

Cheng Hsin Newsletter Anthology 1998-2006: Martial

The following Anthology is a collection of past Questions and Answers from 1998 to 2006 dealing with the martial aspect 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.

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From Stephen Pellegrino  
Pacifica, CA, USA  
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Peter,

My question is, how do the "principles" change given the context of ground fighting (as in judo or jujitsu), specifically the principle of grounding?

Also you wrote: "If muscles are exerted here and there, or held in place, then real unity is not possible." Is this still true in the given context?

Stephen

Stephen,

Certainly the form of application would be different lying on the ground than it is standing on the feet. I do describe most body mechanics from a standing point of view, so when sitting, lying, standing on one's head, or any other configuration the principles and mechanics must be translated accordingly. Most mechanics still apply, but some do not. For example, pressing the knee into the heel or foot does not apply if there is no weight on the foot. The principles themselves do not change.

We must consider the principle behind the mechanics or rules. Understand the principles and you will know how to apply them in various circumstances.

There is always a ground. Where is it? How are we connected to the ground? Where do we receive our force for movement? We need to answer these questions in each moment in order to use the ground effectively.

If we were a body floating in outerspace, we wouldn't be able to travel anywhere since our only ground would be our own center. We could flail around perhaps, working one body part against another, but couldn't move through space since there would be nothing to push off of or compress into -- we couldn't get going. Playing on the ground does have some similarities to space -- our mobility is usually reduced to a small location, and we need to work more within our own body sphere -- and to this degree we might want to think through what we could and couldn't do in space, and what principles would apply.

But truth is we are not in space and so we do have ground. Where is it? In ground fighting our body is usually lying down in some fashion. At any moment the ground may be found through our back, side, legs, an arm, or even the opponent's body. Though our connection with the ground -- and the subsequent alignment of body parts -- may be ever-changing, our center is not. So when it comes to circumstances like these, more attention should be paid to working the body via the center.

Compression is generated through ground contact and movement, using intrinsic strength. It is possible to accomplish this while lying on the ground but it is much more difficult. In ground fighting our range of movement is greatly reduced, so much research and experimentation is needed to work out how to use intrinsic strength in these various postures and circumstances. Given the limited mobility, I would also recommend using the opponent's weight and movement as much as possible to assist in achieving compression.

But practically speaking, the use of muscles is inevitable, just not as much as one might think. Remember, relaxed is better and the less effort it takes to do something the more options are available to us in so many ways. Unity, in the sense of moving the whole in one direction, is frequently sacrificed to

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some degree because various body parts must oppose one another to create movement. But the good news is balance isn't much of an issue with ground fighting -- we certainly can't fall down!

Peter

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Mike Cottrell-Tribes  
Whitehorse, Canada  
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Peter,

I have a question about when is the best time to introduce the basic principles, including: relaxation (in both movement and in standing), calmness, moving from the center, grounding, compression, posture. I've been introducing these concepts in my classes lately, and the feedback I'm getting from some of my senior students is that this is too advanced for junior (less experienced) people.

These are concepts that they (and I) are only beginning to grasp after a decade of training, and so they feel that it takes that long. My counter argument is that we had never properly been taught these concepts, and had to figure them out for ourselves.

So my question is, when is a good time to introduce these concepts, and how much effort should be put into attempting to teach these concepts to people who are still learning the basic mechanics of the art? At what point can one delve into these concepts in great detail, and really work on learning and internalizing them?

Thanks,
Mike Cottrell-Tribes

Mike,

Right away! No time to lose! The principles should be practiced right from the beginning. Advancement is a matter of deepening our understanding of the principles, not waiting to get to them. They are most important. Even more important than the mechanics.

Of course not everything can be learned in a day, but that is simply because learning takes time, not because anything is withheld -- especially the principles. Once I taught a group of about a hundred people during a weekend in Chicago. None knew any martial arts or t'ai chi. I worked only on the Cheng Hsin Body-Being principles of movement and structure, without teaching one technique or form. At the end, I had them make up a "t'ai chi" set using what I had taught them. No kidding, they did better t'ai chi than most people who've studied a t'ai chi set for years!

Hope I cleared this up for you.

Peter

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Richard Cota  
Altadena, California  
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Peter,

Just finished your book "Principles of Effortless Power." OUTSTANDING! I know I'll be reading that several times over. I feel it's increased my understanding of the arts quite a bit. Several things seem to make more sense. The part that seems difficult for me to "own" is that "there is no fight." I understand logically the points you make but I have difficulty "owning" that concept. Any further suggestions you might have would be appreciated.

Thank you,
Richard

Richard,

Certainly for most people most of the time whenever a contentious relationship occurs there is a fight. But

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the "fighting" is taking place in the mind more than in the body. When we enter an encounter as a "fight," we will have thoughts and feelings geared to fight, to contend and defend, and our body will follow these thoughts. By the very nature of the thinking we will tend to turn the engagement into a struggle. Imagine, however, if instead of approaching such an interaction as if it's going to be a fight, approaching it as if it is NOT going to be a fight, but rather an interaction. Without having any thoughts of "fighting" notice what shifts in your mind and body. Regardless of the activity that takes place -- which may be fast, responsive, and appropriate -- without the notion of fight, it will occur differently. Try it.

So, in reality there is no such thing as a fight. Fight only occurs in the mind as an assessment or an attitude and disposition.

Peter

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Michael Morgan  
San Francisco, California  
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Dear Mr. Ralston,

I have an issue I want to bring up to you. [I talked with someone...] when I asked if he knew of your Dojo, he said that the two of you had one issue on which you had a major difference of opinion. As far as I can understand it, what he was saying was that his school believes in learning and/or recognizing and/or honoring "the roots" of martial arts and that you do not. So, here is my thing: I am asking for your viewpoint on the issue of tradition, roots, etc.

Sincerely yours,
Michael Morgan

Michael,

I am surprised that you are still unacquainted with how I hold tradition. "Roots" are of no consequence, the "truth" is. What we call tradition may or may not be worth keeping, especially since it has undoubtedly been changed over time to serve various purposes. (Consider that some past Christians have slaughtered many people for their beliefs, and in the name of Christ! I doubt that man would have approved.)

It's not that I think those who come before have nothing to teach. I have always worked hard to thoroughly learn what others have to offer before presuming to "create" any divergence. However, once the teaching is mastered, it is necessary to seek out principles and insight beyond any beliefs or methods that have been used to teach in the past.

For example, Picasso mastered conventional painting techniques before he approached, say, cubism. Some who scorn tradition think they are being creative but they really don't understand that creativity doesn't mean "do whatever you feel like." I am not one of those, and I studied almost every form of martial art extensively before creating the Cheng Hsin arts. The demands of creating lie in creation, and this is not something that whim or one's ego can even perceive.

Hope I cleared this up.

Peter

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Seungyup Paek  
New York, New York  
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Peter,

May I ask a small question? There seems to be a large number of 'no-holds barred' fighting

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tournaments in the world today. Are these similar to the world championship tournament that you competed in? I believe that this is not the case. Could you please explain the dynamics of the current 'ultimate fighting championships' and how they are similar or different from the tournament that you fought in? Somehow, the winners in these ultimate fighting championships seem to be the antithesis of the principles of cheng hsin. Why is it that they look more like animals fighting in a cage than martial artists? I greatly look forward to hearing from you sir.

Respectfully,
Seungyup Paek

Seungyup,

When people fight, even trained martial artists, it rarely appears as though an art is being performed. On the one hand, we shouldn't assume that because they don't look like what we see in choreographed routines from the movies that there is something lacking. On the other, there is something more to grace than artful dance. When we look at professional fighters, such as Muay Thai or Western Boxers, we see much more grace is possible and usually present in the better fighters. This is because the art they are doing is the same as what they train. In most martial arts, the practices are not at all the same as what is confronted in a real fight. It is very difficult to look good in such circumstances. In simple, it is unfamiliar and unpracticed. When one has more experience relating to the situations that come up in fighting, then this relationship can take on a much more graceful appearance.

In no-holds-barred competitions, winning in the simplest way possible is the goal, or at least has become the goal. (Early on, most martial artists proved to be unequal to the task, and had no ability to deal with such real fighting.) Since simple and direct is the easiest strategy to understand, and being muscularly strong and powerful is the simplest and most easily achieved form of power, it stands to reason that these are what we'd see the most. Strength is strength. Simply because it doesn't fit in with our ideas or methods doesn't mean it isn't effective. If it wasn't effective why would so many use it? Any time a game is created, the players will mold themselves in relation to the rules of the game in whatever way they can to win. This always produces a particular development. If you change the rules of the game, a different kind of development will take place. We should notice, however, that it isn't always the big and strong that win, and some of the better players have shown flexibility and strategic skill.

In the competitions in which I fought they didn't count ground fighting. I spent many years developing Newaza (grappling arts) and am quite confident on the mat. But this was not allowed in the world tournament. There was full contact in striking, and throwing was allowed. But I think the main difference was the background and thinking of the players. Since it was a traditional Chinese tournament, the assumption in the players was probably to conform to this thinking about how the fighting should proceed. I remember being criticized in one of the local newspapers, when they complained: "What happened to traditional kung fu? This American looks more like he's using a combination of Boxing and Judo" (both of which are foreign to a Chinese tradition). This wasn't exactly so -- I was using Cheng Hsin -- but you can see that my fighting didn't appear as the author thought it should. Didn't matter. I won anyway.

Real fighting is difficult. I feel for those that take it up. But I don't share such sentiment about the reduction of the arts to what is easiest to understand or to mindlessly accomplish. Yet this dynamic takes place in many arenas, not just the ultimate fighting one.

Peter

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Christian Campfield  
New York, NY

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Peter,

It seems to me that western boxing is totally off when it comes to proper mechanics in punching.

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For example, the power comes from strong muscular efforts from the arm and the shoulder instead of sinking and springing up from the legs. Am I correct?

Christian

Christian,

No, you are not. Boxers actually hit harder than most martial artists, and generally fight much better (since they actually practice fighting). I trained with professional boxers for some time. They do hit from the legs, using the whole body. But they use the muscles and push the body into the target, and we compress, letting the target push us into the ground. Yet most of them try to relax. They do this not because of a belief system, but because it works in the ring. Most martial artists only follow a belief system and are too abstracted from the reality to understand what's what.

Hope this helps.

Peter Ralston

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Jesse Marandino  
Austin, Texas

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Peter,

Question 1: How can I make my internal strength useful against unwilling (or more likely free willing) opponents that are not constrained to the traditions of my chosen system?

Question 2: Is the ability to change structured knowledge into free-form usable skill something that can and should be taught to you or is it the responsibility of the student?

Jesse

Jesse,

About Q1:

The first thing, of course, is to find and develop such strength. There is a lot of talk about "internal" strength but very little clarity. Clarity regarding what it is you're trying to develop is necessary for its development. We use "intrinsic strength" yet this isn't necessarily what you mean by internal strength.

In any case, power, regardless of form, is not the main factor--skill is. Handling unwilling partners is a complex matter and you need to develop the skill and understanding necessary to do so. It isn't a matter of just having some form of power, although a healthy degree of power is necessary. As Ku Yu Cheong (greatest "iron palm" master -- able to break thirteen large stone bricks at once, all resting flat on a slab) said to a man who demonstrated he could break five: "That's good, but now try to use it against me." The man couldn't and Ku pointed out that power alone is worthless without boxing skill.

To interact effectively with an unwilling opponent, one must first fully acknowledge his unwillingness, which from his point of view is merely the desire to win, and you should remember: that's his job! He's doing what in his mind is appropriate. Let it be that way and join it, don't fight it or resist it. Use what he is doing against him. This of course requires skill, and therefore proper training. It is not done simply by having the idea--you must take this idea into effective action. Once again, this is not something that can be accomplished by reading about it.

About Q2:

Both. It must be taught by someone who understands what it is, but it must also be taken on by the student -- researched, contemplated, tried out, etc.. As you play with people, commit yourself to working on some principle such as staying relaxed, using the whole body, moving from the center, joining, etc., whether you win or lose, and see what you discover. It is of much greater value to investigate these principles than to concentrate on winning or losing. But like I said, you will gain so much by some hands

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on work with us here. It will make a 100% difference in your practice and play.

Good luck, hope to see you in the near future.
Peter Ralston

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Mike Hart  
Swansea, Wales

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Peter,

I know this question has much to do with my attachment to other practices I have done in the past. Specifically, when I trained in a system designed by a guy called Erle Montaigue from Australia (Fa-Jing Ch'uan). His whole focus was (is) on fa-jing, not surprisingly. But I remember asking you in London last year on the boxing day about that, because I was "flicking" the waist, and you asked me to try to guide all of my body, even the rear hip into the punch -- every part of the body should focus toward the target, I believe you said.

About fa-jing, you said: some people do it that way, but you don't, and that you'd stop talking while you were still gracious about the subject. What has maybe revived my interest is what you said in Holland about a push being one movement, not two. While I'm asking this question of you I also realize that, for me, this is an ontological issue of how I hold or perceive "the world" to be, or at least "my world." OK, enough preamble. I am surrounded in Swansea by people who profess FA-JING to be the ultimate force known to man (their ideas not mine). Also, Erle is moving to Wales in a couple of weeks so that obviously this will give them more leverage in their arguments because the guy is on their doorstep. I was an instructor in his system before switching over to Cheng Hsin. I have no doubt that Cheng Hsin is a superior and more intelligent art than anything that Erle teaches -- I can feel that. In fact I am confident in my ability to take any challenges up from local instructors, T'ai Chi or otherwise. What I seek, is to understand why.

I'm sorry, I just realized this is more about an ontological issue than a fa-jing vs. intrinsic strength one. I suppose I'm just looking for justification and support to what I already feel is true for me. All their fajing and dim mak means nothing with the effortless movement and intrinsic strength capabilities that I am currently developing. Their fajing is anything but effortless, in fact, it's downright hard work which wastes more energy than it applies. Still although I usually don't bother emailing you when I work things out, I thought I'd send this one because of the strangely uneasy feeling I have, even though I've worked through it somewhat. I know it's a fear deep down. But I'm unsure of how to "handle" it. It feel's like I'm in a dilemma within myself, like I want to go to Erle when he comes over and say "Hey, try me for size buddy" (if that doesn't work maybe I should say Yo' Mamma!) I feel I can't beat him yet, but there's something inside me that almost screams that. Could you help with any views at all please Peter?

Regards
Mike Hart

Mike,

For one thing you are confusing psychological with ontological. Ontology is the study of "what is," the true nature of existence, of Being. Psychology is the study of mind, the emotional makeup and mental structure of an individual. Your challenge is psychological, not ontological. If we were to make it ontological (which we could do) we would look at what it "is" that is there. What "is" the drive and fear? What are their natures, how did they come to exist?

But that's not your challenge. Sounds like you are working out the relationship between "fa-jing" (for our folks who don't know what this is, it is a method to generate power, usually practiced by whipping the whole body to snap out the hand into a target -- methods vary, but that seems the general course) and intrinsic strength. You are right, fajing is not intrinsic strength. It is not even using the whole body. Since the starting place of the whip is done before the end of the whip arrives. This is a wave, but it is not using

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the whole body as one unit. It is NOT compression.

But it is a method some people train. Your challenge, it sounds, is an emotional one with other martial artists in your area. And it sounds like you are actually unsure of your new found abilities and understanding in Cheng Hsin, otherwise why would their bluster bother you so much? Simply shake hands and say, thank you for sharing. Unless they view the principles of interaction and power differently, then Cheng Hsin methods won't mean a thing to them. Share your view, and offer yourself as one trying to follow this view. Let them know why you chose this method as opposed that one. If anyone is open they'll hear what you have to say, and maybe consider it further. You can always invite them all up to visit me in London or Holland next time, and I can "explain" it further.

Good luck, and peace.

Peter

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Mike Hart  
Swansea, Wales

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Peter,

Have been doing some work with Pressure-No Pressure over the last few weeks to try and improve all the skills, but mainly to just practice staying with the partner in the present moment. Something different has now begun to occur when I face my partner. I feel more open and relaxed, not in conflict and more aware of what is occurring in the relationship, this seems to take a form of "no fear". I don't seem preoccupied with "winning" or gaining the most amount of pressure contact or in trying to catch my partner out because what seems to occur is that my partner can't help but get himself into trouble as long as I follow the PEI.

If I follow and join and remain aware of the advantageous relationship, he still seems to feel that he can get me but never manages to gain the advantageous position. This is just what I notice. I also become aware AFTER the event that dynamics such as leading and cutting, joining and offering were arising and falling all the time. I feel in the position of "watching the water" while they seem to be "watching the fish". This obviously comes from better listening and outreaching. Many people seem to get stuck on pressing into one part of the body and ignore the rest as if there's a place where they feel comfortable. It's almost as if they don't have anything else to do but push "this place" with "this part" of their body, kind of like a favorite technique I suppose but they limit and hamper themselves severely. I have mentioned this to the guys and they try to be with their partner but then their mind gets in the way. If they're trying to just join and follow it doesn't feel right to them, the mind kicks in and insists that you should be doing something which seems to mess them up. Does this make sense to you?

Best Regards,

Mike -- Cheng Hsin Trainer

Mike,

Yes. No doubt the thing that gets most in their way is that they are oriented to trying to win the game. They are concentrating on the "points" rather than the play. Whenever we do a job, we concentrate on getting the job done, like lifting a box onto the shelf, or hammering a nail into a board, or touching someone in a game of tag. This seems reasonable since it is the result that we want and why we are taking action in the first place. But the problem with this is that too often we neglect the body and the relationship. And so, for example, we strain our backs when trying to get the box up since we are focusing on the box getting on the shelf rather than how we are getting it there.

The game you are playing is a "competition." Therefore, people are focused on competing and winning. A couple of problems arise from this, however. Like with the box, they then narrow their attention to winning or getting a result rather than "how" they are getting this result. Also, they are then immediately limited to the very narrow view of how to get this job done, and closed off to the many other possibilities that are

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available. This is natural, since we are trained to focus on results. And so the brain will say that following and joining and whatnot are just not getting the job done, and people lose patience.

The thing to do is to realize that the purpose or goal of the practice is to LEARN, not to win. Winning comes later--after learning. And skill lies in RELATIONSHIP, not result. So adhering to a principle, such as Following, actually forces one to become more conscious of the relationship. From this, winning will come about naturally. The students need to open their minds and spend much more time learning and less time getting results. Have them train sometimes without any care for who is winning, but instead only if they are getting better at relating to what's occurring. This kind of shift should help.

Peter

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Tzachi Lavy  
Jerusalem, Israel  
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Dear Sensei,

How are you? First of all, I want to tell you that I'm so glad that I know you. Second, I hope that I don't bother you with my questions (it's just that I appreciate your opinion very much and it helped me in the past very much).

So, I practiced today with two people from my dojo, that practiced in the past in ju-jitsu, kung-fu and karate, and you know, it's very weird, because for the first time in my life I began to understand what you mean in your book (The Principle of the Effortless Power) about needing to be free of fear, because in our dojo, as I understood from the practice of today, the orientation is more technical art and less martial. In short, what I'm trying to say is that in spite of what you say in your book about studying, practicing and contemplation, I can't succeed in jumping beyond the fence of the Kyu [brown belt] (I'm now in level Ikkyu in Aikido) and make my Shodan [black belt].

I figured it out today, when I practiced with those two men that were practicing hard, that the reason for this stems from fear -- when I felt them grab me/attack me I was so terrified of being hurt by them that I didn't do the techniques in the way that I studied and practiced in the last 6 years.

So, maybe you have some advice for me, sensei. And again, I'm sorry if it bothers you that I ask your advice, it just I like to ask the expert and not the amateurs!

Tzachi

Tzachi,

As you may know from my books, fear is a function of the future. Your mind is focused on something bad happening in the next moment and you aren't relating to what is actually happening in this. You are mentally thrown off balance by the strength and aggressiveness of these attackers and you doubt your ability to handle such force. When you fear or resist anything about your opponent, you are not being present with what's actually there. This is something you have to overcome in yourself.

Concentrate on that force -- contemplate the aggressiveness of it, the power of it, the reality of it -- until you can accept it, be familiar with it, and allow it to be exactly as it is. Work hard to make it very real in your imagination and spend some time feeling this force that scared you. Test it out with these guys again and make sure your contemplation is based on reality so that you indeed are becoming comfortable with their aggressiveness. Once this is so, you can shift from letting the force scare you (putting your mind into the fear of what's going to happen and your sense of being incapable of dealing with it) to just being present with the force, accepting it, and blending with it, using it to do your techniques. You need to join what's there, even if it is aggressive (especially if it's aggressive!). Enter into it with your feeling-attention, rather than pull away from it. At first you may not be able to do your techniques as you want, but you won't be afraid, and eventually will be able to work out how to do the technique.

Hope this helps.

Peter

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Richard Allan  
Southampton, UK  
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Peter,

First I would like to thank you again for all that I gained from the first weekend at Swansea and from your "Principles of Effortless Power" book. They have changed my practice for the better and what is more they are great fun. I hope to be able to train with you again in the future.

Secondly, I asked about the effortless application of jing and how it can be developed and applied through strike, throw, or the Shake maneuvers of Chen t'ai ji without recourse to muscular or energetic tension. You asked me first to state what my idea of fa jing is. My answer is probably pretty ropy but here goes:

Fa jing means transfer of power. The energy I'm specifically asking about isn't the long steady transfer of, say, the push form, but the short explosive releases. I think its basis is using alignment to allow a path of pressure to travel from the earth to be released to the partner. The feet create the pressure and the relative position of the waist, spine and arms coupled with the mind/intention shape and direct the power. A whip like motion may be employed. Pressure is quickly passed from one hip to the other and down out through the legs and feet in very quick succession. The whole body is gently held in shape to allow the resulting opposite reaction from the ground to release. The use of spiral pressure and twisting of the limbs may be used to build pressure.

Now this is just my conjecture: is there an interaction from pressure in the lungs "bouncing" down the diaphragm, thus condensing the energy in the lower abdomen which can cause a sudden release of energy directed by mind and posture? Is this the meaning of "The internal energy should be extended, vibrated like the beat of a drum," the diaphragm being like the skin of a drum? Or is the internal energy itself "held taut" as the skin of a drum so it can somehow vibrate throughout the body?

Like I say I'm just fishing here as I'm not developed enough to play around with this yet, but some modicum of release can be expressed, just I'm not sure if I'm totally relaxed, hence effortless. Heck, I'm nowhere near totally relaxed anyway!

In a nutshell, the stream of interaction is directed by relaxed posture, interaction with earth, relative position to partner and internal pressure, being given shape and direction by the mind/body.

My question is: with mindfulness and expression of fundamental principles and proper alignments, how can sudden short releases be stored and released powerfully without being obvious in its set up or tense in its use? How can it be like your analogy of the archer who bends the bow but bow/arrow/target all interact with themselves and of themselves? Actually I'm getting ahead of myself. With what methods can I train for short power, make it useful yet effortless and avoid any major mistakes? I know there are no shortcuts, but an idea of a quick route for foundation in a broad base of applications would be most appreciated.

Once again thanks and gratitude,
Richard

Richard,

The fact of something isn't the same thing as people's understanding of it. It's what people think something is that's really at issue, and what we must address. What you describe is generally how those pursuing fa jing think on the matter. It is far too complicated. Remember these notions come from another culture and some aspects make reference to shared metaphor, and so collective understandings, that we do not share. It can be confusing and also made to seem more complicated than it is. We might also want to consider that the culture from which these notions came didn't view such pursuits as we would. They would do it a bit more through "imagination" and directed intent rather than factual or scientific understanding. So what was said doesn't have to have any real physical reference or basis in fact, it simply had to generate a desired result when the practitioner engaged in this method.

All that being said, we don't do this kind of training in Cheng Hsin. It isn't that it is bad or wrong, it simply isn't our way. Since we focus on unification, the method of whipping and snapping things is frowned upon

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since it creates separation. The action isn't actually unified as one whole since the end movement occurs after the source movement has finished. Our method is far simpler in reality, even if perhaps more difficult to accomplish. We simply compress from target to ground. It is no more than that. This is true of sudden power such as striking, as well as projections like uprooting. It is the same power, no whipping or complications are undertaken. Punching isn't uprooting but the difference is alignment and delivery, not method.

I'd stay away from the idea that something must be done to generate another thing that is also done. This is a confusion. The idea of "store" and "release" is misleading. There are not two actions, only one. And the power of this one isn't even something you can do anything about. It's intrinsic. Meaning you don't "do" it. Really.

Also, when we say the power comes from the ground, is directed by the pelvis and comes out the hands, this can also be misleading. In what you are talking about that's exactly how it goes. For using intrinsic strength, this statement appears backwards, and so is misunderstood. In Cheng Hsin the power is actually generated through the compression of the intrinsic strength of the body tissue, and this starts with the hands and goes down to the ground, not vice versa. Putting your mind the other way will only demand that you use strength since that's all you can do that way.

The pursuit of "fa jing" as you've described is more popular than using intrinsic strength because it gives you something to "do," and the focus is on trying to generate power through your doing -- your actions and use of movement and strength. Although the use of intrinsic strength requires movement and correct alignment, the power is not something you "do." It is something that happens to you, and this can be very difficult to allow since we aren't used to letting go that much.

It may be possible to take on the complications you mention and still manage to use intrinsic strength, given that you relax and become unified and, at some point in the movements, give up trying to "do" and allow yourself to be compressed. But why go through all the complications and segmentation? Effortless power is difficult enough to accomplish without making it more so. This will become more clear as you study with me. Meanwhile, I hope this helps.

Peter

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Pat Finger  
Tuscon, AZ

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Peter,

In Principles of Effortless Power, you talk about Cheng's levels of t'ai chi ch'uan. . . . I looked back on notes that I have from your Art of Effortless Power from page 16: Feeling-attention "energy work." You talk about Outreaching as being the bridge between Listening and Joining.

Outreaching: Being 'in-touch' with the present and ever-shifting state of interaction; and "Psychic work: awareness beyond what is normally considered objective human perception"
... Are these two "principles" related?

And is the "heaven level- Degrees 1, 2, and 3:

1. T'ing Chin (Listening Strength"),
2. Comprehension of Chin, and
3. Omnipotence Level, the same as this feeling-attention?

Pat

Pat,

My response to this and the next letter require I spend a moment promoting some clarity on our relationship with beliefs. Whenever we learn anything or hear about something, it is based in a structure

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of beliefs and assumptions. Any system that is created (and remember, all systems are inventions, not observations) must have a structure with particular distinctions that become its reality. This is what we learn. These almost always lead to a particular use of words; and labels and names peculiar to this system are assigned to the various aspects of the invented structure.

Are you following this so far? I imagine you'd rather hear an answer to the question, but as you will quickly find, that's not the way I work. I prefer to facilitate some real understanding and encourage a direction of authentic undertaking, rather than toss out handy information that will be taken pretty much at the same level of the request, as such we really won't progress in our dialogue, we'll simply banter.

To foreshorten a probably lengthier response, let me say that these words (heaven level, T'ing Chin, fa-jing, short energy, long energy, etc.) are pretty meaningless to me.

Do you understand why?

To what are they referring? And more importantly, what is YOUR experience regarding these words? We are programmed to think of systems of knowledge as something universally so. Unfortunately, I never got the Universal Text Book that the other masters must have gotten, so I have no ground from which to understand all hearsay. It is best to speak in terms of your own experience, as honestly as you can. What one teacher asserts another will not. And both may well be speaking of what they in turn heard from someone else. How can we progress in this way? Your questions are important to me, but I need to grasp what it is you're actually asking. For this, I need to know your experience (I don't mean how long you've studied, but what you see, feel, think is the case that leads to your question), and what it is you are actually wondering.

Now let me respond in some small way to the question asked.

Outreaching is simply feeling and being connected to another's whole body, so it seems to me that it can be seen as a bridge between listening and joining, since listening is perceiving what's there and joining is action taken in relation to what's there. When we join we want to join the whole body and action of the partner/opponent; ergo outreaching is a component of that effort.

Are outreaching and "psychic" work related? Really depends on how we structure our cosmology.

Regarding: Is the "heaven level - Degrees 1, 2, and 3:

1. T'ing Chin (Listening Strength),
2. Comprehension of Chin, and
3. Omnipotence Level, the same as this feeling-attention?

I don't know. Have never really tried to match what I experience with what others say. Well, not much anyway. Grandiose titles don't mean squat; only an experience is important.

I'm not a fan of the way the Chinese tradition has made so much into important sounding names, for then people tend to fear soiling these lofty ideals with their bumbling ignorance and all too often prefer instead to build up a fantasy around them, and pretend to stand importantly on that fantasy as a "knower" of this thing. It is a damaging position to take. I'm not saying this is true of you, I simply support freedom from this entrapment; and since many teachers do not, preferring instead the above position, I feel for the students who are pressed into a role of believing and following dogma. Certainly there is value in what others can teach, especially the giants that have come before us. Our task, however, is to move beyond the giants, and in so doing, honor them. Reciting dogma does no one honor.

Another way of answering your question is, no. The feeling-attention is just that, a sense with which we have awareness and feeling. This sense-perception should not be confused with emotion, but is the stuff with which we move our feeling sense around. Or at least that's the way it seems to me. But this is not listening, compression, or Omnipotent anything. We use our feeling-attention to assist in all of these (well

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I'm not sure what the Omnipotent thing is about, except that it's not true. I've never met anyone who is actually omnipotent, so why would we use such a term?). Does that help?

Peter

~~~~~  
Stephen Pallitino  
Pacifica, CA

~~~~~  
Peter,

What is the role of (or the difference between) intrinsic strength and fa-jing or "whipping" the body? In my experience, it seems as if fa-jing relates to what many teachers consider "short energy" whereas intrinsic strength is required to demonstrate what is considered "long energy." Although the body can be whipped in any direction, I have difficulty compressing in any but one at a particular moment. Thoughts?

Stephen

Stephen,

Having listened in to my response above I'm sure you get the picture. You must speak to me in terms of your experience, not hearsay and terms that can change from teacher to teacher. Regarding whipping the body, it is not a method of using intrinsic strength that I teach. Whipping is not compression. It is a technique that can be used, but I prefer utilizing the whole body as one unit rather than send a wave passing through it. As a whole body moving in one direction, compression is more readily available.

Peter

~~~~~  
George Porgist  
Flattbush, NY

~~~~~  
Peter,

One thing I'd be interested in is direction in how some of your teachings/thoughts/topics could be studied in a solo environment.

George

George,

Without being aware of exactly which particular teachings/thoughts/topics you are referring to, I can say there is much that can be done in a solo environment. Relational interactive practice, however, ain't one of them. Yet we must remember, we are rarely out of relationship with other humans, even when we are by ourselves. If you are working on mental-emotional activities and the assumptions and challenges that relate to others, solo contemplation can be of great service, since you can delve into these things without hurry or reaction. Also, remember that the body is a functional event designed for interaction; training any bodily skill improves our ability to physically relate effectively. Further, reflecting on some interactive practice as if it is occurring presently, can be a powerful practice, and also one that can be improved with training. Hands-on interaction interspersed from time to time within your contemplation is necessary to improve the connection between the imagined event and the reality, and will strengthen your ability to train without physical interaction.

Beyond this, I'm afraid that my teachings/thoughts/topics is just too broad to address. Much is found in the solo environment. Since you are always there, study is always available.

Peter

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~~~~~  
Minh Nguyen Van,  
Paris, France  
~~~~~

(Once again, a series of questions, I'll answer each one at a time.)
Master Ralston,

1. From "The Principles of Effortless Power": on p. 11: "Performing any functional activity while concentrating on [the center region] automatically increases the power, skill, and effectiveness of that activity." On p. 13: "We must concentrate on our feet and the feeling in the feet...".

Question: How to do both at the same time? (it's even worse on p. 23: "One's attention must lie in the center, the foot, and the earth"!)

Minh

PR: Minh,

There are many things we need to bring into our practice and development. In this case, the earth, feet, and center are all related. Often we need to concentrate on becoming more aware of one area for a while in order to develop it, but this will always need to be connected with the other areas to which it is related. The center directs the whole body's movement but the ground is the source of the power to move the center, and this is accessed through the feet. Even if we concentrate for a time on one specific area or another, they are interconnected and so we need to understand not only one part but the whole. Beyond this, from time to time concentration on one thing or another can be more or less appropriate depending on what's needed or true.

2. Are the 2 visualizations, "ball and chain" and "water drop," to be chosen according to our feeling preference or are they to be both used?

PR: The purpose of such training is to become grounded, or to create an experience that can give us a sense of being grounded. Either visualization can be used, they each provide slightly different qualities. The goal is to feel these qualities as if they are real and present and so find a clear sense of ground. Once strong grounding is mastered, visualizations are not necessary, but for years they are very useful and should not be bypassed.

3. So, you said there is a minimum muscular strength used. I intended to ask you this question: "How to get rid of the unconscious habit of using strength since we constantly use it in daily life?"

PR: Practice. Habits are built up over time, so getting rid of them usually follows the same procedure. Try not using so much strength in daily life. Find every opportunity to train relaxation and intrinsic strength in the most common activities (opening a door or lifting a coffee cup) and your development will be more certain and deeper.

4. Your visualizations make me ask questions. I've learned visualizations before but considered them as a method of training, of helping to create new brain "cabling" or "auto-conditioning". But if you use them also, I wonder if this fact means:

- a. you also use them as a method of training, of "auto-conditioning"; or
- b. they are a way to make us conscious of a kind of reality we usually don't perceive, this reality being pre-existent; or
- c. they create a new reality that did not exist before.

Which hypothesis is right? I tend to believe in the 2nd one because you said "things were there." So it seems that you want us to be conscious of other realities and then live with them...

PR: One thing to watch out for is drawing a few conclusions and then assuming the answer lies within them. While it might be true that such visualizations draw our attention to some aspect of reality that we otherwise might miss, it is also true that we make up the visualizations and so they are not in themselves

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something "there." In answer to your question though, I might say all three are correct. We use some feeling-visual composed of familiar qualities placed in a new setting so as to train our feeling-attention to develop in a way it would not otherwise develop.

Peter

~~~~~  
Tom Aaron  
Brownsville, TX

~~~~~  
Peter,

I would like to see how you deal with roundhouse attacks. Particularly a roundhouse punch to the head, (other than ducking), and a roundhouse kick to the solar-plexus, (other than backing away). I have a hard time blending with these attacks and would like to see it done by a pro! It is easy enough to BLOCK these attacks, but to skillfully blend with them in a soft manner is eluding me.

Tom

Tom,

Evasion such as ducking is usually the best course, at least it should be a basic one. With something like a roundhouse kick, the motion of the foot describes a limited arc, kind of like the crust on a slice of pie. Think of the opponent's center as the point of the slice and remember that, for the most part, his power and movement are restricted to the crust area. Moving your body in towards him will deplete the power of the kick and give an opportunity for you to rotate and join the movement in some way, or unbalance the opponent. If you continue that movement past the "pie slice" area of motion to the side of the opponent, he can't touch you at all, but you may be able to join him. Joining is basically finding a way to attach yourself to another's movement while they are doing it, moving with them at first and then taking over. With a move coming at you like that, it is possible to allow them to compress you into the ground and use this compression to disrupt their attack.

Just some ideas to play with.

Peter

~~~~~  
Christian Campfield  
New York, New York

~~~~~  
Master Ralston,

I would like to ask some questions:

1. It seems to me that lifting weights in order to develop muscular strength in no way helps the development of effortless power and in a way, may hinder it. Agree or disagree?

PR: Agree. In theory there may be nothing wrong with weight training as long as sufficient time is also applied to fully stretching and relaxing the muscles trained. However, training to tighten muscles and increase strength usually means increased tension and a commitment to the use of strength rather than effortless power.

2. I have been trying to find an effortless-power way to throw a jab. Honestly, this is VERY difficult. Recently I started hitting the heavy bag with 100 jabs in a row. All the while I'm zero-in on what muscle activity is superfluous to the bare act of the jab. Throwing so many punches in a row brings to the surface the problems because muscle fatigue hurts. Where does it hurt? How can I modify the action(s) as to avoid that fatigue? ... Those are the questions I'm trying to focus on in streamlining the action. What do you think of this? ... Do you have any further suggestions regarding punching with effortless power?

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PR: When you finish a session you should be more relaxed than when you started. Look at it as a relaxing exercise. It shouldn't hurt. When you feel pain, pinpoint the strained area and you will likely find that it occurs where the whole body's integrity or unity is broken. Align the body and movement so that this break disappears. Be careful not to use strength to "patch" it up. The pressure must reach all the way to the bottom of the foot. I have a 5 step method to achieve this; next time you are in a workshop where such a lesson is appropriate, ask about it. (We covered it at the camp for example. See Mike Cottrell-Tribes' comments above regarding punching -- this is the method he learned at the camp.)

3. On to the mat: In a grappling situation you made the suggestion to "relax on the bottom and let him carry you on top." This was very good advice. But somehow I still have seen myself struggling, pushing, forcing, etc. It feels like I'm missing some secret. It is as if there is a mental/physical block. There has been great difficulty in anticipating my opponents movements. All this in spite of the fact that in the school where I train, out of fifty, there are only (maybe) two people that can beat me. My regular skill does not interest me. I'm only interested in expanding those brief moments when the movements just happen by themselves. Can you make any more suggestions?

PR: Find ways to use their efforts against them, let their action get them into trouble or lead you into the next thing which puts you into an advantageous position. In grappling sometimes this needs to be done by allowing them to work a little. Let them feel as though they could have success at some technique and then turn the tables as they attempt it. On the other hand, besides "leading" them into things, you can "cut" or reduce their potential or advantageous position as a constant, thus avoiding the "big problems" altogether. Using leading, cutting, and other Cheng Hsin dynamics may also help you find ways to use less strength.

Peter

~~~~~  
Christian Campfield  
New York, NY

~~~~~  
Hello Peter,

Question for you: I've been playing push hands with someone who is very good at it. From time to time I'll pose a judo/jiu-jitsu situation to him. He is able to deal with it from a push hands perspective quite effectively. In trying to understand how this is possible, I'm starting to think that the presupposition in judo is that the opponent is not skilled in rooting. A strong root seems to make every judo throw I know irrelevant. Can you comment on this?

Secondly, I've been studying t'ai chi for over 1 and 1/2 years and jiu-jitsu for about 10 years. It seems to me that all the jiu-jitsu I ever did was preparation for the complexity of tai-chi. So far I can do the yang form (short) and am learning the Chen form. Of course I'm not at all good at the form, but I can do it. I also am continuing to develop mechanically correct striking and boxing skills. Given all that, what do I have to do to begin to get degrees from you. (I've been to one 3-day seminar in NY and would like to go again this October.)

Best wishes,
Christian

Christian,

It really depends on the players. Once, a long time ago, someone took a championship collegiate wrestling team and entered them in a Judo tournament to see who would win. All well and good, but they entered them to compete with white belts! Reasonable, since they had no judo rank, but totally bogus as a means for testing or comparing the arts. The wrestlers won every match. But in order to be a good test, they would have to have fought with competition-winning black belts -- not just any black belts since in many Judo schools the achievement of rank is determined by accumulation of techniques and this says

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little about a persons ability to interact competitively. With such a match up the outcome would probably have been quite different.

When I was a young black belt in Judo, I had an opportunity to challenge the current championship collegiate wrestling team (who happened to be sharing our space at the college due to a mix-up in scheduling). We agreed they would do their thing and I would do mine, no restrictive rules favoring one or the other. We did newaza (on the mat). I fought five of them. I won every one. Different result.

There are too many unseen factors regarding your Judo work with the t'ui shou person for me to comment with any accuracy. It could very easily go the other way. A good competitive Judoka could easily beat most t'ui shou practitioners, probably even competitively competent t'ui shou players. It really depends on the skill of the players and just what they are doing, what they are restricted to or not. For example, do the players stay rather fixed and facing each other? Do they have to or can they grab clothing? What is the psychology for the match, does one "method" or "level" of interaction dominate the play? Etc.

Competitive Judoka frequently have a very strong root. One thing people in the martial world overlook too much is the degree of actual functional experience a person has, which is primarily seen in his skill in freestyle competition. Even here we need to consider further, is his skill related solely to his own art and the games of that art, and can they (the games of the art), or the player apply such ability widely? In other words, skill is developed by being skillful in freeplay or competitive games and interactions, and these are learned through studying and doing such activity. It is not developed by just learning things intellectually or mastering techniques, although such things can be very useful.

So, there's a comment.

Regarding degrees: if you go to the website www.ChengHsin.com and then to "Archives" and scroll down to "Degree System" you will find lists of the requirements for all of the degrees. If youre serious about getting your degree, talk to me in NY about doing one of the camps in Texas or Holland. The more complete and detailed studies of the camps are where students can really leap ahead.

Good luck,
Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Bob Daufenbach  
Pittsburgh, PA

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Peter,

Many of the images used in Cheng Hsin truly help to facilitate a "feeling-attention" and "body awareness" of the principles and improve function. Ball and chain, hand up you down, water drop, and standing on pilings seem to be adapted for "stand up fighting". My inquiry is about how these can be adapted to grappling or ground techniques. Have you developed others for that type of encounter?

The first 70 pages of "The Art of Effortless Power" continue to be both a challenge and a source of inspiration. Thank you for sharing your work.

Sincerely,
Bob Daufenbach

Bob,

It is true that mat work or grappling on the ground present a different set of challenges. Yes, most of the images have standing in mind, but the principles involved can be done on the ground as well. I haven't invented images to serve that adjustment, but you are welcome to. Sometimes just changing the name or how you view it can be useful. I remember being told of someone who, having discovered a new image of

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"infinite space" beneath the ground thought they had evolved beyond me because I was stuck on waterdrop. Silly notion, isn't it? We are talking of images here, ways of developing. They are all only exercises, inventions to move people in a direction. They are not and will never be the principle itself. Once these images are mastered at some point one can simply powerfully engage the principle without image. But I don't recommend that course until you've spent years making the images real and useful, for they offer a more concrete avenue through which to progress. But you can use whatever image serves, as long as you can make it real for yourself it will work.

Good hunting,
Peter

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

Peter,

In the Retreat when we were doing the work on Principles of Effective Interaction there was one section where we worked with changing the perspectives. Like in a fight looking from above, three-dimensional, out of the eyes of another, from the ground etc.. Working in this specific domain, is it just to become better in changing perspectives? Shall it bring us into a state where we always know which perspective is appropriate in a specific circumstance? Shall it just show us that the perspective that we usually take for granted (ours) is only one part of the whole thing? Shall we come to a state where we able to be connected the whole time in a fighting context to all the perspectives that are possible at once?

Thanks in advance,
Stefan von Leesen

Stefan,

Yes.
Peter

~~~~~  
Pieter Vaartjes  
Groningen, Holland  
~~~~~

Respected Peter Ralston,

By coincidence I have visited some years ago one of your boxing intensives in the Netherlands. I was amazed and impressed by your performance. I have a ju jitsu background and I have always known that if there is a secret in the (eastern) martial arts it is to be found in relaxation. So for about four years I try to visit one of your workshops in the Netherlands each year. From the start of this year 2002 I practice every day your push with what you told and what you have written about in your books. And sometimes I get the feeling that I start to learn it a little. Often I hardly feel what I do or it feels awkward and strange. But comparing with my jujitsu history I see that as a sign that I am actually beginning to learn the push (a little).

What I really would like to know is how you deliver your punch(es)? How do they work physically? And what kind of exercises do you recommend to me?

Pieter Vaartjes

Pieter,

Simply: stay relaxed, use your whole body and use your whole arm back into the shoulder and chest and spine. Train to move your arms with your hips, don't use the arm muscles themselves. Press down on one foot, usually the front foot, to get your grounding to move your center and hips. Allow the back heel to

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come off the ground and rotate with the punch, at the very end of the punch let the back foot slide forward a bit.

Mostly, stay relaxed. When you finish training your punching, you should be more relaxed than when you started. And train to use your whole body as one unit. This should give you something to work on.

See you in Holland next year.

Peter Ralston

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

~~~~~  
Hello Peter!

Another few question are arising out of some training sessions:

1. If we are in a fighting context we seem to be always too late when we only deal with the movement of our partner, ergo we have to deal with something else. Obviously there are a lot of things happening inside of our partner before he moves -- things like having the intention to move, changes of energy, etc. but the problem seems how to be in contact with these things. Is it a good start to first get more and more in contact with what happens when I move (energy changes, intention, etc.) and after this gets clearer to me, go over trying to detect such things in a partner? Are there more exercises that might help me to get more in contact with these things? Am I overlooking something obvious?

2. In your workshops we spent a lot of time concentrating on yielding practices. Games like mosquito yielding, pressure-no pressure, etc.. What comes out of this -- seems to be obvious -- we might get better in yielding. If I am in a fighting context one point seems to be able to yield to the pressure of a force. The other possibility is that I bring the pressure directly into my foot and from there compress. Do you think that this happens automatically when I'm yielding? I was wondering because my impression is that these are two different matters. If this is true, why do I have to spent so much time with the yielding games - still not being able to bring the pressure into my foot and compress?

I hope that my English is good enough to explain what I mean. Looking forward to your answer.

Thanks in advance
Stefan von Leesen

Stefan,

About your first question: there are different ways to approach it. Sensing what the other is going to do could start with noticing what subtle adjustments have to happen in his body before his gross movement can occur. As you suggested, become very sensitive to what happens for you before you can do something. Try not moving anything at all, be very still, and then try to do a punch or whatever. Just at the moment when you have to do anything -- shift your weight slightly, have a feeling of intent, tense a muscle, take a step, move your eyes -- STOP. This should begin to show that you always do something subtle before you do something gross. In order not to "telegraph" so much yourself, try reducing those processes (relaxing helps, as does a clear and calm mind, so does shifting your thinking from trying to be "fast" to simply being "immediate"). This should also help you become sensitive to what processes others are going through before they can do their gross movements.

There are other considerations such as potential, intent and whatnot, but I think you have enough to work with already. One more thing, though. You will need to pick up changes of intent throughout the motion, not just before. An example of such sensitivity can be seen in the video when I pull the chair from under Epi as he sits. The motion to move down is not the intention to sit down. Even though he is looking between his legs and expecting the chair to go, when his brain makes that shift to sit, he will fall if no chair is there. How do we pick up such a subtle shift and in such a small fraction of second? I dont really know, just do (for me it comes as a very subtle feeling of a change in the other person's body-mind).

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About your second question: No, yielding and compression aren't the same thing. Yielding is found inherent in many things, like following, leading, compression, absorbing, joining, sticking, and more. But being compressed by a force into your feet requires a certain alignment so that that happens. Yielding requires no such alignment, just getting out the way. If you are receiving a force, and use intrinsic strength to neutralize the force by having it compress you into your feet, this is called absorption. But I recommend lots more yielding work before worrying about this. Otherwise, you are likely to just tense up.

Good luck,
Peter

~~~~~  
Rob van Ham  
Nijmegen, Holland

~~~~~  
Peter,

The directions you gave at the last Holland Camp on "letting go and relaxing the whole body using only the feeling-impulse for movement" are very helpful and helps me improve my moving, relaxation, balance and whole body feeling. But I am not getting what you mean with "falling into the hands and falling into the feet at the same time." When falling into my feet during a push I try not to move into my hands with a horizontal impulse. While falling into my feet and shifting I try to keep a relaxed alignment from hands to feet. It even feels as if my whole body is falling away (down) from the hands but at the same time keeping a feeling connection and alignment between hands and feet. How does this relate to what you mean with "falling into the hands"?

Rob

Rob,

Sounds like you are doing fine. What you described above seems consistent with the work we did on "hand up you down" and draining from hands to feet as you do the push. For now, don't try to do "falling into hands" at the same time you work on "falling into feet." These are good practices that teach you something about relaxing and alignment. So if you do them independently, you should learn from each. Then use this information, or the feeling-sense you develop from each, combined and connected in your techniques, and see what happens. I'm sure I can make this even more clear to you at the next Holland Camp.

Peter

~~~~~  
Chris Hein  
Long Beach, CA

~~~~~  
Hello Mr. Ralston,

My name is Chris Hein, I have been a long time admirer of your writing, and think that your approach to the martial arts is in a fresh and more complete manner. I have many friends who have studied with you and all have many comments about your ability.

My question is about relationship. Can someone's relationship skills in general get so good that they are better than someone else's specific relationship skills? For example: Guy "A" is a magnificent boxer, has good techniques and good relationship skills in the art of boxing. Guy "B" is a great ground grappler with significant ability on the ground. If guy A (the boxer) has made greater leaps in his understanding of relationship as a whole, will he be more than a match for the ground grappler, or will this lack of understanding on ground fighting outweigh his superior relationship ability? This is a strange question I know, but I am really curious as to the limits of superior relationship ability.

Thanks for your time.

Chris Hein

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Chris,

In general someone with greater relational skill will win regardless of the art he does. This has all sorts of qualifications to it, however. Being skillful in a certain kind of relationship doesn't always mean the person can transfer his understanding to other relationships. If he is grounded in more "universal" distinctions then he will be able to relate more effectively to unknown methods. If his skill is based on very specific techniques, rules, and methods, however, he will not. For example in the arena of fighting, if he is skilled in such things as force, distance, perception, use of power, perceiving the opponent's mind activity, and such, these things will apply regardless of method. This doesn't mean he won't have challenges, but that he should be able to meet them. Having greater relational skill than an opponent often translates to an advantage regardless of inexperience in the opponent's method.

Shissai quote: When one has mastered a weapon, even a cudgel becomes a sword in his hands.

Roughly, fighting is fighting, the more skilled fighter usually wins. But I make a distinction between fighting and martial arts. Most martial artists aren't very skilled in fighting, primarily because they don't train it. Instead they play games and do exercises related to fighting arts, but frequently they don't learn the relational skills necessary for actual fighting. Boxers, Judoka, Muay Thai, fencers--these people do fighting arts; but Karate, Aikido, T'ai Chi, various Kung Fus, etc. generally don't practice any real fighting. In a match, the fighter will always beat the non-fighter. You can't learn fighting without doing it. But don't get me wrong, I'm not saying one needs to be in street brawls to learn to fight. They simply must enter an art that has real fighting activities taking place. Most Karateka and Kung Fu practitioners would think they have this, but kumite and its Kung Fu equivalents are games of sparring, not matches in fighting. A judoka may be restricted to throws and pins and such, but in a match he really throws (against his partner's will) or pins, he doesn't fake it or pretend he could as in Karate kumite. When a boxer hits or a Muay Thai kicks, they really hit and kick, and so when they dodge they really dodge. Learning relationship in this domain is different than in the "pretend" domain. It is true that in T'ai Chi push hands, for example, one really pushes, and this does develop certain skills, but the arena is so restricted that it can't properly be called fighting. There are too many unnecessary rules and limitations, therefore it should be called a game or exercise.

Someone playing a race car video game will learn to make many visual distinctions regarding racing, and he'll be able to move his virtual car around the track quite effectively, but he will not learn many of the distinctions necessary for being effective in a real race. For instance, he'll be unprepared for the forces that will act upon his body and his car when hitting a turn at great speed. Obviously someone with experience driving an actual race car would beat him hands down.

Certainly many skills are learned in arts that don't work on real fighting (and by real I don't mean one has to be knocked out or some such, but that the play or match is relating to the skill of fighting, not the idea of fighting). Aikidoists do learn to throw, they simply don't learn to fight. Obviously this is a long story--perhaps we could go into it more thoroughly in a workshop. From what I've already said, I think many misunderstandings can occur. So I say again, in general the more truly skillful fighter will win regardless of art or methods employed.

Peter

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

Dear Peter,

I'm struggling with matters around the basic question "What is a principle." To be more specific, let's start with leading. Isn't leading inherent in any interaction anyway? Every kind of communication

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involves offering and leading, since I am presenting myself and do something with my offer in some way -- though usually not consciously. So leading seems to be a distinction which can be made in every interaction whatsoever. I cannot not lead, so to speak. Is this one of the aspects of leading being a principle? At least this distinguishes leading from being a trick, which can be done or not. The same seems to be true for following. I always follow something, maybe not appropriately, but it's always there, as long as there is some kind of interaction. And the same again with the Body-Being. I am aligned with gravity and centered and grounded anyway, there is no way to avoid it as long as gravity works. What I can do about it is only do it better, more effective and consciously.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem to be true for yielding. Yielding is something which can be simply absent.

So the question is: Has this "being there somehow anyway" something to do with being a principle or not? Is this a good direction to look or a completely wrong track?

Thanks,
Klaus

Klaus,

We need to make a distinction between offering and leading. Offering is simply what you present, it doesn't suggest anything else is done. Leading includes offering and making available, but it also demands action, you need to move in relation to your partner so as to influence their actions. In both cases, you need to be conscious of doing these things otherwise they are not occurring. Without this consciousness they are not occurring! It is a particular kind of relationship which only occurs through conscious interaction. As I said with leading, you must influence their actions, it doesn't matter whether this happens anyway, if you aren't doing it consciously for the purpose of leading you are not leading. It really isn't occurring. You may look back and say such and such happened and it looks like leading, but this you are doing consciously after the fact; at the time no leading took place. If that relationship isn't actively created by you it isn't there, there is no operating principle "just because." Your actions need to be directed by this principle of relationship otherwise it isn't active.

Don't confuse "conscious" with having to "think" about things. You can do things consciously without much thought at all. But that's another story.

Leading is not an objective principle, or a principle of "being," it is a principle of interaction, an operational principle. The same is true of following. But with Body-Being it is not an interactive principle between people, but between you and the environment, or the "objective" principles. You will be in relation with these objective or existing principles no matter what you do, but your Cheng Hsin Body-Being only occurs when you align to certain principles, otherwise there is no CHBB, just what you get by default. Yielding is also an operational principle, in other words, it is determined by how you interact with another.

So, that should answer your question. A principle is what it is. There are different domains and kinds of principles. Hope this helps.

Peter

~~~~~  
Chris Higgins  
London, England

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Peter,

I have a question. How do I become very good? What is the process that you followed? Because it seems to me that there is a difference between the process you followed and the process we may follow. And because of that, sometimes only the form and not the essence gets transferred. People don't always get the same insight. I guess it is related to confusing personal belief with insight/experience. You have said that a lot, but maybe it needs to be so much more emphasized, because most people do not

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take it seriously and just believe what you say. Which is OK, as long as we do not then somehow forget that it is just belief.

Take care,
Chris

Chris,

We shouldn't confuse any process that I followed with what you need to do. We are very different people and our goals are different, so your process will be different from mine. That said, however, I think if one wants to become very good he needs to become obsessed, at least for 10 years or so. The reason I say this is because without being obsessed the only thing you have is discipline, and that takes a lot of . . . well, discipline. What I mean by obsessed is being swept away by really wanting to learn, to really want to know and be able to do it, making this the primary goal of life for now, so that it occupies most of your thoughts and actions. You immerse yourself in the study and practice. In this way, you will be naturally disciplined since every chance you get you will be studying, not just in the many hours a day you will put into your practice and contemplation, but also every time you are standing around or walking down the street you will practice some body-being material, or any time you see an opportunity to work on your skills no matter what the forum, you'll use it. When you are just sitting around, say waiting to see the dentists, you will be thinking about how something works, or training a movement in your mind, or contemplating some question. These things will naturally occur. Why? Because you are "obsessed" you really WANT to know, and you are committed to getting it. You need to "use" me a lot, but you can't stop there, it needs to become yours and in your life. I'm just here to help.

Peter

~~~~~  
Nick Feenberg  
La Jolla, California

~~~~~  
Peter,

How does one determine or define "mastery?" I've studied three martial arts -- Tai Chi, Hsing-I, and now Aikido. T'ai chi is not generally taught as a martial art and seems more to be a health exercise. You definitely create a great deal of clarity about your personal life in that arena. When I took Hsing-I it seemed to be that if the other person was lying on the ground that you were on the right path. Spiritually, if you follow the traditions of the masters you will achieve success. Aikido is a little different depending on the teacher. You can see enormous results in the field of self-development and personal growth and if you choose to pursue its martial aspects, a great deal of power and ability. Success in Aikido is defined as defeating the self not the opponent. All three seem to have different ideas of what constitutes a "master." That word is thrown around so freely that it seems anyone can use it.

In my own studies it seems like I am taking baby steps towards mastering my own event. I have much more ability, power and freedom than ever before, but it always seems that there is more to "do," a task that seemingly will take as long as I'm around. You won a world championship, a tangible result around which to measure your level. What about the rest of us, when do we get there?

Nick Feenberg

Nick,

Mastery is related to whatever you are trying to master. The three arts you mentioned have many differing goals and ideas about what the art is even within the same art. In these the goal seems to represent the desires of the participants. Therefore, mastery is determined by the purpose for studying an art. If you realize this purpose, if you attain the level of skill or transformation that is sought, then perhaps we can say this is mastery.

There is always a subjective component to the assessment of mastery, yet the title is used in different

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ways for different endeavors. One can be a master bricklayer and this would suggest a certain level of skill. Or mastery can pretty much be just a title. For example, one can be the "maestro" of an orchestra and, although this is "master," it doesn't suggest a particular level of skill as compared to other maestros, just the attainment of that job or role. On the other hand, if one is a master painter or dancer we expect a level of skill that surpasses most painters and dancers. Here it becomes hard to define when that person achieves mastery, but some consensus is reached that they have created something that not only shows a deeper level of understanding in their art than most, but some ingredient not commonly found even in those who are technically proficient in the art.

One thing we should consider is that mastery does not mean "perfect," nor does it mean that the person is master of everything. It must mean that there is a level of understanding and skill that is uncommon and greater than what is easily attainable, otherwise the word doesn't mean anything. But this shouldn't be confused with the person being perfect at everything, and sometimes people fall into this trap, imagining that a "master" is a perfect person.

Whatever it is that you are trying to master, I think we can confidently say that as a student of some art in the process of investigating what the art is and what mastering it would be, that you are not a master. Such questions need to be resolved, and in such a way that they aren't intellectual conclusions but demonstrable experience.

There is no set answer to the question of mastery. It is whatever you create for yourself. Make it powerful and real and you can attain something powerful and real. And make sure that you have fun on the way! Good luck,
Peter

~~~~~  
Marc Daoust  
Jacksonville, Florida  
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Dear Mr. Ralston

I just recently read your book (Principles of Effortless Power) and it is the best martial art book I have ever read! And I read a lot!!! I just want to tell you how much I admire your work and dedication to your art, and how you made it so much more than fighting, but also a doorway into being

I'm sure you get a lot of mail from all kinds of people asking all sorts of questions. This one is no different, but I am sincerely asking for some guidance and advice. Just so you know a little about me (my ego), this is my background. I started as a kid (9 years old) to learn karate, then I got into a phase of search for a complete and effective system. I learned some judo, kickboxing, wrestling, Brazilian jujitsu and muay thai. I learn fast and I have a lot of natural ability. I fought a few times in cage fighting and did well. (I'll stop bragging and get to the point, before you fall asleep!) Recently I realized that only so much power can be generated by the body alone (160lbs) but also that this power will decrease with age. And more importantly this ego-driven way of training did nothing to get me closer to being and enlightenment. So I gave up all hard styles and a promising career to look for a better way. I started reading books about internal martial arts. It is quite hard to find a good and complete work on that subject. Then your book found me -- it was misplaced in the wrong section. As I read your book it just brought everything together, what would have taken me years to discover was written right in front of me!

Now I practice standing chi kung (with much more attention on gravity and grounding) also I do ba gua circle walking, chi kung (focusing also on grounding and waist movement), I take a t'ai chi class. But I'm still confused. Am I doing the right kind of things? My t'ai chi teacher showed us this energy circulation into the arms, but you teach to drain down into the ground when the hands move. I really like your way, it's so much easier to focus downward constantly than moving it all around. So what should I do? What's the best way to develop the energy? How should I train? Forms? Push-hand drills? Or should I train with people from hard styles and try to apply effortless power sparring?

If you can help me find the right path, I will be forever thankful!

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Thank you for your time, I hope to hear from you soon.
Marc Daoust

Marc,

Your background is very useful to give you a sense of the scope and reality of what people do, and how they interact; you will also have some experience of what the mind goes through in such competitions. This is valuable experience, don't turn your back on it. Essentially none of the internal martial artists you will encounter will have any of this experience and so what they offer should be balanced with this lack. In other words, they may not know what they are talking about as a reality but rather just as a belief. Sometimes what some teacher believes happens to match reality enough to be useful. But it's best to have them show you how things work rather than merely asking you to believe what they say.

Martial work, or any other work for that matter, will not bring you to enlightenment. That is a different study. The martial work helps in many ways with discipline, reality checks, feedback about your own limitations, habits, assumptions, reactions and so forth. But the goal is different. You can pursue enlightenment, or simply increasing consciousness in any way, within a martial pursuit. But you have to do it, it isn't inherent in the pursuit at all.

You may get caught up for a while in a fascination with the various ideas, routines, and promises of the internal martial field. This is fine, but keep an open mind and press yourself and your teachers for real understanding about why the body should function this way or that, or why it is important to practice this way and not that way, and so on. There are many good ideas and clever methods that exist in the internal martial arts; and some of it is even powerful and effective. But there is also a great deal of superficial thought and hollow routines that people adhere to simply because they were taught it and believe it. Try to separate the wheat from the chaff.

No one item will make the big difference. For me to tell you do this thing instead of what they suggest is minor. Understanding the principles and why you should do either or neither is more important. I highly recommend coming to the Cheng Hsin month-long Retreat. Your desire for investigating the truth of being would be empowered a great deal by attending the ENB (Experiencing the Nature of Being) which is the Ontological workshop in the first 7 days of the Retreat. Some simple hands-on play and learning in the Cheng Hsin martial arts can point you in the right direction in a big way that just reading about it rarely does. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but real study is worth so much more. Your relationship to your other arts will doubtlessly change. Some you might give up, but others you may be able to find much more value from, since you won't be as stuck on merely believing what you are told, but will have some way in which to discern the truth and investigate the matter for yourself.

This working things out for yourself is best done in concert with someone who understands the need for personal responsibility in this search, and so a good teacher is invaluable. Unfortunately there aren't that many very good teachers. This is one reason I advise so strongly that you study with me for at least a while. Regardless of what you think about my personality or teaching methods when you do, you will be exposed to real learning by a teacher who understands what he is talking about in a deep way. This will provide for you an experience of that honest direction, and you can use that experience in your relationship with other teachers -- passing by some, and demanding honesty from the others, until you find a teacher worth studying with.

As one of my past teachers once said: "Study with the best. It may cost you more in the short run, but will save you so much time in the long run." This is a true statement. Studying with lesser teachers seems to allow us to hide and avoid any real confrontation with ourselves, or avoid committing ourselves to a real study, and sometimes may even seem to save some money or just be convenient, but the unseen cost is much larger than anything we may avoid. Certainly sometimes people just want to dabble a bit in some art, to learn about it in a safe way as a hobby, and there is nothing wrong with that. But this is not your case. And so you should consider what I'm saying, and why I'm saying it.

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Good luck and hope to meet you soon.
Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Nick Favicchio  
Plattsburg, New York  
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Peter,

I was wondering about what you refer to as "holding a question." In a sense, I've worked with the questions of "who am I?" and "what am I?" and come to logical and rational conclusions not unlike your own. However, a direct experience of the answers to these questions has, as far as I can tell, not yet been forthcoming. I was wondering how exactly you "hold a question" like you speak of in your writing. I guess my question is what exactly you mean by "holding a question"? I am hoping to get at an experience and understanding akin to what you describe getting from the contemplative seminars. Are there any other contemplative exercises I should consider? Any pitfalls or things I should be worried about?

Thanks in advance.
Nick Favicchio

Nick,

Holding a question is simply contemplating. But contemplation, as I'm speaking about it now, isn't sitting and thinking about or trying to answer the question. It is setting out to experience the answer, so to speak. And yet it isn't an "experience" we are looking for either, it is the direct consciousness of the thing we are wondering about.

We say "hold" the question because it is like remaining steadfast in this one question for a long time. Without necessarily thinking things or searching around for something to occupy your attention, you hold on to this question, which is really mostly having the intent to deeply and directly grasp what something is.

A first question of this sort is often: "Who am I?" In this you would hold the question by dwelling on your self with the intent to directly experience yourself. The question "who am I?" helps drive your attention toward that end. Within this question, you can ask: Who is seeing? Who is thinking? Who is walking? Who wants to know? Who is laughing, scratching, eating, listening, or anything else that might be happening. This helps drive you back into the question of who you are no matter what is going on. If you do this steadfastly and without break, it is called holding the question. You can set up a period of time in which to do this, an hour, a day, several days, 15 minutes, or whatever, and then commit to doing nothing but hold a chosen question for the entire time.

For more work in this I'd recommend attending an appropriate workshop or intensive here, like Experiencing the Nature of Being, or the Empowering Consciousness Workshop.

Good luck,
Peter

~~~~~  
Marc Doust  
Jacksonville, Florida  
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Dear Peter

I just received the intro video tape, thank you. You seem very good at explaining things, which is important in this kind of discipline. I'm still confused about something. You mentioned that the intrinsic

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strength you use comes from compression with the ground. But other internal teachers talk about internal power coming from accumulating chi in the body and then projecting it into your opponent. So is it the same thing or is it something completely different? Is chi an energy that can be accumulated or is it just an expression of a trained and focused mind projecting intent or will?

If internal martial arts are so effective as so many people claim it is, why don't these people actually enter real no-hold-barred competition, just like you did in 1978?

Most of them will say that their arts are too dangerous!!! But I think that if you can't perform in competition how can you expect to be able to fight in life threatening situation!

I wonder what are your thoughts on this.

Thank you,
Marc Doust

Marc,

Intrinsic strength is something you really need to study for awhile before it becomes clear. It is not the same thing as using chi. Most of what people call chi is just fantasy. There is something valuable to do in that area, but it isn't entertaining fanciful ideas, it's a lot of hard work. Certainly the vast majority of internal martial artists wouldn't enter real competition, because they don't know how to fight effectively. This is true of most martial artists. Unfortunately there is a tendency to lie to others and oneself about that. The thing is, fighting skills aren't for everyone. Few people actually want to use that path. It isn't necessary. Just don't lie about it or pretend.

Peter

~~~~~  
Joel Glover  
Englewood, CO

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Peter,

I wanted to express my gratitude for your willingness to make yourself available for these types of workshops. My schedule and commitments tend not to permit much time for these, but when I get to them I am so grateful for the outcome. I left the seminar with two strong impressions that have already helped me.

One has to do with lineage. I have studied a Chen Pan Ling tai chi chuan style for just under 10 years, but I don't really have a consistent instructor or class anymore and I have no clue on my lineage and can point to no "secret transmission." I feel like I am getting the "secrets" from you, like avoiding is better than blocking. In addition, I began to recognize that honoring lineage could serve to hinder or restrict learning what truly works and could force one to learn and even teach aspects that don't work. So, I feel better (less insecure) about being something of a mutt in the tai chi world. I especially appreciate the chance to get to "play" with other practitioners and to recognize that they are not superior because of their "lineage."

The other has to do with usefulness. I am involved in various levels of combat almost daily and I continue to try to use the basic Cheng Hsin principles. However, my combat is either in court, or negotiations, or on paper. In some ways it could be perceived as more abstract but for me it is more concrete. I don't need to imagine being in fights. I am in them. I was in them last week and will be in them this week. I continue to try to implement a system to apply the Cheng Hsin principles in the conflict resolution work that I do in the commercial world. They tend to work very well. The workshop helped reinforce for me those principles and to see their application in the combat that I do on a regular basis. For example, perception - seeing through your opponent's eyes; experiencing and knowing losing to know winning; timing; letting your opponent continue their attack so you can lead them instead of having them do something else; accepting and immersing in the loathsomeness of the combat; presenting; yielding; not committing to a particular outcome; recognizing anger in your opponent; doing everything right and still getting your ass kicked; and many others -- all had direct, concrete applications for my work. They may not always improve the results, but they help me enjoy the work that I do much better.

So, thanks for the help. I recognize that I may not fit the mold of your typical students but what

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you do really helps me on a daily basis and I look forward to continuing to work with you at other workshops.

Joel

Joel,

Not to worry about lineage, it means nothing. If you study t'ai chi, then your lineage goes all the way back to the founder of t'ai chi. Where else could it go? The secret is not in lineage, but in finding real teachers who know what they are talking about. And then of course you have to practice what you learn.

Remember when applying the Cheng Hsin material to your work, the principles for combat will work just fine, but the form and method of applying them may have to be different. Consider, for example, what is it we are accomplishing through yielding, why do we do it, what does it provide, and what is the principle? Then you can know better how this may apply to your work. It may take forms that don't look like yielding, or like yielding looks in the martial sense.

Good luck and thanks for your letter.

Peter

~~~~~  
Nguyen Van Minh  
Paris, France

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(Next: Because of the amount and nature following questions, I will answer these rather briefly and as they come up.)

Peter,

1. Question: Does your kind of realization break selfishness and fear?

PR: Yes.

2. Question: Is the "I" purely memory?

PR: No. The self certainly is identified relative to what is historical and so memory is a big part, but I don't think it is accurate to say that "I" is memory. At least one other ingredient is necessary, which is the conception that "I am." This is then followed by "I am this or that" based on identifying something that I am, which is a function of memory.

3. I can't stand firmly. What is exactly "rooting"?

PR: Attaching to the earth. There are various methods to achieve this, but the name, being a metaphor, suggests some sense of being connected into the earth. Feeling the whole body and relaxing the whole thing so that it falls down into the feet will help you stand more firmly. Concentrating on a feeling sense of being located or attached under the ground will help you root.

4. About relaxation: Does it require that one find out and annihilate every anguish, including existential anguish? I mean anguish about one's destiny, life, death, and so on. I feel them in doing relaxation in bed, before sleeping. What kind or state of mind allows this kind of realization?

PR: Your view is an extreme one. Deep relaxation may well result in running into emotional tension produced by such things as anxiety, and it is true that fear or anxiety does not fit in an extremely relaxed body. But worrying about it doesn't help. The principle behind relaxing is letting go. If you can let go of all anxiety, something very deep is sure to relax. But don't get caught up in "biting off more than you can chew." Instead of trying to accomplish everything at once, it might be more reasonable to do what you can and then work your way toward deeper levels of relaxation when it feels natural to do so.

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5. In fighting situation, does one use a minimum amount of strength when relaxed? If yes, what is this minimum?

PR: Yes. The least amount you can use to get the job done (and usually less than what you think).

6. About chi: I never understood it. How to train simply to develop it? When you push someone far away in T'ui Shou, do you use chi? Do you use a minimum amount of strength?

PR: Chi is best thought of as "feeling-attention." This applies primarily to feeling, listening, outreaching, directing movement, and whatnot, yet it is intrinsic strength, not chi, that is the main component to not using strength.

7. Did you manage to make somebody else to break the ego? I mean: is your realization "transmissible"?

PR: Yes and no. First of all if you mean by "breaking the ego" a realization of being that is not a self, then this might be called an enlightenment experience which others have had, yet neither I nor anyone else can "make" that happen. Others can experience whatever I have experienced (or anyone else for that matter), but they must always experience this for themselves, it cannot be handed to anyone without their responsibility. With work and commitment on the part of a student, I can facilitate such things.

8. Do you have any students who have the luck to live by you so to have the opportunity to get close teaching (your own personality is part of the teaching)?

PR: Not really. Some students live close enough that we see each other on occasion. Of course personal contact with someone who has an experience of what it is you want to know is the best way to learn (but I doubt anyone would want to learn my personality). Perhaps someday we will have a facility where serious students can commit themselves to a life of work and study; but this is not foreseen.

Peter

~~~~~  
Jan Bloem  
Groningen, Holland

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Peter,

Two small questions:

Q1: During the workshop we did an exercise in which we needed to put our hand on the body of the partner and move around without losing the contact. After that we did some pushing. At one moment I put my hand on a partner and I had the feeling that he was not very present. I felt the body all right, but that was it. Also with the pushing it was rather easy to "push him around." On a theoretical level, can you say that this is a case of a lack of body-being?

Q2: I have the feeling that I see more and more what you mean with "consciousness" and also the "martial value" of it. My question is (one of them) some people say that you are able to "read" the intentions of your partner. How I interpreted your remarks during san shou was that we should be very aware of every part of our body and the mechanical and physiological reactions which are evoked by external stimuli -- being a punch, kick or behavior in total. When people say "he can read the intentions of his opponent" the impression comes to mind that you need to learn to observe behavior of your opponent and you should start with your opponent. I have more the feeling that you do not read the intention of the opponent by looking at him, but by being aware of your own bodily reactions, because they are usually quicker there than any visual feedback. When you know out of experience that a certain physiological reaction is evoked by a certain behavior of your opponent, there is a great chance that this behavior will occur. In that sense you will be one step ahead. This will make it possible to "respond instead of react." Am I on the right track?

Jan

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Jan,

About Q1:

What we were practicing is called "outreaching," which is making and feeling the connection with another. This enables us to pick up information about a partner or opponent beyond feeling his whole body, such as a sense of what he's up to, how aware he is, his reaction to being "touched," and so forth. We can't say that your partner lacked body-being since that would mean he didn't have a body or wasn't alive. We could say that he probably was not very conscious of his body, or not "in" his body much. When a person identifies most strongly with his mind, the relationship that mind has to body is abstracted, detached. He may "perceive" the body and even identify with it, but he doesn't occupy the position "of" the body "as" the body, which creates a serious weakness.

About Q2:

Certainly I recommend paying attention to the opponent and your own body. Although this sounds self evident, you'd be surprised how many martial artists need more work in this area. As far as your analysis, it certainly shows you're thinking about it, and it may well have validity. The particulars, however, aren't as important as the experience, and the experience usually comes as a feeling awareness, a cognition of the other person's intent and impulse, which for me comes largely as a feeling, sometimes just as a sort of knowing that is so close to my response as to be virtually undetectable as something separate from my action (but not completely). As a feeling it is as if their movement, and in some sense their intent or what they are up to mentally, emotionally, and strategically, "touches" my body. In this way, it may be similar to what you are considering. I wouldn't want you to restrict yourself to one way of thinking about it. In the end there may be many ways we pick up such information -- use them all.

Peter

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Michael Schomaker  
St. Louis, MO

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Peter,

I am having problems with the fixed foot rollback. I am referring to the following pages in "The Art of Effortless Power." Basic Practice Routine pg. 82-83 and Leading Rollback 106-109. The distance that is shown in the photographs in the basic practice seem unrealistic when I go for the press. I can only get a purchase on the opponents body with my wrist. It feels too far away. If I close the distance then the rollaway becomes real tight -- not enough room to move without moving too far back in my back leg -- not keeping the pelvis in between the legs. On 107 and 108 it seems that B is almost leaning -- and I find that is what I do when I play B. I am assuming that whether you are A or B you must follow body-being principles.

Michael

Michael,

Remember, the one isn't the other. In the Basic Practice, both sides are represented, in the Leading Rollback only the one doing the rollback is represented. In such a case the other is the "attacker" and as such doesn't have to have concern for his own training but rather "lends" himself to the job of "naturally" attacking the one who is doing the technique so as to help them learn that technique.

Leaning in itself isn't bad nor does it violate the principles. (For example, in the Shoulder Sluff we lean.) Leaning such that the balance is put in jeopardy is another matter. It is sort of like the difference between bending the upper body or moving the pelvis in such a way that puts the balance in jeopardy -- the first is simply another body shape which may be appropriate to the moment, the second puts one into a vulnerable and ineffective situation.

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Regarding the Leading Rollback, leading the opponent into a bad or awkward position, or encouraging his off balance, is quite appropriate.

Regarding the Basic Practice, one thing that isn't shown is the adjustment of the feet. If one is too close or too far the feet should be moved accordingly. If, for example, when you turn during your rollback and you begin to distort the body and become awkward and unbalanced trying to keep your feet fixed, move them. It is more important to train good balance and body principles than to keep the feet in place. As you know, I am not a fan of the t'ai chi version of fixed step "push hands" as a main diet. Training without moving the feet has merit, it is a way to increase grounding, learn how to maneuver the body without moving the feet, discovering movements one might ordinarily overlook, and finding the limits of one's ability to yield the body in place as well as expand those limits. Yet as a main practice it is too limited, leads to too many bad habits, and turns into a game that isn't completely useful in open fighting.

A few tips on the Basic Practice: when you do the leading rollback don't run for your back leg, stay on the front as much as possible but back away enough to let them by. This way when the press comes you will have more shifting back that you can do. Adjust the feet whenever needed. At first, move your feet as much as you need to make sure the body is comfortable, balanced, relaxed, and responding well to your partner's motions. Then begin to move the feet as little as possible, still keeping the above advice in mind; move only as far you must to respond to his motion and no further. Eventually see if you can keep all of the principles mentioned and not move the feet. This pushes you in a direction of learning certain things; but the important thing is to know the difference between when to move the feet and when not. When in doubt, move.

On the other side, when you are reaching for your partner, remember you are not really pushing or pressing, you are "reaching out to compress." They are neutralizing your attempts at getting a purchase so you never really get to compress. In order to compress you would take a step, with the push or the press. But as a Basic Routine this part is not done. So when the person is too far to compress and stay balanced, give it up, or take a step. Remember, it is only a practice, and anything put into a routine will automatically limit one's free and, in many cases, appropriate responses. Use it to develop and learn; but remember: the principles are always the most important thing.

Also, the pictures frequently don't depict the whole story, they just provide a ball park idea and place to begin learning the movements.

Peter

~~~~~  
Jamie Schardt  
Chicago, IL

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Peter,

For power delivery, western boxing can produce more raw power, but compared with intrinsic strength it is inefficient. For balancing power delivery and mobility, again intrinsic strength goes a lot further. Because there isn't a great deal of muscle contraction, movements can be redirected, changed, corrected. It doesn't unbalance the "giver" because there is no force until compression by the "receiver," and it is harder to become unbalanced by the opponent moving the attacking limb because it isn't rigidly connected to the torso. So, am I understanding this correctly so far?

Jamie

Jamie,

Boxing doesn't necessarily have more power, it simply takes more effort to achieve it. The rest of the statement seems fine.

Peter

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Jan Bloem  
Holland  
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Peter,
How can "The Cheng Hsin Principles" be applied to kicking?
Jan

Jan,
The same way they are applied to anything else. Move the leg from the center of the body, stay relaxed throughout and move the whole body into the kick. The last point is unusual in most kicking arts since usually people counter leg movements with their upper body and arms to balance the motion of the lower. I suggest not doing this, but instead move upper and lower body in the same direction. This will take some getting used to and you'll have to find a new way to stay balanced, but it isn't too difficult once you work it out. When the foot comes to the target, continue the motion into it and allow the body to be compressed into the foot you're standing on. One piece of advice I give people in kicking is not to try to "kick" but simply place or put their foot somewhere. Stay relaxed and let it drop as soon as it's free. One thing people seem to overlook is that when kicking you are on one foot (at most) at a time. This reduces mobility and the ability to make subtle and quick changes, so timing and awareness of the relationship is crucial.
Peter

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Maurice Gillis  
Iwama, Japan  
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Dear Peter

I would like to thank you for not only allowing me to take the degree one test this past summer, but encouraging me and giving the necessary guidance. I had a great time, as usual, and taking the test added a whole new dimension to the Cheng Hsin challenge. I believe taking the test forced me to learn a lot more than if I hadn't. Lastly, I was wondering if you could elaborate on something for me. You have spoken well of Ueshiba in the past. I see a resemblance between some of your techniques and those of Ueshiba. What if any influence has Ueshiba had on you?

I want to thank you again for sharing what it is you have worked so hard to find, and I anxiously await your next seminar.

Sincerely,
Maurice Gillis

Maurice,

Of course Ueshiba has influenced me as have many others. I studied Aikido with Robert Nadeau, who studied with Ueshiba (so've heard many "insider" stories). And I think Aikido done right is very beautiful to watch. Some Cheng Hsin techniques may look like Aikido techniques but when you work with them you will find they in fact are not, they just have a familiar look (Aikidoists have as hard a time learning them as anyone else).

I've studied many martial arts, and when I learned something valuable (i.e. if it had some effective functional purpose for being) I tended to keep it, and what was not valuable, I tossed. But don't misunderstand, I don't believe in jumping too quickly into revision or eclecticism. My philosophy has always been to master what is taught, before I would even think about changing it. This may have slowed me down in some cases, since I was hesitant to change what was asserted, even though I may have failed to find genuine value in it. But it also forced me to discover things I never would have if I had rushed

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to modify something due to a lack of immediate understanding. Eventually, however, I did begin to toss what proved to be remnants of techniques lost, or that were poor inventions in the first place, and to keep only what showed itself as a useful contribution. Of course by that I don't mean I kept the techniques as I found them, I just kept the direction or sometimes the look, and changed them or redesigned them to be consistent with Cheng Hsin principles. Since, as you know, my commitment is to the principles and not to any form or specific art.

I never really wanted to create a new martial art by creating all new techniques. That pursuit seemed rather useless and I felt no need to do it. (I have known several people who tried that, and I thought their efforts turned out to be bogus and superficial.) But I did want to communicate the incredibly valuable principles of Cheng Hsin and so this is why Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou, Cheng Hsin Boxing, Cheng Hsin Body-Being, etc., were created.

Of course, standing on the basic design of techniques from other arts has sometimes proven to be a mistake. In trying to "reinvent" a technique to be Cheng Hsin consistent, I have discovered that a distortion of both the technique and the principles was often the result. In such a case, I found it was better to throw it out and start from scratch. But then again sometimes I was forced to learn (invent) a particularly difficult form of using intrinsic strength in order to accommodate the basic design of a technique that I never would have discovered without going down that road. So it seems to have evened out.

Not to understate his many genuine technical and systems contributions, the greatest influence Ueshiba had on me was inspirational. By the time I saw him, I had already gotten to the point of feeling like the world of martial arts didn't hold much more for me. And I was still a young man. But everyone I saw seemed worse than I, or doing systems that lacked what I already experienced as possible. Then I saw Ueshiba and conceded there was more to be done. I admired his attempts to go deeper even at an old age. I loved the beauty of his art. I enjoyed his ideas and intelligence. So it re-inspired me to study more. To look even deeper and push on. This was his main contribution to me personally.

Peter

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Michael Norman  
Boston, MA

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Mr. Ralston,

I have completed the first two chapters of your book and have decided to stop and make sure I get them right before moving on so as not to lose anything. I do have several questions that you may answer later on in the book but I will ask anyway. If they are answered please don't waste your time in answering them since I am sure you are very busy.

Thanks again for taking time to read my letters. I think I have found answers to a great deal of what I am looking for in your book and I would truly love to do anything that I can to help you and your organization.

I have a black belt in issheinryu karate so I am used to a straight punch and a forward-facing grounded stance, but after taking kickboxing and tae kwon do, I found that a sideways-facing bouncing stance makes me much quicker and allows my kicks more freedom, this is where my problems arise.

Michael Norman

Q1: Since you talk about the elbow as pointing down, do you suggest a straight punch or a twisting boxing punch as the base technique? There will be times when the other is applicable but which do you see as more effective?

PR: The elbows point down only when there is no reason for them to point in any other direction. I do neither the boxing punch with the twist, nor the karate punch. Basically, I simply reach out the arm using

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the whole body and put my fist on the target. The elbow should be moving into the end of the fist so that the wrist isn't bent at all -- the elbow, forearm, wrist, and fist should all be on a straight line. In a high hook punch, for example, this means the elbow will be up and out to one side so that the forearm and wrist are straight when moving into the target.

Q2: Looking at Cheng Hsin from a kickboxing standpoint, is it possible to adopt a stance which limits the amount of target space open to hit but also allows you to settle on your heels and remain mobile? Along that same line: if I am fighting from a sideways stance with one shoulder facing my opponent, my whole body can be in line with the exception of my head which would be facing him. Does the fact that my nose is then out of line with my navel create problems?

PR: Many martial arts fuss over stance. The pose one takes is really not very important. I suggest that rather than trying to protect the body with the shape of the body, instead protect the body with your awareness. Be sensitive and completely aware in every moment of everything that is occurring with the opponent and you can always take appropriate action. This is best.

Q3: This question is the most important and one that I have had for my entire life. Ever since I was small I have been able to control small warm bursts of something to shoot through my body. It creates an extremely pleasant, warm feeling and makes my skin tingle, but I can only do it a certain amount of times in a row before I feel like I have exhausted it. I have asked doctors about it and they have no idea. Is this my qi? Speaking of qi, I am having a lot of trouble feeling it. I can see and feel its effects but not the qi itself, which is preventing me from being able to gather it and direct it as much as I would like too. Any suggestions?

PR: I will tell you the truth about that. What that is is what that is. It isn't really any more or less. Try practicing other things as well. Altogether, they help improve your ability to control your body and direct your feeling-attention. The consciousness which moves attention through the body is not itself a feeling, so the effects are all you can notice. I spent much time messing with such things and found one question that's good to ask is: what are you doing it for? It is quite useful for increasing awareness and sensitivity, and shifting states, and making new distinctions in subtle perceptive feedback and the like. But if you watch, it isn't very useful for developing magical powers all by itself. This is what many people think is going to happen. I've yet to see it. I've met a few people with some phenomenal abilities, but these didn't seem to come from simply developing their chi, and such people are very rare. Much more frequently encountered are the people who "believe" but show little beyond that. I suggest working with trainings like the Ball and Chain and such. I also suggest that you investigate what this feeling really is that you are creating. Be completely honest about it, and see what you come up with.

Peter

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Stewart Breslin  
Pacifica, CA

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Peter,

I was working with one of those punching bags with the water in the base trying to find the proper alignments for compression using the resistance of the bag to push against in various shapes. Testing myself by feeling my triceps while pushing, I noticed that no matter how relaxed I started out, at some point my triceps would tense up. If I go on the assumption that there should be no tension in the arms at all at any point then I must be mobilizing that muscle group to push the bag away at that point. I even set up my push so that I was bracing my elbow against my hip so that the upper arm was not required at all and I still tightened up my triceps. I also tried working the alignments with a feeling of receptivity of the bag and also with placing all of my attention in my foot. Both of these approaches yielded better results but I still couldn't keep from tensing up. Is this a sign that I am holding the bag out or pushing it away subtly rather than allowing the weight of the bag to compress down to my feet or is a very small amount of

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tension in the triceps necessary or inevitable? If I should continue to try and eliminate all tension from my arms, do you have any suggestions for ways I can train to eliminate the tension?

Stewart

Stewart,

Bags aren't the best training devices for pushes. But to answer your question: fail. Instead of moving the bag and trying to relax the triceps, relax the triceps and try to move the bag. The operative words here are "do" (relax) and "try" (to move). This means that the most likely result will be failure to move, but success at relaxing. Once you've found action in which your muscles are relaxed, then keep that and search for ways to move the bag with relaxed muscles, not with something else. You may not get it in a week or year.

Good luck,

Peter

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Anthony Taylor  
Tasmania, Australia

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Dear Peter,

Thank you for your work, your writings periodically keep me honest. I am training with Dave Higgins in Hobart, mostly enjoying the mind/body-space of playing the games and making some primitive beginnings on a slack rope. I am training in Aikido with teachers of various quality at the Uni club and doing some supplementary training with a Ninjitsu instructor simply because he is the best mover I've ever seen.

I reason that most people seem to come to Cheng Hsin with a lot of Martial arts under their belt and already have as it were, techniques to transcend. It seems true of yourself and Ueshiba that technique, instruction and discipline provided a valuable basis to find truth. It seems wise to begin informing technique with Cheng Hsin principles and practices as soon as possible.

These different influences have kept me a little extended without causing confusion probably because they all inform each other so thoroughly, I would, however, appreciate some guidance on how best to be a beginner. Is it as simple as Goenka says, that to make a well you need to commit and dig one deep hole? Can I study a few traditions with serious and playful curiosity and come away with more than just a good time?

Good luck with the month-long.

Anthony Taylor

Anthony,

It is hard to say, both have value. In the beginning, however, it is probably best to look around for a while. Studying a few things can balance the dogma of any one. On the other hand, you need to delve past the hard parts to get an appreciation of any art. Some arts, or teachers, aren't worth the time; some are. After much study, then choose one or two arts and dig your deep hole.

Peter

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Rene Hunt  
BC, Canada

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Hello Peter,

I am a practitioner of shotokan karate. It has been brought to my attention that a high ranking master in our style has a posture of moving with leading hips or tilted hips while walking and probably at

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all times. Do you know what the benefit of this would be? Does it have to do with lowering the attention to the center? or movement?

Thank you for any input.
Rene Hunt

Rene,

Perhaps. When we engage some body practice our attention does go there, and our movement is affected, but there are many ways to produce those effects without contorting the body. Tilted hips sounds bad. Distorting the body is rarely good. There are many martial and other arts that tend to disfigure the body for some purpose. A ballerina for example will have stubby and crushed toes and feet, and a tendency to walk like a duck. These side-effects may be necessary to the practice of her art, but it is a disfigurement of the body. We should question the necessity of any distortion. Perhaps some reshaping of the body is required to practice our brand of martial pursuit, but be wary of obsolete or irrelevant methods of body conditioning.

Leading with the hip may just be another way of coordinating body movement, perhaps to unify top and bottom in motion. If movement is initiated from the hips or center then the hip will move first, but if the body is to be unified the rest should move at the same time. Such movement may appear as different than what one is used to seeing since usually people aren't unified and don't move from the center. Hope this helps.

Good luck.
Peter Ralston

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Brendan Lea  
Bristol, Vermont

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Dear Peter,

I was wondering where you found your discipline. How does one learn to practice for extended periods alone? I want what you teach to become a part of my life. I can't wait to learn what there is that you teach.

Brendan

Brendan,

It's really very simple: just want it. When you practice, realize that there is something you can get right now and keep working to get it. It isn't about trudging along doing something on faith, waiting for the future to give you the fruits of your labor. It is developing it today. And if you can't find what you need to work on today, then it is about finding it today. Either way, you can be excited with the work you're doing now.

About three decades ago at my old Chinatown school, some younger Chinese students asked me why I kept doing certain things over and over. They said it looked like I could do them well, why repeat it so much? I told them that each time I did it, I felt or noticed something off -- my unity or timing, degree of relaxation, or something -- and so I would do it again to work on correcting that, and if I did it perfectly, I would do it again just to experience that again! I never did it just to do it, I just happened to find a lot to work on.

Good luck,
Peter Ralston

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Paul Altman  
Florida, USA  
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Hi Peter,

I'm still working an hour a day on balancing on one foot, eyes closed, knee in heel. So far, it's been revolutionary, letting me see SO clearly that I never had a breathing problem at all, but rather an alignment problem. After three decades of looking for help for my breathing problem! It's amazing to discover how much energy I was using to keep that huge boulder of tension, from toppling over. At last I can glide around during the day, without having to work so hard to stay upright.

I'm also interested in strength training and developing an athletic physique, once I've got the skeletal structure working efficiently. From all the work I've done while balanced on one foot, I'm beginning to get a much better idea of what "good form" may mean, regarding strength training. So I'm thinking of moving dumbbells, or a medicine ball, around in space, while balanced on one foot, eyes closed. I have a suspicion that this would be quite good for the self-esteem...the sensation of being able to reach out and grab a heavy object (for example, a medicine ball or an opponent) and move them about while retaining dynamic biomechanical efficiency and independent balance. Even as a child, I always felt uncertain on my feet, that if I punched someone that my fist would bounce off them and I'd fall over from the impact. I can now see that these terrible feelings of inadequacy and impotence, are an accurate self-perception of my lack of balance, and are probably very correctable. I deeply regret having spent decades looking for a psychological solution.

A friend who's a yogi has suggested stretching to help me with this, but my experience is that many static stretches don't adequately address the 3-dimensionality of efficient alignment.

What do you think of the balance training aids? I'm currently balancing on a stable smooth piece of wood. It's recent news to me that many folks have given balance training a good bit of thought, and there's a whole list of balance training aids available. They all seem to share the concept of providing an intentionally unstable surface. Do you like the idea of adding them to my eyes-closed, one-foot, knee in heel, standing routine? Looking to the future, do you like the idea of adding a medicine ball to the mix?

If you've got a minute, any comments/insights greatly appreciated, as always. Although we haven't yet met, your ideas have made quite a difference.

Best,
Paul Altman

Paul,

I never used weights, was afraid it might bind up certain muscle groups; instead I preferred swimming and boxing, et al. Experiment as you think wise, I haven't followed your development so it's hard to advise. There's a guy in Australia that's been working on balancing on a slack rope for some time but I bet he keeps his eyes open. I just practiced improving my balance (among many other things) when I could, in all sorts of ways.

I think stretching is very good, and should be well rounded. Many stretching related "arts" such as yoga or dance focus too much on particular stretches to serve a particular purpose. Of course some of this is bound to happen no matter what, but I would work the whole system of muscles involved in any tightness and throughout the body as best as I could.

Good luck,
Peter Ralston

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Julian Waters-Lynch  
Melbourne, Australia  
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Peter,

Allow me if possible to ask a few questions related to body dynamics. I've been trying to interpret and train the principles you discuss for over a year now, and certain aspects are beginning to surface which I've been wondering about.

First, I feel I've made progress in compressing into, say the right leg and turning the center to result in what feels like effortless, relaxed punching with the right arm. I'm curious as to compressing into one leg and hitting with the opposite arm. I assume you don't change your footwork to deliver two quick, successive strikes with opposite hands? Is it possible to compress into the right leg and hit either straight or across the body with the left hand, adhering to the principles of which you speak?

Secondly, you greatly emphasize connection to the ground, using gravity for intrinsic strength, etc. Do you see any place in your art for leaping evasion or leaping attacks? Is it possible to use intrinsic strength whilst in the air? I know you write about the problems of pushing off one foot rather than falling into the other...but granted one can cover much more distance when two feet leave the ground do you see any worthwhile advantages?

Thirdly, I have been trying to investigate and experiment with footwork. My most immediate question is: 'To cross step or not to cross step?' You speak of always allowing the weight/center to fall between the feet, and balance feels more precarious with cross stepping; however there are times when a cross step feels more appropriate than two quick steps, or a long one leaving the groin exposed. Very interested to hear your thoughts on the merits and disadvantages of cross stepping. Also, do you see both hips being level as an important part of body-being structural integrity. I notice when I really try and stretch out and align my body for say a long, low punch there is a tendency for one hip to slip lower than the other. This seems to cause the back foot to lose some of its connection to the ground. Another point that has me confused: How much to compress into one leg, vs. maintaining weight on the other.

Finally, I find trying to apply the principles of effortless striking to kicking more difficult. I can do it to some degree by projecting the center, but compressing into the standing leg feels different. Any advice would be appreciated. (I only really practice two basic kicks, the Japanese names I was taught are soku yaku and soku gyaku if that means anything to you. Basically just a heel kick pushed out from the body, and a driving swinging toe kick along the direction of the knee joint).

Much appreciate any help and advice. I had avoided asking these questions too prematurely as I thought they might be answered in some of your other books, but I feel it may be some time before I have access to any of them. I will go up to Sydney in a few months to train with Tim Hulbert, maybe he will be able to assist me further. Thank you once again.

Yours Sincerely,
Julian Waters-Lynch

Julian,

1. First off let's clarify that sinking into a foot isn't compression as I speak about compression being used for power. So when you say you compress into one foot and then turn the pelvis, this is not compression in a punch (although we might say it's the simple compression of your weight sinking onto that foot). Compression in the punch (or any other technique) only occurs when the impact of the punch is connected to the ground and compresses the whole body into the ground. And of course it's possible to hit with either hand. Look in the Art of Effortless Power on pages 269 and 270. It is basically the same punch, simply turn the other way.

2. Actually, we don't use gravity for intrinsic strength. Gravity naturally compresses our bodies into the ground, and we need to align with that force, but the compression of the blow is created by the opponent's mass compressing us into the ground. You can leap about all you want, it depends on what you want to do and how you want to do it. And your mass flying as a whole into a target will have significant impact, but it won't be compressing you into the ground. Therefore against large opponents it

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will be far less useful. Still you can relax and allow your whole body to compress into the mass, it simply will be limited by weight and momentum, and this is not compression as I speak of it, since I'm talking about being compressed into the ground. But not everything in a martial interaction needs to be about compression. It is only an effortless use of force.

3. Too many questions at once! I'm not sure what you mean by cross stepping. If you mean taking a step, we do it all the time. If you mean for example stepping your back right foot across the front left foot but stepping to your left while trying to face a partner in front of you, this is awkward. It can be done but isn't recommended. Mostly you simply need to know the strength and weaknesses of any step. Timing is always a factor. About the hips, generally level is best since it is most natural and balanced, but not as a rigid rule. And when we punch we are pretty much 100% on one foot at the moment of impact. Again, see pictures in the Art book.

4. The two kicks I do are straight and round. Other than this are variations. Generally, I don't recommend karate type kicks, snapping the leg muscles is not an effective use of kicking. Once again, look at page 268 on kicking in the Art book. It's not much but gives the basic idea. Probably Tim has the Art book, so if you don't get one before this, have a look in his. Do you have the Cheng Hsin video? If not, it is available in PAL format, contact Rob van Ham (robvanham@wanadoo.nl), it may clear up some simple things for you.

Good luck,
Peter

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David Fraser  
Plymouth, MN  
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Hi! Peter,

I purchased your book "The Art of Effortless Power." I have read it several times and have used your principles regarding punching. My punches have gotten very powerful and effortless. It works great. Thanks. I have a few questions about sinking and the part about compressing the leg.

1. Do you press the foot into the ground hard or does it just make contact with the ground?
2. How is the sinking/compressing used when you are just walking? Do you drop the leg down slightly as you walk or is it just a feeling that you sense?
3. If someone is punching at your head, would you have your hands held up to block the punch or do you have them down by your side? Do you then raise them by the turning of your hips? I understand that all these movements are done with a relaxed body and calm mind. That's all for now.

Thanks
David Fraser

David,

You should do the Boxing Intensive coming up this October. So much will be cleared up and so much more will be learned that you can't even imagine. Regarding your questions: compression is something acting on your body not something you do, therefore your action is devoted to alignment and setting up the movement so that compression naturally happens as you relax into impact. Sinking and compression are two different things. Sinking is something we do, creating a downward flow of intent in the body, increasing grounding and lowering the feeling-attention. Compression is what happens to the relaxed tissue when it is aligned such that, when pressure is applied, the body is squeezed into the ground. You can walk however you like, no advice there. And we don't block, but, ideally, the hands are raised by the hips when they need to go up.

See you at the next BI.
Peter

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Renaud Vanderlinden  
Port Elizabeth, South Africa  
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Dear Mr. Ralston.

My name is Renaud (pronounced "Reno") Vanderlinden. I've been doing T'ai Chi Ch'uan for about 10 years now. I'm currently living in Port Elizabeth, South Africa although my family and I are originally from Belgium. When I started here in Port Elizabeth I found the teachers to be rather dull and non-helpful in their approach to the art. I've since been teaching myself and I am currently starting to teach others. My Mom bought your book on "The Principles of Effortless Power -- the teaching of "Cheng Hsin." I knew immediately that this was what I was lacking in my training. I consider myself very good at T'ai Chi and I can grasp concepts very quickly.

There are, however, two things that I feel I seem to be stuck on and I was wondering if perhaps you could give me some guidance. After reading your book I feel that if there's anyone who can help me it's you. The first is that I lack a lot of sparring to put into practice what I am learning, although this should hopefully change when I start teaching others as I can spar with them. I would like to know if there's any exercise I can do which will help my confidence and my sparring while I don't have anyone to spar with?

The second and bigger problem is as follows. I started reading your book and followed your words with great enthusiasm. All your teachings of centering, balance, relaxing, grounding, sinking, etc., helped me a great deal. It was without a doubt the greatest eye opener I've ever experienced. I also do Qi Kung as a form of muscle stretching and breathing exercise. I feel, however, that I'm blocked or stuck at the moment. Although I understand everything mentally I can't seem to extend it to my physical actions. Is there a meditation or some form of exercise I can do in order to release me, to calm myself and focus? To be completely at one and at peace? I find myself when I spar to be attacking, even in my training. Maybe I'm too aggressive or I'm not understanding your teachings well enough?

My Mom ("Michele Mistler") and I have been avid followers of your teaching and her T'ai Chi master in Belgium (I don't have his name) just spent three weeks with you recently. I feel that you can definitely help me if you so choose.

Thanking you,
Renaud Vanderlinden

Renaud,

One thing to watch out for in working out the "functional" aspects to the art (via sparring or whatever games you may invent or play) is not to turn it into just another kung fu type "application." Many t'ai chi teachers do this since they don't know how to participate in real internal martial interaction. Make sure to relax, don't block or resist, but find other ways to handle another's force (yielding is the main one); work on using intrinsic strength, keeping calm, listening and joining these are things that set such an art apart from the "external" arts. Grasping these things mentally is a start, but all this must be trained "into" the body.

Interactive work can't really be done without a partner. We play a game called "Pressure -- No-pressure" which is very simple and easy to do but teaches so much, and can be played with anyone regardless of their chosen art or skill level. It is simply two people playing, touching for the most part, but not allowing any more pressure to come to the body than would crush a mosquito, while at the same time trying to apply pressure to the other person. That is the game. It is open and you can do anything you can think to do, but one thing I tell people is that they can't use pressure to get out of pressure being applied to them (basically: don't block -- don't push on someone's arm to prevent them from pushing on your torso, for example, instead, yield to the pressure, and independently apply pressure anywhere on their body). This basic description and some others are in the back of the book "Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou: The Art of Effortless Power" if you have it. If not, you might want to get one, as well as the video "An Introduction to the Arts of Cheng Hsin" if you don't have one. Also, I do a two week camp in Holland the end of June. If you can get up that way, come join us.

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Regarding your last question: to address this domain I think the work that we do in ontology and contemplation is appropriate. You can begin to contemplate for yourself, and I recommend attending the ontology workshop here in the spring if you can. The books I have out that relate to this domain of work are "Reflections of Being" (a series of essays written a long time ago and never meant to be an explanation or complete information in any way, but may give you some direction); and "Ancient Wisdom, New Spirit" -- transcriptions from actual workshops and groups doing this work, but once again it isn't instruction, nor complete. I am currently working on a book that will be complete in this way. Other than that, try questioning yourself and contemplating on what is true within your experience. There may also be some direction available through reading through the old IDA (original newsletter) available in Archives on the website.

Good luck and hope I've been of assistance. Maybe I will meet you one day.
Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Benjamin John Weeks  
Colorado, USA

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Greetings Sensei Ralston,

Your book, *The Principles of Effortless Power*, has had a big influence in my life. The concept of interaction has really changed my perception of my responsibilities in conflict. It is a major influence in my moving away from martial arts that trick and DO something to an opponent. I feel like I have a lot to unlearn particularly in the aggressive and combative way I view the world.

I read in your book that the weight of the body presses against the earth closer to the heel than the ball of the foot and it made sense to me. I have enjoyed the feel of gravity on my body and pressing into the earth on many walks, hikes, and climbs here in Colorado.

I am attending Aikido classes with a Sensei who has MUCH more talent than me, that I feel may be one of the great teachers in my life. He of course sees that I am pressing with my heels. He teaches that you press with the ball of the foot. I am reluctant to embrace this, as pressing with my heel seems to remind me of some basics. I was hoping you might share a few words with me about this.

Thank you for everything,
Benjamin John Weeks

Benjamin,

Principles are not found in methods, but a method can be aligned to certain principles. If that method doesn't follow the principle it was developed to express, then even such methods will not serve to develop these principles within the practitioner. In other words, the "form" -- routine, technique, shape, practice, etc. -- has little to do with the principles of a practice unless these principles are expressed consciously in the form. For example, if you practice particular movements to become more relaxed and yet you do not relax, the movements aren't going to do it for you. If you train to be whole in your techniques, you will likely become whole, but the technique won't do that for you. Principles are what govern your routines, it shouldn't be the other way around.

When it comes to traditions, unfortunately much of what we practice is done simply because it is tradition. We don't know why we do it that way, except the teacher said to do it that way. Certainly we can't question why to do everything the teacher teaches at first, since our understanding is small and we don't have enough content upon which to base a question. But as the art unfolds, whatever isn't understood should be cleared up, and whatever doesn't follow the principles you want to develop should be challenged. Why do it this way and not that? This is a question that can be asked of every martial art, and they will all have a pat answer, but the answer is often simply a recitation of a rationale that is flawed. Frequently, once we understand the strengths and weakness of something, we can do it either way.

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I don't know why Aikido does the ball of the foot thing. Find out. It is likely just a holdover from sword play, something that served in that context, but isn't needed for tossing people around. When you want to lift a heavy weight, you will do it most successfully on the whole foot focused primarily on the heel, not the ball. So when handling another's body weight this seems best. On the other hand, you don't want to twist the knee; for this concern one needs to turn attention onto the hips. If you are going to spin on the foot while doing some action, then use only one point, ball of heel. But to twist the foot while it's carrying weight is not a good idea, turn the hip joint only.

Once when I was young practicing judo, I kept telling a brown belt marine who was a fellow student, not to step in the way he was, since he would plant his foot sideways and after he loaded his partner he would then twist the foot under him to do his throw. He was strong and so could get away with it for the most part. But one day he did this with a much larger man, and as he twisted his body to do the throw his foot wouldn't move since there was too much weight pinning it to the mat. He snapped his knee and was crying as we pulled him off the mat, He could never do judo again.

Work out what is what. How does the body actually work? And train consistent with that. If you find out why Aikidoists use the ball of their lead foot, let me know.

Thanks.

Peter

~~~~~  
Lamar Bensinger  
Columbus, Ohio

~~~~~  
Hello Peter,

I hope this email finds you in good spirits. I was wondering if you could comment on this mind-punch thing? Fred sent this email to me:

Lamar,

I was being a bit facetious. I will look into this Darren Brown guy. Guys like him and David Blaine use things we all are capable of but exclude from our consciousness.

Is Darren's mind punch a "trick" or did he enter this guy's mind?

I did a workshop with this Torsten guy who hit everyone in the gut 2x with his muscles and the third by "opening up" your muscles with his mind. TRULY IMPRESSIVE! It goes right into you and you feel it for hours later. His hand was basically touching this guy and disappeared 3 inches into his gut. I saw this from the side. I asked Torsten if he could hit from any angle, any direction like that and he said "Yes." That has implications for head shots. He said he knocked out Dan Insanto's #1 student who is my size but bigger sparring with him with a head shot. (He also said I was "softer" than this guy. I guess I've learned something in Ralstonia . . .)

Kevin and another apprentice Andrew were discussing how Peter "holds back the part of the punch that "hurts." Is this the part? Using the mind or is it just mechanics with Peter. I suspect Peter has a lot of mind stuff involved. Kevin is even doing the Christmas Tree meditation for the Chakras that Peter does but glosses over. (I usually sleep through it out of physical fatigue.) There's a lot going on!

Fred

I know the mind plays a powerful psychological role. Weightlifters who concentrate on their muscles are able to lift heavier weights. However, my curiosity is if the mind can have a martial effect beyond the mere psychological?

I know you've said that you are very open and don't hold anything back (in teaching). Since I've never heard you talk about this, I just assumed there was no such thing.

I know when William Chen was asked about ch'i that he would say there is no such thing.

Thanks for your help.

Lamar

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Lamar,

Interesting chatter. I've been in the biz for a long time, and I wouldn't get caught up in the claims and fantasies that people try to sell. I've always said if I wanted to make the big bucks I would play on people's fantasies, but my heart just won't let me. In any case, the whole matter of mind can't be underestimated, but it is a long and hard road, not an esoteric power one can "learn" like a secret. People have a hard time understanding that kind of thing, and so turn it into fantasy. That's why I steer clear for the most part. It is something that needs commitment and time and usually a slow understanding.

I do talk about laying the groundwork for such stuff in my new book: Zen Body-Being. It is well written and should be coming out in August. Check it out.

Peter

~~~~~  
Peter Smith  
On the road

~~~~~  
Dear Peter:

I am a fan of yours, and of internal arts in general, and I have a question/scenario.

I travel a great deal for my business and often am forced to practice forms and postures in parks and other public or semi public places. Now and then I am hassled and have to deal with it. This morning I had an encounter with three men and their large dogs in a park. As much as I would rather apply soft energy and use the great feeling from the forms of T'ai Chi and Bagua and Aikido and etc, when confronted by the filth of humanity and their rudeness, the brutality and the fear and the rush of time, I find that I resort to my old Shao Lin based style to defend myself. This is pretty much natural, as I cannot force the issue in such circumstances -- I just have to handle myself -- I am always alone and they never want a fair fight. There is never a formal challenge and a square off.

Now, this morning worked out OK. But as much as I would love to use the stuff like you do on the videos and the teachers do in the studio -- the Aikido beauty moves and the flowing touch that leads to a throw, and so on, I used a front kick (twice) and a grapple and push that was very un-Tai Chi. There was no time to get into the Tai Chi mood, or it just did not happen-I do not fight as a pro and have to just deal with things like this quickly to save my ass. I cannot understand how to turn on the Tai Chi, Bagua, Aikido if the opponent is jerky, rude, large, bulky and does not conform to the standards of martial arts halls. I mean they are usually just mean, tough, rude slobs who watch UFC and Pride and want to grapple and crush with their weight or hurl a haymaker and knock me out.

It is really quite terrifying and although I can control fear to some extent and engage opponents as an amateur, I still seek the beauty of the T'ai Chi, Bagua and Aikido, you know what I mean--I mean, I know the moves and do the forms and have the will to do it, but my Shao Lin style background seems to come out and take over. What happens is primitive heave ho as I feel that I have to get myself out of trouble quick. I have been through this a few times in the last year, outside every time. I just can't wait for the dude to come in and "play". They move and I react and always fall back on the kick or hook punch, once I used an open hand upwards to the face of a guy and hit his chin -- that was nice and VERY effective but not T'ai Chi - not like you can do, or even I can do in a set up situation -- sparring or pushing hands with other like-minded individuals.

Today when the first dog attacked, I asked the man to control his dog and he refused. When the dog came at me growling I threw a large rock at him and thudded into him -- that stopped him and the other ones too when he cried out, but I don't think I killed him -- just hurt him bad. The other dogs stayed with their humans. I had the rock in my hand already before the attack and showed it to the man, he was laughing at me with the other two guys. Then the people came to support their unleashed dogs in the fight -- of course there is a leash law in the park but no cops there to enforce it. These guys carry these fiberglass sticks that they use to scoop shit and throw balls for the dogs and they had the sticks raised against me and they were cursing and fuming mad. One guy stayed back with his dog. The two tough

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guys confronted me violently, the bigger one coming first -- as luck would have it, it was his dog that I caused to squeal.

I was able to defeat the primary attacker and scare him. He outweighed me massively and is probably used to being the bully. He could not move well after I took out his left hip and gutted him with the 2 kicks I mentioned--I must admit that I missed one at the beginning as he pulled back a bit -- that scared me but then he came at me for true and my kicks went into his clothes--I could not feel the impact but saw him wince and huff and puff with a scared look in his eyes. The other guy came up and threatened me but did not actually attack. When the big guy made a move for the rock on the ground, I knew I had to get it. I pushed him and our eyes met and he froze a second. I grabbed the rock and threatened him with it like a cave man. Then, as I backed off and the men backed off, I pitched the rock away and waited. But there was a lot of tension still and I felt ready-I tell you Peter, I wanted to use Tai Chi at that point and felt like if they came again I might be able to "meet them" and play around with them--but I wasn't sure. I mean if they are violent and crazed with anger, how the hell can you be calm and just Aiki the opponent??

Luckily, the other guys did not want to "play" anymore as you say in your book and just threatened me and the one said he would go get his gun and kill me and so on. I called the police for that and won't go into more detail. The cops are taking care of it.

How can I turn on the T'ai Chi?

Thanks

Peter Smith

Peter,

You speak of such encounters as frequent. Even if they are not so frequent but recurring, I'd say you need to look at what you are doing and how you are doing it. Why do you get into such fights to begin with? I suspect, since I've had others with similar problems, that your "presentation" gets you in trouble. Most people are rarely if ever attacked, and a few get into fights all the time. There is usually a reason for this that lies with the person who keeps getting into fights. Certainly, someone can be attacked independent of anything they present or do, but repeatedly? Not likely.

One man I worked with, came to me and asked me to teach him how to defend himself because he kept being attacked. I asked him to describe exactly what happened and how it happened. When he was done, my response was, "Of course they attacked you, you're an asshole! We need to work on your mind not your self defense skills." I'm not saying this is true for you, I don't know anything about you except what you wrote and said. But it is an area to look into. Also, you might want to take a look at the places you go. Perhaps there are better places to practice. Overall, my first concern is why you keep getting into such things. If it's possible to change things within your control and put a stop to these situations, then that is where I'd look first.

About your concerns regarding doing "t'ai chi" or "aikido" rather than brute fighting: you have the wrong idea about it, as do most people. There is no "technique" that makes something an internal martial art or not. (But instead of talking about internal martial arts in general, let me speak of Cheng Hsin, since that is what I do, and the two are not always the same.) The techniques you use aren't the important thing, it is how you do them, what you are actually doing. When engaged in a physical fight you need to do what is appropriate to the situation.

In your circumstance this could start with what you say and how you say it. Whether you are physically involved or not, your intent, what's in your heart, how you use your mind, and how you take action and relate, are all essential in doing Cheng Hsin. It isn't about the "form." It is about what you are actually doing.

For example, you could "yield" in the very beginning before confrontation takes place; or you could "join" the others in speech in some way and perhaps "neutralize" the situation. You could be "calm" and move to prevent them from putting you in a "disadvantageous position." You could stay "relaxed" and if

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attacking use your whole body. You could keep them "off balance," watch for their "intent" to move and move before, take away their power by changing positions, and so on. You can see that what I'm saying requires a great deal of mind training. How you use your mind is most important, since it will determine how you perceive, how you interact, and how you use your body. These things require training, however, they don't spring up -- especially in a confrontational situation -- just because you've heard about them or practice some moves and have an idea of them. You need to train them, and not just in the fighting mode, but in many of life's encounters.

Of course I'd say study with me for a while, there is much to learn about all this. But if you can't, check out what I'm pointing to, and look into your mind and your relationship to others.

And good luck,
Peter Ralston

~~~~~  
Bence Komaromi  
Budapest, Hungary  
~~~~~

Hi Mr. Ralston!

I am currently in the middle of "The Sword of No-Sword" and something came up which I would like to ask you about. From my studies in the martial arts, it seems that masters who have obtained the highest levels of skill and understanding of the "principles of effective interaction" in their arts have a history of successful combative (not necessarily life and death but often that type too) experience from the time before they understood these principles. Before they became effortless, it seems they used quite a bit of effort to achieve their successes. It seems like success in "the way of effort" progressively gave way to success in "the way of less and finally no effort".

You mention in "Principles" that something that began bothering you early on was that you felt you overcame opponents due to your physical abilities rather than a true understanding of underlying principles. My father has also often mentioned how with age he has gradually become far more "economical" or "efficient" in many things he does than he was in his youth.

From what I've gathered from your and others' "dregs" so far, however, is success through effort is ultimately unimportant and since it is vastly different from success without effort, it is of no real use in itself, but may actually act as an impediment by ingraining the "wrong way of doing things." "Just practice, try to realize certain principles better and better and wait patiently for success to come along." The principles and a body-sense are supposed to act as the compass you constantly follow. So the question that came to mind was: could success (no matter how) also act as that compass which one always follows through training, but which finally becomes effortless when, while going through all the different ways one can achieve success, one practically stumbles on an effortless one? Or put another way: can effortless success really be attained without first experiencing success with effort?

Thanks for any thoughts on this.
Bence

Bence,

Producing results is one thing and transformation is another. The process of transforming the "process" of obtaining a result usually requires much attention and repetition and experimentation -- effort. Once the process has changed, the result may come about effortlessly.

Following success as a compass does not lead to effortless effectiveness. It could lead you into a dead end, for example: success until you hit a plateau, or success but only with effort or deceit or some such. So no, this is not a viable path.

Can effortless be obtained without experimenting with effort? Perhaps, but not likely, since the "process"

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everyone has to begin with is always founded on effort, so it is your starting point, so to speak. But try it and find out.

Peter

~~~~~  
Michael Thomas  
Kimberley, England  
~~~~~

Hi Peter,

I'm wondering how intrinsic strength applies in a groundwork context. Is it still possible to apply principles such as grounding when you're off your feet? My experience of ground fighting is that it utilizes a great deal of muscular effort, but I can't yet see how it could be otherwise. What are the options for applying intrinsic strength?

Thanks,
Mike

Mike,

It is harder to use intrinsic strength when grappling on the ground. It isn't harder to use grounding though, since you can't get much more grounded than lying down!

First you need to learn the use of intrinsic strength before trying to use it in a more difficult situation. Using intrinsic strength requires movement, alignment, and compression. While grappling, movement is reduced because of the nature of the art, but there is still movement. The more you can use the ground for compression the better. In grappling, positioning is very important since you have so little mobility, also leverage is essential. And yes, more strength is generally needed because of the situation, but still less strength than you might think, and much can be done in the area of yielding, maintaining the advantage, efficient use of weight and positioning, etc. All of the principles still apply, they simply must be translated into lying on the ground.

Good luck,
Peter