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## **Back to the Future: Wang Hui-Juin & Search Center**

In the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a wonderful song entitled, "Tradition". It describes the conflict of change versus traditional values. T'ai chi ch'uan (Taiji-quan) and indeed all martial arts, enjoy ancient traditions and historical significance. Tai chi players are often proud to recite their teacher's lineage, and many schools of thought and multiple styles have developed over the years. I like to think that tai chi is capable of change brought about by research and development. Einstein's theories of quantum physics are a major advance over the ideas of Newton, but do not nullify the important contributions of the latter.

If we watch the sport of high jumping, for example, we see that, many years ago, events were won by a scissors kick. Next we saw someone take the prize by jumping forwards over the bar. More recent winners are flipping over backwards. My point is that the great tai chi masters seemed to learn from traditional teaching, but then advanced the art in some way. A true master would hope that his disciples would improve on his skills. Unfortunately many teachers have not progressed, and are only able to copy and transmit that which was taught them.

In the classic tai chi literature, we see frequent references to the use of energy rather than physical strength ("yong qi, bu yong li"). "Four ounces can move a thousand pounds" is a corollary of this concept as well as "invest in loss". Ideally a tai chi player can utilize this Qi energy for health, healing, or combat. In practice, how many of us really use qi rather than force?

My own tai chi journey began in 1970, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I really had no idea what tai chi was, but read about a local master in the weekend newspaper. My wife and I decided to take lessons. This wonderful Chinese man taught us the 108 movement Yang style, and later a group of push hands exercises. Later we studied applications of the form, learning a structured set of movements to be used with a partner. We would have learned more, but our circumstances changed and we moved to an isolated coastal community, far from classes.

In 1982, we found ourselves in Taipei, Taiwan, where I was studying Mandarin. Looking for a tai chi instructor, we were formally introduced to Master Wang Hui-Juin (Henry Wang). He asked us to demonstrate our form. Afterwards he told us that we looked very pretty, but our form was "empty". Somewhat upset, we asked what he meant by "empty". He proceeded to demonstrate his form and we quickly understood. There was a sense of energy and power coming from him, that we had never witnessed before.

At that time Wang was in his early thirties, but was already considered one of the best tai chi masters in Taiwan. He had won several push hands competitions including best in Taiwan and several international events. He enjoyed accepting challenges from martial artists of different styles at the New Park in Taipei, and usually won. He had taught

martial arts in the army. He had studied with several teachers, and finally found Grandmaster Huang Sheng-Shyan from Malaysia. Huang seemed to possess the ability to use energy rather than force. Wang was disappointed in his own ability, knowing that he won many competitions because of superior strength and technical skill, rather than relying on softness. He realized that Huang could teach him "real" tai chi, and followed Huang everywhere he traveled in Taiwan.

Wang tried to help us improve our form, but we realized we would have to start from the beginning. After four months we had to leave Taiwan and our tai chi languished until we were able to arrange for Wang and his family to immigrate to Canada in 1986. He felt that the daily stress of survival and earning a living in Taiwan limited his ability to progress in tai chi. Since coming to Canada he spends all his time teaching and developing tai chi. He feels that is his purpose in life. He has several hundred students in Canada, as well as branch schools in United States. He has also taught in Europe.

His tai chi research has led him away from many traditional tai chi concepts. He teaches left and right sides of the Zheng Man-Ching (Cheng Man-Ching) 37 movement short form. He feels that it is important to learn both sides. He emphasizes learning the movements in infinite detail utilizing his "seven principles". They are: Concentration, Relaxation, Balance, Center, Circle, Proportion, and Coordination. These principles are interdependent, no principle is more important.

The center consists of the body's head, spine, dan tien, and feet as an axis. All movements originate from the center and extend in a centrifugal fashion. Movements of the extremities follow, and are controlled by the center. There must be no independent movements of the arms and hands. When a fish swims, its center moves first, then its head and tail.

Wang teaches a non-traditional weight distribution. Tai chi philosophy teaches yin/yang balance and harmony. Therefore Wang teaches that weight should be distributed either fifty/fifty or one hundred/zero. This is different from most schools which teach seventy/thirty weight distribution. When we stand, we do so with fifty/fifty balance. When we walk, we change from hundred/zero to hundred/zero. It is the same when we swim or ride a bike. Why in tai chi do players utilize seventy/thirty? Why not sixty/forty, or eighty/ twenty? Wang believes tai chi should follow natural laws.

Balance permits fluid movement from one position to the next. Balance is related to center. If one is leaning over, as often occurs in seventy/thirty, they may be balanced, but not centered. Balance also requires maintaining the body level and avoiding up and down movements when shifting postures.

Proportion helps keep the body in a circular or globe shape. It implies connection of left to right and upper to lower parts of the body. The left hand is proportional to the right foot, the left elbow with the right knee, and the left shoulder with the right hip.

Coordination is connected with proportion and implies moving in proper time. It should make one's form "seamless" and flow from one movement to the next without a break. The center must move first and the extremities follow. The movements should appear to extend into infinity.

Circle is basic in tai chi. Our bodies consist of nine separate joints which must be relaxed and connected in spiral fashion. This will allow a free conduit for energy flow. All movements are circular and "unending" and straight lines are absent. The dan tien is the center of the circle from which all movement travels distally.

Concentration keeps the mind on task. Focus must be internal and all movements originate from intention. The tai chi player must be aware of all internal and external messages. Relaxation is not the same as being loose or flaccid. One must concentrate on being relaxed, and attention paid to areas of the body that exhibit pain or tension. The tai chi literature talks of bamboo bending in the wind, while a stiff tree is uprooted. Another example compares a stiff rod to a whip.

Using these principles Wang teaches his students to turn their centers before shifting their weight. This is opposite to most traditional ideas. By turning first and then shifting, there is improved rooting and stability. Because his concepts of the form are so radically different, his students have fared poorly in form competitions, where different standards apply. He feels all martial arts should use his seven principles, not just the art of t'ai chi ch'uan.

Since following Wang's precepts, my "empty" feeling has changed dramatically. My body feels very different after performing my tai chi sets every morning. I notice increased somatic warmth, and a sense of tingling in my hands. My palms are often moist and display a mottled appearance under the skin. Wang can also detect changes in my tendons and bones which he attributes to increased qi flow. My general sense of emotional and physical well being has improved.

But I feel Wang's greatest contribution to tai chi is rediscovering how to use qi in martial applications. He has created his own version of push hands, which he calls "search center". The "push" in push hands implies physical force, while "search" implies soft skills. I have yet to enter or witness a push hands tournament where the true principle of soft overcoming hard are presented. More likely opponents will be wearing protective head gear and using tactics and techniques to vanquish the "enemy". I have even seen rules which penalize too much neutralization of incoming force. Initially, "search center" and "pushing hands" may appear similar to an observer. Players face each other with one foot forward and employ either one or two hands in soft contact with a partner. (Notice the term "partner" vs "opponent") Players then move in a circular pattern, spiraling from their bodies' centers. Hands and arms serve as antennae to search for the partner's center which is detected by subtle areas of tension or resistance in the partners body. Each player tries to avoid having their center discovered by anticipating the incoming energy and softening and relaxing around it. The seven principles apply in all search center movements and weight distribution is critical. When moving back all weight is on the

rear leg. When in the forward position the weight is distributed fifty per cent on each leg. The body must be centered and leaning is avoided.

There should be comfortable energy between the players during "search center". This should be a mutual learning experience, where players teach each other, rather than a stressful competition. The object is to increase skill level rather than defeat an opponent. Players may actually assist their partner in searching for their center to improve their ability to search. When someone is using the seven principles it can be difficult to find their center.

In Taiwan, Wang learned to "build" his center by constant practice with other players, most of whom were quite hard. He had to learn to gracefully lose and avoid reacting with resistance. He said that his body began to turn like a the large ball, and eventually he could avoid force from any angle and of any strength. Finally he described his body losing "shape" and almost "sucking" his partner into Wang's center.

After years of learning to yield, Wang began to search for his partner's center. As a metaphor he describes carefully feeling the edge of a knife blade to determine sharpness, rather than grabbing it and getting cut. He would use his mind and mental attention to receive and interpret messages coming from his partner's body. He would try to absorb and neutralize their energy and reflect this energy back to their center. At this point in his training only his mind was used to search. He refused to physically push or use muscular force.

After searching and sensing his partner's center, Wang would "cover" it with his chi. This is not easy to describe. I mentioned above how proper positioning of a tai chi posture can produce a sense of extending the movement's energy forever. In search center Wang is utilizing his mind and correct body position to send out his internal energy. Having experienced Wang's covering, I would compare it to a mouse that is trapped by a cat before the cat pounces. My center felt "locked" and there appeared to be no escape even though no physical contact was applied, only a feeling of surrounding energy. Covering ability must be practiced many years before it becomes automatic. The mind must focus to the center's smallest point like a magnifying glass using the sun to start a fire.

Finally Wang learned to extend his energy through his partner's center and direct it any where he desired. He could also use his mind to alter the strength and frequency of his expressed energy. For example, he might send his partner a long or short distance, up or down, left or right. Because there is no use of muscular force, all the partner will feel is his body being moved much like a wave of water can move a person in the surf, or the wind push a person. There is no experience of pain on impact or feeling of hard physical force. In fact being searched is quite pleasant. Often I feel as if I am accumulating some of Wang's chi energy in my body.

"Search center" takes a long time to learn, and is not easy. Patience really can be a virtue. Wang makes it look so the simple, but most students find it quite frustrating, yet enticing and challenging. In class Wang will place a chair in middle of the room. Then he will ask

a student to go to the chair and lift it. The student will know instinctively where to place his/her hands on the like a chair, and how much effort to use in lifting it. Wang then smiles and says, "That is 'search center'!" Of course in this example the chair is inanimate and has a no intrinsic energy to sense or reflect. Wang can rapidly intuit his partner's center, but only after years of practice.

Before I met Wang he learned pushing hands in the traditional approach and relied on techniques and muscular strength. Since he created search center, I have observed him becoming softer and relying on his internal energy, rather than physical actions. When he sends a partner across a room there is almost no visible movement of Wang's arms. This is verified in slow motion videos. The films even show a sense of energy connection between Wang and his partner. It seems he can respond to his partner's movements before they are actually initiated. Most recently, Wang and his students have been experimenting with sending and receiving energy without actually making physical contact. This is perhaps similar to what other masters have called the "empty fist". The possibilities are infinite. Though many doubt the reality of emitting chi energy, it is also hard to believe we are surrounded by energy such as radio waves, etc. which can only be received or transmitted by proper equipment.

Can one practice "search center" at a traditional "pushing hands" tournament? Wang claims that is like playing golf with a ping pong ball. The two concepts are like apples and oranges and therefore different rules must apply. Wang and his school are now trying to organize "search center" competitions. The rules are still being developed and may be modified if necessary.

Presently there would be two partners in competition, one offense and the other defense. After three minutes, they would switch roles. Each match would total six minutes. The person on offense would be allowed only five seconds to complete his search after initiating it. Offense must search at least every ten seconds or after completion of three circles with their partner.

It is not permitted to "run out the clock" by circling indefinitely. Points are awarded to both offense and defense. Yielding and neutralizing a search, earns a point for defense. Resisting a search with force will earn points for offense. Pushing by offense will earn points for defense. Obviously the pushing and resisting are penalized, while sensitivity and relaxation are rewarded. All competitors would have a chance to experience each other, and not quickly eliminated. Wang hopes that "search center" competitions will encourage the art of tai chi and stimulate a return to the principles of softness, and internal energy.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the tai chi form as taught by Wang and search center are totally integrated. To accomplish search center skills requires proper form based on the seven principles. Increasing search center skills will also improve one's form ability. No longer do we need to learn the form for health and relaxation while learning separate push hands skills for martial arts. By deviating from traditional teaching, Wang has returned to traditional tai chi philosophy.

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