rather, I think it is probably an issue of mind or timing. It's interesting you say "on the hop." In the states we might say "being caught flat-footed." Both are referring to being caught in a bad situation, but for opposite reasons. In being caught flat-footed, (which is a boxing term) we are saying that the person has set himself for a moment and is unable to move. He receives the full force of a blow because he is stuck and not able to respond effectively. Usually this happens because he doesn't know the punch is coming. On the other hand, your phrase speaks volumes about the timing of movement. In a similar way to be "flat-footed" when you are "caught on the hop," you experience an inability to respond. If you are indeed hopping, or jumping, or even just taking a step, you can move in no other direction than the fall of your motion until after the foot touches down. If someone catches you in mid hop (step) you can't change. In other words, you can't step somewhere else until you've finished that step. This is a timing issue. And a good place to check.

Don't ignore relaxation. There is always more to accomplish in relaxing the body. If you feel you are relaxed to some degree look more deeply into it. Look into the "inside" of the body and the larger areas of the body. These are not only harder to fully relax, but in so doing it will at first probably screw up whatever skill levels you presently have -- since much of that skill is dependent on sudden muscle contractions in these areas and removing them will leave you with nothing. Then you will need to find new ways to move. This may also help with your stuckness. But relaxing doesn't stop with the body. You must also relax the mind. Relaxing the mind does not mean going to sleep or becoming indolent, those are more like shutting down the mind. Relaxed mind is awake, yet free and open. It is actually necessary for the deep relaxing of the body. It's not easy to explain what relaxing mind is, but it's something you should work with. This may improve your ability to respond.

In fighting terms, a second is an extremely long time to be stuck. You've seen me do multiple punches faster than most people can see, how many times do you think I could hit you in that stretch of time? Such a gap could change the course of the whole fight. Now, I know you are only playing games and are working things out (which is totally appropriate) but consider: how could you dodge that many blows in that space of time? This could open your brain to a different time frame by giving it a new and challenging perspective. Sometimes even laziness is a factor --incredible, but true. But since you say you have in

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

mind what you want to do but are unable to do it, this suggests something else.

I could go on but would be better if I could see what you are doing. As you know, often when I watch someone do something it is obvious to me what they are thinking that creates problems. For now, you can just have fun working on it. Keep me posted on your success, and let me know if anything I've said makes a difference.

Peter

~~~~~  
Mike Hart  
Swansea, Wales

~~~~~  
Peter,

Thanks for the reply in the last Newsletter. I can understand the function of the raised elbow much better now that you've explained it.

It took me a while but I think I've figured out what you were saying about the mind and speed, the important thing is that I need to work more on relaxation at the moment, especially, as you mentioned, inside the larger areas of the body. I was wondering if you have any exercises for relaxing and/or getting more in touch with the shoulders and hips apart from the letting go exercises, as these areas seem to be the most difficult to feel deeply. I can feel them, but there seems to be a deep underlying tension that I have difficulty in letting go. Sometimes I just lie down and practice relaxing the body, but even when I'm limp on the floor or bed or wherever, I seem to locate a deep seated tension in my legs -- is this my body or mind, I'm thinking? I don't know if it's possible that my mind is the root of the problem or if I can really feel tension in my legs that deeply. It's strange.

As for my stuckness, what you said really made a lot a sense. I think it's mind that's my problem. After reading your reply last week I went to the training session and played pressure-no pressure and touch-no touch again, then I contemplated on the experience later and the next day. So far I have come up with the following: I drift in and out of listening and outreaching. When I drift out I'm extrapolating with the logical mind, but not feeling with conscious- awareness. This obviously makes me relate ineffectively to my partner as I'm not here in the present, I'm in the future.

As you said, relaxing the mind is also a necessary part of relaxing, and I think my mind is taking control of me. I'm not quite sure of the domain I'm getting into with my explanation, or even if I'm explaining in the correct terms, but recently (about a month ago) I've noticed that I've started noticing my mind. I've noticed emotions build in my body from thoughts (anger and frustration mainly) and it seems a weird experience to watch my thoughts arise and how they affect me. The experience of "noticing" seems to neutralize the emotions somewhat and they quickly die down. Is this useful? I haven't done any ontological or contemplative work with you or anyone else, although I have read all your books and continue to re-read them. Just today I started to read a book called "The Power of Now" and the first thing that was said is to dis-identify yourself with the mind and become a watcher -- this is when it really hit me that I'd somehow started to do this. It's really, really strange this noticing mind, I'm comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. I guess I don't know where it's going to take me.

As you suggested in sword play, I'm now starting to experiment with other movements to feel my center moving through the sword. I had done a little sword years ago with someone else, but never enjoyed it so much. I was just doing choreography before, no understanding or principles. Today I was practicing part of the Cheng Hsin sword routine, and came to realize: how can anyone ever become bored with a solo hand or weapon form, there's just so much to experience and to correct? One can spend hours on one movement. Which is obviously how you spent much of your time investigating the body-being alignments, and everything else.

I can still picture you performing the T'ai Chi set in Holland (OK, I sneaked some time out from the mini-set group to watch you!). I've seen many videos and performances of t'ai chi by different people but none touched me as you did. I could see connections and center movement and intrinsic power (don't ask me how, I just saw) within the postures that I haven't seen in people who are considered renowned masters of the art. The sword form was also poetry in motion, it inspired me.

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

Well, that's it for now. I show your replies to my students --we read them at the end of a session. They also seem to identify with what's said and of course we can help each other work stuff out. I must say there's a completely different feeling about myself today than there ever has been.

Thanks again Peter, your replies are always to the point and there's always something I can glean from them. Hope you've got some suggestions for the hips and shoulders.

Best Wishes

Mike Hart

Mike,

About relaxing the pelvis, of course "you" need to do it, but if you have someone there that does good deep tissue massage and can reach right in and touch the psoas muscle (goes in from the front through the intestines to the two huge muscles on either side of the lower spine), and also can put an elbow deep into the right hip and pelvis points, this can help. It makes it clearer where the muscles are, how much tension is stored there (which is usually a lot), and helps your mind "locate" them. It's a bit painful, but works. As far as shoulders and everything else, you simply must continue to relax them as much as possible.

Relaxing in this way is an ongoing practice. The more constantly and sincerely you send the signal to the muscles to relax, to let go, the more they will. It builds up over time. Often people think relaxing is a one time thing, an on/off switch. But this is only superficial, or immediate relaxing. Deeper relaxation comes about when you continue to spend time on it. Even if no noticeable result takes place still send the signal. Gradually the muscles will let go more. The deeper and more solid the tension the longer it will take. When it comes to relaxing, mind and body can't be separated. Muscles don't contract just for the fun of it, so tension is always the product of mind. Therefore, so is relaxing. When it comes to the mind, however, it is not just what you easily cognize that I'm speaking about. Keep sending the signal not only to what you know and can think, but also to what you feel, and what you don't know and can't yet feel.

Regarding being stuck: Yes, paying attention all the time is difficult, but valuable. It will take work, and it will produce results. Continue to move through the various distractions, fears, habits, reactions, and anything else that will come up as a result of trying to stay that present and aware. Keep asking the question: do I perceive everything that's going on in this moment? And remember, "this" moment passes very quickly into "this" one.

As for becoming the observer. This is a good start. If you haven't done this before it can be useful to de-identify from all the crap that fills the mind all day long. And it helps you to not take it all too seriously, since it's just stuff you're doing, and usually unconsciously. But don't get attached to it. It is a beginner's technique and in the end must be thrown away. Use it as long as you need to, just don't think of yourself as separate from the "self-mind" you are watching. Don't identify with being the "watcher." It is only a technique. As you get some space from being controlled by all of your thoughts and emotions, you can also ask: who is watching?

I'm glad you've found more joy in the work. As I keep telling people the more you learn of Cheng Hsin and the better you get at it, the more fun it gets.

Good luck,

Peter

~~~~~  
Klaus Heinrich-Peters  
Hamburg, Germany

~~~~~  
Peter,

I focused my training in the last time on moving the legs from the center. But if I really stop

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

cheating and relax my leg and the hip joint, I cannot step anymore. e.g. after the commencement, shifting the weight to the left leg, relax the other completely, I am able to turn my leg and foot out while turning from the center. Doesn't work really good, but at least a bit. The real problem starts after shifting the weight to the right foot. Now I should step with the left, but I have no clue how to lift the leg. If I go deeper with the center to push the leg forward, I only push my knee. The heel lifts a bit but it's light years from something close to stepping. The problem is that it's so logical that this happens: If I stand on a bench with one leg and relax the other, the foot rests a few centimeters (about an inch?) below the level of the other foot. So if I'm not on a bench but with both feet on the ground and try to move it from the center, the ground is simply in the way.

On the other hand, if I move my arms from the center, they are not completely relaxed - otherwise they would just hang during the whole form (maybe they could be completely limp if one would increase the speed in the form and try to catch the falling down with the next move? Would be fast.). So some holding action takes place to preserve the shape I achieved by moving them from the center. Even if I can't do that a hundred per cent, I can feel at least the path the center movement is suggesting for the arm movement and follow it.

While I feel pretty comfortable with this, if I try the same thing with the leg it just feels like making it stiff. I also tried to work with a better feeling connection to my feet to replace the absent physical connection, but this seems to lead to only more cheating. Can you give a hint?

Thanks,
Klaus

Klaus,

Moving a limb completely and only using the center for lift as well as vertical movement requires lots of work. Keep up the practice you describe. You are attempting to find the literal physical connection between center movement and limb. This will be valuable later. It may require many such practices, seeking out and finding ways to accomplish moving the leg or arm from the center without any lift or activity at all in the limb. But it will force your brain and nervous system to become very clear on what is and isn't a result of center movement. Most people give up very quickly. They conclude that it can't be done and so they immediately go back to old habits in the form of using a different method. But in so doing, they do not develop the experiential clarity and skills involved in literal center movement.

I recommend that, from time to time, you try to do each movement of the t'ai chi set in this way (don't try to connect them or you are likely to rip your arms off, better to experiment with each move several times. This reveals what it takes to try to make shapes in the arms and legs using only the center for all movement (the rest of the body being like a rag doll). Through such a practice you will discover ways to move and shape your body (arms and legs) that you never would have discovered in any other way. This provides a knowledge that is useful for seeking out intrinsic strength, and the feeling not only of what's required to move limbs from center, but also of actually being completely relaxed while doing so.

In these practices you cannot keep a shape and so it will not look the way you might like. Yet they allow you to develop far more than someone who only practices the shapes. When you practice the set or limb movement keeping a shape (normal practice), then you will need to use hand-up-you-down (or foot-up-you-down, etc.) for the lift. But since you have the experienced tossing your limbs literally from the center you will have a much better sense of what is being moved by the center and what is not, and you will be far more precise in the movement and can leave out all of the subtle strength and tension that others cannot (thinking they are totally relaxed). As you move the arms around (still literally from the center, it is only the maintenance of the shape or "lift" that is hand up you down – it is NOT the source of the movement) you will be able to more clearly feel the connection with the center and the alignments necessary for intrinsic strength.

If you recall the exercise I did with the tai chi class in Holland when I had you sink in the front foot and drag the back foot up to the front (done in stages), this is something that was developed to help clarify the leg movement from center. You will find that different ways of sinking and feeling and alignments will

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

create differing results. And don't confuse tension with feeling-connection.
So there are some hints.
Peter

~~~~~  
Nicolas Feenberg  
La Jolla, CA  
~~~~~

Dear Peter,

I was talking with my girlfriend and she was lamenting that some people have it so together or easy or are so effortless in what they do that she felt somewhat inadequate. I responded that while that person might find great ease in that aspect of their lives, I'm sure that you are able to do other things that they might find quite difficult. I know some people that are brilliant intellectually yet look upon those who can simply sit and "be" with great envy. Anyway, I did an ETW [Cheng Hsin's central ontology workshop] with you ten years ago and you spoke of many of us as having "Ralstonitis." I guess that means that someone of your level of mastery must have such an easy time with things that you are to be looked up to. If you don't mind, perhaps you could share what aspects of your life you find difficult, and which people that you see as "having it easy." Your thoughts or comments would be very interesting.

Best wishes,
Nicolas Feenberg

Nicolas,

I don't imagine that anyone "has it easy." Life is always full of challenges, and any individual is a conglomerate of specific traits. These "traits" will always bump into difficulties since we are stuck being a particular individual. Some people seem to be more easy going, and others embrace great strife and suffering as a character trait. Yet everyone has ups and downs, and no one finds everything easy. In fact, "effortlessness" most often shows up only after a great deal of work.

Someone who has recently awakened --having had a powerful enlightenment experience --will not be suffering much at all for a period of time, since the whole "self notion" will abate. Yet even then, given time, the self-mind will reestablish itself as he continues to cling to self-survival. Some of his past difficulties may have dissipated altogether, since some of the self attachments will have ended, but many will remain and these will always cause struggle.

The particular difficulties will depend on what a person is attached to and what he or she clings to as their self --emotional relationships, success, self esteem, fears, avoidance, being "right," opinions, beliefs, space, whatever. As long as we persist as this particular "character" the same particular challenges will emerge.

But to respond to your request more directly, I find many things challenging. For example, I'm not particularly social and so have not developed the social skills that allow some to let others feel at ease in their presence. Since I tend to be strong willed, I bump into challenges all the time when my will doesn't get its way. I've never been very good at tennis. Feel better?

We "hear tell" of "complete enlightenment" or freedom from self, but I've yet to witness it or experience it. So I plod along, repeatedly struggling and getting free, as my tenacious self persists. Having some insight into the workings of all this does help me take it less seriously, and empowers getting free of anything that presents itself as a struggle -- but not always.

Enjoy the ease, and enjoy the struggle. Then how can you lose?
Peter

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Cheng Hsin T'ai chi and Body Being

~~~~~  
Jason Shaw  
Brooklyn, New York  
~~~~~

Dear Mr. Ralston,

In the principles of effortless power on page 68 you describe Joining as "a calm activity with both parties helping each other defeat the aggressor." My first question is if two parties are joined how can there be an aggressor? Is the aggressor the initiator, the intention, or the first one to become imbalanced therefore breaking the joining so to speak. Or is it something completely different?

My second question is in the eight points on structuring the body-being on page 29 you describe how the feet and hands move together. Now I find when I walk normally, that as I step with my left foot my right hand generally goes forward. Is this correct or is my left hand supposed to accompany my left foot forward?

Thank you truly,
Jason

Jason,

Obviously the aggressor is the other person who is attacking you. It isn't you, since we are starting from the assumption that you are the one joining the other. Most likely, the "aggression" or attack or action of the other person begins before and without your joining it. It is their action that you join. Having joined it you then recreate the combined actions in such a way as to serve a purpose of your own. After all we are speaking of a martial encounter, not dance. The purpose for the interaction determines what's appropriate in the interaction.

About the hands and feet moving together, this is an exercise to help you experience more unity and connectivity in the whole body, to experience the whole body moving in unison. The connection between the various parts remains in all Cheng Hsin movement, but doesn't necessarily follow the same literal path as the other parts -- such as when walking.

Hope this helps.
Peter