

The Art of Search Centre

Many contradictory philosophies seem to be associated with tai chi styles taught in the West. Hard push hand techniques, requiring a high level of skill and strength, versus the ability to be sensitive enough to softly control the movements of the opponent with merely a touch, is one example. This ability to perfectly *match* and control the movement of a partners centre is called *Search Centre* by Henry Wang, (Wang Hui-juin). This art of Search Centre seems to embody much of what is associated with the true nature of tai chi as described in the Classics.

While taking a one year sabbatical to Taiwan from his practice in Powell River, Dr. Peter Uhlmann was introduced to Shirfu Hui-Jiun Wang in Taipei. Shirfu Wang, a young man in his thirties with a reputation for being one of the best instructors in Taipei, began his Tai Chi quest after leaving the Army at twenty two. He wanted to find a balance for the hard techniques he had learned while instructing *Tae kwon Do* in the Taiwanese Military. His dedication to tai chi eventually lead to Push Hands Competitions where his *hard* Kung Fu skills became useful in helping him win National and eventually International awards. During one of the competitions he met Grand Master Huang Sheng-Shyan from Malaysia who demonstrated the incredible *soft* power of chi leaving the young champion powerless to defend himself. Convinced he was on the wrong path, Wang made a decision to pursue Huang as his Shirfu. On Huang's subsequent visits to Taiwan, Wang became a devoted follower eventually earning the respect of Grand Master Huang and the honour of being acknowledged by him as one his primary disciples.

At the conclusion of Uhlmann's sabbatical, Peter's wife, Ronny, respectfully asked Shirfu Wang if he would be interested in coming to Canada to teach Tai Chi. Shirfu Wang agreed as he was interested in breaking away from the traditional Chinese Tai Chi culture in Taiwan to explore the contradictory issue of *hard* versus *soft* gleaned from Grand Master Huang of Malaysia.

In August 1986 Wang arrived in Vancouver and discovered that Powell River was an isolated village accessed by two ferries and 70 miles of winding road North of Vancouver. The isolation and opportunity to teach beginners and practice without distraction appealed to Wang, who devoted the next ten years of his life learning to master the incredible skills of his Shirfu Huang.

To increase his income from Tai Chi, Shirfu Wang found it necessary to move across the Strait to the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island where he could draw on a larger base of interested students. My introduction to Shirfu Wang happened soon after his move in 1987. A severe back injury left me unable to run distances to relieve stress and to remain fit. Thirty years of playing and then coaching both high school rugby and mens' rugby had taken a toll on my body. Shirfu Wangs tai

chi classes became a welcome substitute to the joint jarring running and the grinding contact in rugby. After learning the basic form I became excited with my success in Push Hands competitions where I unconsciously continued to apply my aggressive rugby training. Initially, I looked forward to improving my techniques and skills by learning from the more experienced push hands competitors .

Fortunately this was not to be the direction that my study took me for the next sixteen years. Replacing the hardness of my rugby training with the true softness of properly taught Tai Chi has been a challenge for both myself and my Shirfu. The change has dramatically altered my life both mentally and physically. The aggression I once projected towards my competitors has given away to sharing friendships and knowledge. This new direction has brought me into contact with others who are learning to share and appreciate a different state of awareness with a more global context.

The dedicated core of students that remain from these early classes, meet two to three times a week throughout the year to continue to study with Shirfu Wang. Others, who have met this unusual Shirfu, travel regularly to Comox for private lessons or wait for the annual week long workshop on Mount Washington to refresh their skills. Through this devotion some of his students are beginning to understand the enormity of what Shirfu Wang has to offer.

Teaching students to give up their natural instinct to meet hardness with hardness requires a Shirfu with strong principles and beliefs. To achieve his goal, Shirfu Wang replaced the more aggressive *Push Hands* competition with the non competitive *Search Centre*. Wang realized that by continuing to take his students to competitions with other groups, he was only encouraging his students to return to physical *jousting* where the hardest and fastest with the most effective technique usually won. Wang regularly advised his students that physical pushing had to be replaced with the power of the mind or chi. Students were expected to invest in the practice of yielding and loss, until they could appreciate the subtlety of the *soft* push from chi and the practice of *sticking* to their partners centre. To those students who continued to seek the thrill of competitive Push Hands, Wang demanded that they give up their physical pushing and only focus on the feelings generated by sensing the chi energy while doing Search Centre. Eventually, through lots of sensitive feedback and sharing, the core of students who remained began to understand the nature of chi and the sensitivity which comes from discovering softness.

The process of practicing Tai Chi, on one's own, can be slow and tedious without any guarantees of success. Encouragement and feedback from friends makes the daily challenge of learning easier and more meaningful. Moments of awareness can be shared thus contributing to the level of excitement that inspires the group to continue their dedicated practice from one year to the next. These special moments often come during the reflective hours following time spent practicing Search Centre with friends.

The week long Summer Camp on Mount Washington intensifies the opportunity to share experiences with others who may have different backgrounds and levels of experience. During the Summer of 2004, the word *matching* emerged, to become the perfect word to describe what happens when one *sticks* to their partner. Shirfu Wang uses the words *catch*, *yield*, *stick*, and *follow* to describe the process of Search Centre. The word *matching* covers all of these phases plus the degree of the *root* felt by the partner. To *catch* you must be able to *match* the incoming energy with just the right amount of force. An example often used by Shirfu is that of a volleyball approaching at full speed towards the setter who must reach out and receive the ball without losing control. Too much force and the ball bounces off the fingers, while too little pressure causes you to disconnect losing control as well. Once the ball meets the fingers the objective is to *yield* while being firmly in control, so the ball can be redirected with precision.

The *sticking* follows the *catch* as the Search Centre partner begins to retreat. Being sensitive enough to feel the connection of two centres while the partner retreats allows one to *follow* without being detected. The *sticking* means you are *matched* and able to respond to any change in the amount of root, the slightest change in the direction of movement, or the partners next intention. *Sticking* or *matching* means you feel the contact with your partner's centre as if they were in the same globe of chi. Losing contact with your partners centre means giving up any control of the connection. The loss of connection by your partner becomes immediately apparent because their movement does not match the movement of your *dan tien* or centre. Without the instant awareness of the position and movement of both centres you will be unprepared for the next action or intention. The *dan tien* is the handle of the bull whip. By controlling your partners handle, you can neutralize their whip.

Matching enables two tai chi players to approach each other and to sense each others degree of root and level of awareness. Information from the *matching* enables you to gauge the amount of chi, and the position from which the chi is being directed. Sensitive *matching* allows you to know whether the partners chi ball extends to the ground or is only being projected from one shoulder or both shoulders. You are able to know whether your partners push is from the *dan tien* or is from the bottom of his feet, whether their globe is rooted and uniform or broken and disconnected. Their vulnerability, or lack of it, is immediately apparent if you are *matching* properly.

To reach a high level of *matching* ability requires hours of *catching*, *yielding*, *sticking* and *following* your partners attempts to yield and search while being as rooted as your partner. Any time spent *matching* with beginners or a more advanced player will give you the further practice needed to develop the sensitivity required to reach a higher level of Search Centre. Giving the beginners feed-back about their *chi globe* helps them in the learning process and enables them to discover the *trail* between the postures of the form.

The development of sensitivity required for Search Centre is dependent on careful attention to the details and principles of a *softer form* as taught by Shirfu Wang. One's ability to remain rooted while aware of the *trail* found between the postures of the form leads to a greater understanding of one's own centre and root. Careful attention to the shape of your chi globe, within the movement, eventually increases your ability to *match* your partners centre and to feel the shape of their *chi globe*. Employment of Shirfu's seven principles, balance, relaxation, proportion, centre, circle, concentration, and coordination during all phases of the movement within the form becomes a basic requirement for your evolution towards the ability to *match* any person in your vicinity. Search Centre and form become inseparable.

Shirfu Wang's guidance and intervention have been critical at all stages of our development. Having put thirty years into his study, Shirfu is able to redirect us when we prematurely find ourselves thinking we fully understand the latest concept. His reminder that there are no limits or short cuts to the process of changing one's body and mind, is necessary. Too often new students arrive with the dream that they will be able to make the changes in a matter of months. We are reminded it took us five years to understand and ten years before we could feel what was happening in Search Centre. Sensitivity to matching still continues to improve with each of my 17 years of study. My increased awareness of the energy and skill levels amongst other martial artists has become a fascinating discovery. I am encouraged to continue my quest of building and directing my chi while relaxing more to bury my root deeper.

Newer players benefit from the feed-back of the advanced player who has the knowledge and sensitivity to be aware of what is happening to the beginners movements and their *chi globe*. Two novices will spend hours lost in disconnected movement unable to give each other any useful feed back. Frustration leads to loss of focus which results in harder pushes impeding development of sensitivity needed for *matching*. The lack of pressure and size of the *chi ball* or *globe* from a beginner can be particularly frustrating. *Qigong* exercises and properly taught form, over time, increases the chi level making it easier to appreciate the benefits of *Search Centre* practice.

Increased awareness of the *chi globe* allows you to eventually *present* your chi globe to your partner controlling both shape and size. Willingness to trust and to cooperate with your partner are necessary in all stages of this growth. Feed-back about the shape and strength of the chi push enables the partner to steadily grow the size and density of their *chi globe*. Two players, both able to *present* their chi globes become sensitive to each others movements and intentions. The bouncing or *fa jing* becomes easier as this tension and shape become more easily controlled or manipulated. This heightened awareness of both the shape and tension of the globe is achieved with years of dedicated practice of form and search centre. This

non combative game, or dance, invites the participants to provide each other with encouraging feed back, valuable to both the beginner and the advanced player.

The opportunity to meet friends on a regular basis to share with them the latest nuance of awareness is stimulating. The experience of feeling the steady improvement in ones health and increased sensitivity to chi make the effort of daily practice worthwhile. Friendships based on the spirit of sharing philosophy and knowledge become the foundation for the growth of each tai chi organization. Shirfu Wang continues to invite all Tai Chi Schools to adopt this philosophy of softness and cooperation which will support Tai chi as the art that primarily promotes health and well being. Striving for the sensitivity that enables one to *match* their partners every move and intention becomes a secondary goal. Shirfu Wang's notions of softness and sensitivity used in Search Centre versus hardness found in some techniques used for push hands, may encourage members of the Tai Chi community to re-examine the Classics which remind them Tai Chi is a soft martial art.