

It is Better to Receive than Give - ©Dr. Peter Uhlmann

Even as children we all learned that it is better to give than to receive. That is an excellent philosophy for making close relationships and living in the social world. However, in taiji I believe it is more important to receive than to give. What I mean by this is before one can develop internal issuing power, one must first develop the ability to receive and accept another person's incoming energy. It is not easy to be receptive and open to a partner's force. We have learned through our lives to develop tension and resistance. Most hard style martial arts teach students to utilize blocks when attacked rather than absorbing the blows. My taiji master, Wang Hui-Juin (Henry Wang), is able to remain rooted while several students attempt to move him from his place. He is also able to 'bounce' their incoming energy and throw them back in various directions of his choosing. Watching him play with a student reminds me of someone playing with a paddle where a rubber ball is attached by an elastic band. To develop these skills he first trained his body to listen and receive. Only when he mastered absorbing was he able to emit energy.

Why do serious students study taiji? Most will insist that regular practice is good preventive medicine. Some will actually experience healing from various diseases. Many want to experience 'qi' energy. Finally, a few want to develop martial abilities using internal force.

The taiji classics and recent literature all talk about the health benefits of taiji. There are volumes written about the development and utilization of 'qi'. Specific descriptions mention the use of listening energy, movement from the center, and utilizing internal spirals. Various taiji schools and styles claim their approach is superior to others. They defend their teachings with differing theories, interpretations, or descent from a famous master. There is a joke that asks; 'How many taiji players does it take to change a light bulb?' The answer; 'One hundred. One to change the bulb, and ninety-nine to say how their teacher does it differently!'

Master Wang is very practical. He feels that taiji is performed correctly when it works. He uses a simple test to determine what works. He asks if a player can assume a taiji posture and withstand pressure from two partners pushing against him/her. If the stance is correct the player will remain relaxed and rooted. If the stance is incorrect the player will feel tension and limb pain, and lose their root. It is important that the player does not respond to incoming force by using physical force, resistance, or pushing back. That is not in keeping with taiji principles of softness.

The 'secret' is to receive incoming energy and open up the body's internal channels. If a partner pushes against a player's hand, then the mind's focus must be away from the hand and the incoming force transferred in a spiral fashion through the player's centre to the feet and the ground. The experience should feel similar to water flowing through a pipe with no areas of obstruction. There must be a feeling of connection. If there is no connection, the partner will feel they are pushing against the player's hand, shoulder, waist, etc. A sensitive partner can provide constructive feedback and tell the player where

the connection feels broken. If there is proper connection the partner will feel they are pushing against the ground rather than pushing against the player's hand.

Initially it is impossible to connect. It requires many hours of practice. It also means that one's form must also be correct. It should be possible to interrupt a player's solo form at any position and test for connection to the ground and rooting. There is no point in practicing the form without this concept, since the movements will be empty and devoid of qi. To connect means to listen to the incoming energy, relax the body in order to absorb and receive, then spiral the force from the point of contact, through the center (trunk, spine, dan tien) and into the lower extremities and the ground. The body position must be circular and in proportion. By proportion Master Wang means the right hand is in proportion with the left foot, the right elbow with the left knee, and the right shoulder with the left hip, and vice versa. The body must move in a relaxed coordinated fashion, and everything is controlled by the mind. The body must be centered and not leaning. The weight must be distributed either 100% on one leg or 50% on each rather than the traditionally taught 70% and 30%.

In our classes with Master Wang we spend hours practicing to receive a push without resistance. Only after this skill is mastered and becomes almost a reflex, do we attempt to return the energy by reversing the process and searching for the partner's center. Then we follow the harmonious balance of yin and yang by receiving and giving.

(Published in Qi : The Journal of Traditional Eastern Health & Fitness, Autumn 1998)