CLIMBING AND KUNG-FU - A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

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I began training kung-fu with Gregory Fong at the age of 23, eight years ago. I came to the training with no martial arts background, and I was drawn to class because I was experiencing severe tendonitis in my elbows from overuse in climbing. I had seen many doctors, had spoken with a number of climbers, and nothing these folks offered me as tools for recovery were working.

The type of training that was presented to me by Gregory Fong, on the other hand, struck me from the very beginning as an entirely different tool for repairing my injury. Almost immediately I began to experience results, and three years later my elbows were stronger than they had ever been in my life. Moreover, the results, both physically and mentally, that I received from the training carried over into my entire body. In the pages that follow I will try to explain some of the guiding principles and tools that are essential to our kung-fu training.

As an aid to both my understanding and that of the readers, I will describe the training as often as I can through reference to two physical activities that I am very familiar with and that I find easier to write about than the kung-fu training in isolation. These activities are climbing and surfing. My goal is to describe the essential pieces of the training in as concrete a way as possible; in this way what I write about will be clear enough so as to avoid possible misinterpretation.

I should also make it clear that while the kung-fu training serves as my daily practice, I spend many days a year climbing and surfing. I mention this to give the reader a bigger picture of my life and as an explanation for why I choose to describe certain aspects of the training in relationship to climbing and surfing.
I began climbing in New England right around my first year of collage at the age of 19, and since that time I continue to climb all over the world on a variety of terrain. I began surfing four years ago, and since that time have surfed somewhere in the area of 75 days a year.

I will begin my description where all activity begins in the training, and that is with the structure of the body. As a beginner, the primary focus is on proper structural alignment. Every object or body that stands upright, may it be a large building, a sandcastle, or the human body must be held up in such a way so that it will not fall down. Engineers spend years learning how to build buildings in such a way so that they will never fall down. This means that every piece, from the foundation to the steel beams to the consistency of the concrete, must be laid out absolutely perfect. Otherwise, over time the building will collapse.

While there are many aesthetic variations in the ways that buildings look, they all are built according to very strict and similar structural codes. Our bodies resemble buildings in many ways, and while aesthetically every body differs, all bodies are governed by the same structural laws of proper alignment. This means that if I drop my head when I

walk, or stick my butt way out when I stand, or lean to one side when I think I am standing straight, my structural alignment is off. Over time, small structural problems, again just like with tall buildings, will become large problems that can lead to serious health issues.

So, like good engineers, we spend most of our time as beginners correcting the structural mistakes that over time we have learned to accept as normal parts of our body. And I want to stress that everybody that is new to the training must begin at this stage. If this stage is skipped, no matter how good their technique becomes, they will never advance very far. This is so because if the body, or the building, is not set up right, eventually the law of gravity will take over and the structure will come crashing down or be in need of endless repair.

We build this alignment through a tool called standing meditation. In this activity, the teacher puts the student in a certain position. At first, the student is asked to place their feet at shoulder width with knees slightly bent. They then make sure their knees are over their toes, that their tailbone is pulled in, that their chest is relaxed, eyes open and head slightly up. The arms may be placed at the side or slightly in front with palms faced down as if pushing up to get out of a swimming pool. The student is asked to focus only on these requirements, and to direct the mind to keeping the body set up in this way.

Quite quickly, the student will find this seemingly simple activity very difficult both physically and mentally. Physically, this position forces the body to rely upon muscle groups that over time have been ignored. These muscles are weak, and so when they are asked to be of service they start to hurt. Mentally, the mind quickly wavers in its concentration, especially as time passes and the pain increases. Bringing the mind back to its focus on the requirements thus becomes a challenge in its own right.

If we look again at a building to understand this better, we can imagine that a building, after it has begun to sag from poor structural alignment, will put more weight on some parts while removing weight from others. When this is corrected, and the building is put upright again, those areas that have not been holding weight may have become weak. They will then “complain” when asked to be of service. The body is the same way. If, as was my experience, I have learned to compensate for my weakened tendons in my arms by relying on my biceps, my triceps, my chest and my shoulders, when I ask my tendons to go to work they complain. Moreover, mentally, my brain has been conditioned to send signals to these groups whenever I need my arms to go to work. Getting my brain to rewire these signals, and demand action on the part of my tendons and other little used groups, required vigilance and disciplined attention.

The standing meditation, in its most basic form, is a tool that is used to put the body upright correctly. Standing (as I will call it from now on), however, is that and much more. For example, when I began as a climber my first job was to strengthen my fingers and my forearms while gaining a sense of basic foot and hand coordination when moving on rock. This meant setting the structure of my body up correctly to match the requirements of the route. As a beginner, I could climb moderate routes relying on strong

arms and rudimentary coordination. As the routes got harder, strength and coordination, those fundamental elements of good climbing body structure, were not enough to get me to the top. I needed something more.

If I was to climb harder into more difficult realms, I needed to move beyond simply setting up the structural alignment of the body correctly. I needed to combine an increase in both the amount and efficiency of muscular activity with superior instinctive coordination. On harder routes, the climber must access a tremendous concentration of muscular power while at the same time making minor adjustments in coordination at all times. This means that entire muscular groups must be "discovered" in the body, groups that have yet to be used because they are specific to climbing. It also means that movements that are specific to carrying the body against the forces of gravity on very small rock features must be discovered and made natural and instinctive. As a result, the climber must train with a type of focus that can build this type of muscular awareness into the mind and body.

The same is true of standing. After we build correct structural alignment into the body, the really hard work is just beginning. Now it is time to "recruit" as many muscle groups as we can to build power into the body. In climbing we recruit those muscle groups specific to the act of climbing: these can be muscles in the hands and forearms, in the back and feet - muscles that we may never use for any other activity. Without these muscle groups at our disposal, we would never have the power to get up any hard climbing route. Our standing philosophy is similar: the more muscle we can recruit to go to work for us the more power we will have in our movement.

When standing, we put our muscles and tendons under pressure. We create resistance, and this makes our muscles and tendons go to work. How we create resistance in standing, however, is quite different than in climbing. In climbing, the rock provides the resistance. The rock demands specific movements and these movements demand activity from specific muscles. The more you make these specific movements - the more you climb - the stronger and more efficient you become. In standing, I need to create the resistance using my mind. For example, we are often asked to stand as if we were lifting up a heavy barrel. This means that we need to put the exact same resistance into the body, onto the arms, legs, back, neck etc., as if we were carrying a heavy barrel. This is a type of mental focus that exemplifies a big part of what standing is all about, and really sets it apart from other types of physical activity.

The mental focus of climbing is obviously very important, especially when the stakes are high. But it is different from that of standing. The act of removing the object of resistance, may it be the rock, water in surfing, or the weight in lifting, but still maintaining the exact same muscular activity as if the object were still there puts great pressure on the mind. The mind is forced to go to work in a way that under any other circumstance it never would. The mind is forced to maintain the "picture" of the barrel in the body, thus utilizing those muscles necessary to holding the barrel and relaxing those not essential. It would be like my body was activating and relaxing, expanding and

contracting, the exact same muscles and tendons that I would be using climbing a very difficult hand crack; except I am on the ground in my standing posture.

This type of mental activity is a piece of what we call *yi* in the Chinese. *Yi* is the mental activity required to put in resistance where there is none. As my *yi* grows stronger I am able to put more and more pictures and thus resistance into my movement. So now I pick up a barrel, and pick up fifty pounds with my feet, and lean against the wall, and pick up fifty pounds with my head, and so on. The more pictures, the more resistance, the stronger my *yi* must be.

The great teachers in this kung-fu tradition have been able to build a great number of pictures like these into their movement, and this is where they got their power. Through the tremendous amount of resistance they were able to create and maintain, they were able to develop and recruit dozens of muscular groups that the average person unfamiliar with standing had no control over. That is why they could easily destroy the average opponent. Those unfamiliar with standing could only make up great tall tales about these teachers to describe their ability; they had to say they threw their *qi*, or struck without hitting. The truth is that these teachers simply had learned how to harness much more from their body than their opponents. It was far from magic.

A strong *yi* brings both health and fighting ability into the body. For example, at the end of a strong day of climbing in which I really pushed my limits, my whole body and mind feel light, clear and powerful. This is because I have put a lot of resistance on both my body and my mind. My body was forced to go to work to get up the rock, and my mind was forced to keep my body moving up in the face of fear and anxiety. I like to say that good climbing fires up both my body and my mind, and this is why I feel so good when I am done. After a good kung-fu workout in which I maintained a high level of focus, I feel much like I do after climbing. My whole nervous system and body feel connected, clear and healthy.

Training every day really builds this feeling of health into the whole system of the body and builds up the *yi* focus. Training, however, is designed not to be limited to a couple of hours every day. The whole day provides countless opportunities for training: when sitting at my desk I can make sure to be sitting upright with the correct standing requirements built in, when I am walking I can put *yi* into my walking and put resistance into my legs, when in heated moments of conflict I can pay attention to my breathing and maintain focus on a desired outcome. Training in this way builds up energy in the body, strengthens the nervous and immune systems, strengthens the organs, and builds upon the minds' ability to focus and concentrate.

In conclusion, I would say that our primary guiding principle is that health depends upon both a strong body and a strong mind. To train just the mind in forms of meditation, or intellectual activity, or problem solving will not sustain health and well being over the long run. To train just the body by going to the gym, or by running, or by doing any type of martial art that lacks standing will not sustain health over the long run. Health depends upon both *yi and quan*, the interplay between the mind and the body.

Our tools are standing and kung-fu, which means simply hard work and repetition in simple movements. Through the right kind of hard work, the kind that forces the mind to be actively engaged in the movement, the body is able to convert much higher levels of oxygen into carbon dioxide than is average. This means that the body has access to a great deal of energy, energy that can be used to train harder, recruit more muscle groups, strengthen tendons and organs, and build a strong mind. The result of this equation is better health and well being.

Lastly, I want to dispel a misconception about kung-fu training. There really are no secret short cuts. I have yet to be thrown across the room by my opponent's chi. I do not connect my heaven energy with my earth energy. I try to work hard and smart by keeping it simple. In climbing, surfing, or any other form of activity, there really are no secret short cuts either. Sure, good climbers and good surfers make it look easy. They seem to be moving so naturally that you would swear they were just born with the skill. While this may be true in the rarest of cases, for the rest they have become good through sweat, discipline and smart training. Training kung-fu is not much different. You have to work hard and smart, and you have to be willing to start at the beginning. In climbing, you would be considered a fool to try K2 as your first big mountain. In surfing, you would probably die if you tried to surf jaws two years into your life as a surfer.

What is so interesting about kung-fu is that we tend to think that we can skip right to college after six months. We want to move beyond the basics and on to the "higher level" stuff. The truth is that in a good training we spend almost our whole lives working on the basics. But this does not mean that we stay in first grade for thirty years.

In climbing, the best climbers have become masters of the basics, and their movements, focus, and muscular structure reflect this mastery. They have honed the basics into millions of precise movements, and have built up their focus to deal with the elements like fear essential to climbing. They too do not spend their whole climbing career mastering the warm up at the local cliff. They push themselves into harder and harder situations, and thus over time improve. The attention to the basics of coordination, muscular/skeletal alignment, breathing and focus simply becomes more refined.

A solid kung-fu training, built upon the principles of standing meditation, provides the opportunity for this type of evolution of the body and the mind. It can open up almost infinite possibilities for health, fighting skill and athletic potential. The key that opens up this potential is the standing and all the exercises built upon the foundation that standing provides.