

Tai –Chi and I-Chuan A Beginner’s Perspective

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Introduction

My journey into tai chi and discovering I-chuan started in May of 2000 for health reasons. Years of stress, tension and poor posture manifested itself physiologically within my spine creating a bone spur on my 6th vertebrate. This condition first became apparent by the appearance of chronic muscle constriction and pain in my neck shoulder, arms and hand that continued for roughly 3 months. Modern medical solutions included physical therapy and muscle relaxants, both which reduced the pain but were unsuccessful in eliminating the condition. When the final solution offered was surgery I sought other alternatives. I chose acupuncture as a starting point. The Acupuncturist did relieve some of the pain associated with my condition but acknowledged he was treating only the symptoms of a skeletal and nerve problem that would only continue to reappear as it was aggravated by stress and other associated triggers. He suggested seeking a tai chi or qigong teacher that could help me create long term healthful solutions to my condition.

Dedicating many years to Tang Soo Do training as a teen I was open to seeking a more holistic self-healing solution but was rather skeptical about every qigong teacher and tai chi instructor I encountered. Most talked in mystic terms about “ the way or the journey “ and none of them seemed to model nor radiate the health I sought.

The first tai chi instruction I received was from a local tai chi society. This was a group of people that were very excited about the idea of tai chi but the most seasoned member of the group I had the opportunity to interface with had only practiced the art for 4 years. The group continually deferred knowledge to a head instructor that rarely taught class because of travel or other teaching commitments in Seattle. The class was normally lead by a varying group of students with different levels of experience.

We typically started class with 15 minutes cross-legged meditation. During this time we practiced various methods of what they called “ prana breathing “, which were rhythmic methods of breathing practiced to strengthen and purify the lungs. This was normally followed by stretching, warm up exercises and calisthenics. We would then practice balanced walking, maintaining our weight over our center with our heads flat, as if to balance a book on our heads while walking. The remainder of the class would be broken into smaller groups where these previous techniques would be encouraged to be used while learning the Yang form which looked very dissimilar to the one I watch in our Yang class. The students were eager about the exercise, but in my opinion knew little about what or why they were doing it and what made movement right or wrong. This

experience, though made of good intentions, after 2 months gave no relief to my condition and in fact, sometimes aggravated my neck pain, especially after the balanced walking exercise. In retrospect, the exercises the way I practiced them only further put stress and tension into my body rather than releasing it. In the case of the walking exercises the instruction to walk with a book balanced on your head only mis-aligned my head and neck, because it worked to the contrary of straightening the spine and neck. In my case, to find my flat spot I need to tilt my head back, creating curvature in my neck.

After this experience I was convinced that if there was to be merit to tai chi I had to find someone that was competent to teach the art. I continued searching resources and used the Internet in the area of health to seek other solutions. From these investigations I came upon a form of well recognized Qi Gong that was scientifically based and associated with a national society headed by a prominent doctor who touted many health successes from his system. I contacted the national group and received an e-mail from a local student of the group who said they were forming a group in my area. The group met each week in her home and she discussed the philosophies of acupuncture, channels and meridians, blockages, specific breathing methods and the concept of Chi as a universal energy and how it can be garnered through Qi Gong to circulate and heal a variety of ailments and conditions. At the conclusion of these study sessions we would come together as a group and practice 2 or 3 different moving Qi Gong patterns that were practiced to strengthen immunity and gain better health. She believed that practicing as a group attracted more chi and was thus more beneficial to all members of the group. I never did feel chi and felt no change in my health. After a month of practice I abandoned the group, disillusioned about the idea of healing myself.

At this point I called the acupuncturist who treated and suggested this idea to me originally. He spoke with some of the other doctors in his clinic and came up with Gregory Fong's name.

My first impression of Sifu Fong's class was different than I expected. The students were for the most part all older and more intelligent than your average group of martial artists. There was a genuine environment of attention and extreme value for the information that was being imparted. Sifu's teaching style was unique. Where most teachers would count repetitions for an exercise or bark orders, Sifu after a few minutes of quietly repeating a movement, began asking questions without offering answers. He encouraged the student to think, question and explore the why of each thing they were asked to do. He encouraged the group to attempt to identify the components or body parts engaged in the movement. This challenged the student to think while they moved. To think and feel the movement while it was happening. To consider other points of view and synthesize these thoughts into an idea. Once the students conceptualized this idea, normally after many off base complicated explanations and comments from students, he begins to verbalize the simplicity and purity of the movement demonstrating correct and incorrect examples. He uses proper and improper examples from students to further clarify the movement and explain the process. He encourages learning from other students as they may have different points of view or methods of explaining that may register with others better than another example. His inexhaustible patience for the

groups' experimentation was not only encouraging as a student but to me seemed to emphasize the importance of "feeling it for yourself." Something we are all encouraged to seek continually in our practice.

My first direct exposure to Sifu Fong's training began by being placed in a very uncomfortable fighting stance and instructed not to move, relax and enjoy myself. Within a minute or less of what I thought was a test to tolerate boredom the stance manifested itself into the most self-induced pain that I had ever experienced. I dug deep into my mind to seek the enjoyment that I thought might appear but was only met by violent shaking and profuse sweating. In my mind this challenge became not giving up before I was told to stop, a paradigm of past martial arts training. The only observation I was left to ponder was how I could sweat so profusely while my hands were stone cold.

At the conclusion of class I thought to myself how this experience was different than any other experience I had. No magic transference of chi healed me. There was no quick fixes offered, instead you got out of this what you put into it. But a few things were very obvious to me. Sifu and most of his seasoned students radiated the health that I sought. This meant to me the result of his practice worked. He had an obvious mastery of his art and was truly capable of teaching and effectively communicating an internal art. The logic behind the relationship of the mind, structure of the skeleton and health of the body made sense and spoke directly to why I had the problem I had. These factors alone were enough to keep me motivated to return for the first few months. What I didn't realize until later in my training was how fortunate I was to have the opportunity to train with Sifu. His direct roots to the lineage of the art, his talent and understanding for the practice are things that interested people travel thousands of miles to learn. To me this is an unbelievable opportunity that few will ever have the opportunity to experience.

The material in this paper is my beginning understanding of the art of I-Chuan and it's application to the art of Tai Chi Chuan. Any misinterpretations or errors in this material are solely my own and reflect my perception and understanding of my training to this point.

Standing (Zhanzhuang)

In my view standing is a practice that integrates the components of proper skeletal alignment and muscular support with the minds' ability to relax the body in an effort to improve the nerve sensations and muscle functions throughout all areas of the body. The continuous practice of standing is an awakening and developmental experience for the mind, nerves, joints, muscles, tendons, tissue and organs of the body that improves their health as well as heightening the strength and effectiveness of their use. The advanced stages of standing manifest themselves in internal and external exploration of how the body works naturally and interdependently in motion to maximize transference of power in martial application.

Zhanzhuang is a self-explorative process that continually changes as you continue to explore and learn from your own development. Each human body is different and its'

changes and developments differ accordingly. We all have different physiques, under or overdeveloped muscles in different areas of the body, tension and injuries as well as different levels of concentration and focus. These variations and combinations make the practice of standing meditation a very different experience for each individual.

The Health Stance

The beginning stance is referred to as the health stance. From the beginning of our training I have heard the message that this is the most basic and most important stance as it is foundational for proper health and energy. I-Chuan starts with the transformation of the spine that has been altered by years' improper care into the healthy or natural spine that we were born with. Without health all other efforts are useless and you will end up right back at the beginning, or what is called lesson #1, for if your physical structure is not healthy and sound, nothing else will work.

My understanding of the physical structure of this stance is as follows:

Stand naturally with your feet shoulders' width apart. Gently tuck in your tailbone to straighten and flatten your lower back. Resist the urge to over-extend your pelvis during this movement but instead, seek to properly align your lower back without creating excess tension.

Once your back is straight, lower your upper body down by gently bending your knees and loading the weight of your upper body onto your thighs. This movement should allow you to feel the weight of your body connecting itself with your feet and the ground. As you lower your weight you should naturally feel slightly more weight distribution on the heels as opposed to the arch or balls of the feet.

As you lower your upper body weight onto your thighs gently tuck in your chin; raise the crown of your head and your neck in a motion to straighten your upper spine while relaxing your shoulders and chest. Circle your arms in front of your body as if hugging a tree. Breathe naturally filling the entire expanse of your lungs taking note to observe the expansion of your abdomen with each complete breath.

Once you have assumed the health stance within a few minutes you will begin to ache and shake in specific parts of your body. This is caused by the inherent physical weaknesses of the muscles as well as areas of tension inside your body. Within minutes the major muscle groups of your body will tax themselves to the point of exhaustion. With consistent standing you will begin to improve the endurance of your muscles, begin reducing your tension, and start to strengthen the mind enough to call upon the weaker and secondary muscles to assist in the process. This doesn't happen overnight and the student must apply a few months of diligence in standing to achieve this.

During this initial stage the fundamental challenge to the new practitioner is to accept and learn from the discomfort and pain caused by your underdeveloped muscles. Note that there is a difference between pain associated with the weakness of your muscles and pain associated with improper standing or pre-existing injuries. All of these things should be discussed with your teacher prior to attempting to stand.

Few people enjoy pain, and it is the natural tendency of the student in the beginning once he or she has been placed in proper standing position attempts to change their position to reduce the discomfort. Often, this destroys the proper alignment of your stance and in the end will not adequately allow you to begin to develop the strength and balance of the different muscle groups that maintain the proper skeletal framework of your stance. This is the challenge and dynamic of stillness. Sifu will continue to adjust you as you move from the proper position and instruct you not to move. It is very important to note that when you do move, the stillness is over, the benefit reduced and adjustment may be necessary again.

Standing with the Mind & Body

When I examine the application of the mind to standing I believe it can be thought of in simple and tangible terms. By simply acknowledging and turning your singular attention to something (a body part, a sound, a feeling or sensation, etc.) you are capable of entering the mental stage of standing.

The experience of the mind and body working together is certainly not a concrete process that anyone can definitively define but for explanation sake, I would describe my beginning experience of standing as the following:

Relax → Focus → Visualize → Physical Work

Relax

If the mind and or body is occupied or agitated it is difficult to relax. Immediate thoughts and emotions that clutter our consciousness such as anxiety, guilt, or frustration exist primarily when you think about past or future events. When you place your mind in the now, or on the present task at hand you will create a space and purpose to focus.

Relaxation within the context of I-chuan is often misinterpreted with the beginning student such as myself. When we think of relaxing past the dream of lying under a palm tree with a pineapple drink, I think of creating complete absence of tension in my body. This is a misnomer within the concept of our art. Complete relaxation of the muscle creates empty and / or inactive and useless muscle. This means the mind and body are not working together or rather, the mind has shut off the body. When the body goes to work physically it will bring both the mind and body to focus and relax. The opposite, overly tensed muscle prevents the body from moving naturally and restricts its' function and range of motion. Striving to achieve a natural, calm and stable state that is alive yet free of uncontrolled physical tension is the objective the mind must teach the muscles.

Focus

Science acknowledges that any form of energy that is concentrated and focused increases its' power. (Water through a funnel, a hammer striking the head of a nail, the concentration of a laser beam are all examples of this.) Whenever you focus your thoughts its effect on your body increases. This phenomenon is a powerful concept recognizing that negative thought and focus can be as powerfully harmful as the benefits of positive thought and focus.

The opposite of focus is daydreaming or letting the mind wander. When the mind begins to wander from the task at hand the mind unplugs its energy from the body and ceases to communicate with itself. At this point, all activity, standing or moving merely becomes mindless exercise. Just as you might pull the plug on a TV, the TV shuts off.

Daydreaming is a natural process of the mind and is what happens when the student unplugs the mind from the body. If we find our selves daydreaming during the process of standing we have lost the connection and are failing to do the physical work associated with the standing. As our mind wanders we need to gently remind ourselves to re-focus on the task at hand. As you challenge your mind to stay its course it eventually will sustain longer and longer periods of focus without drifting, just as your muscles eventually develop more endurance during the process of uninterrupted standing.

Visualize

Once the body and the mind are relaxed and capable of focusing on a singular task, the mind is capable of using its imagination to move beyond what its current experiences and present reality have been. Every physical creation first begins with the mental creation. We visualize with our minds' eye the objective at hand. Whether our intention is to pick up a pencil or relax the chest, it is the suggestion of the mind that sends messages via the nervous system to the muscles of the body. To sum this up simply, we say all action begins with a thought. It is this continuous intention that develops the nervous system's ability to strengthen its functions and improve the vitality and function of the body. My experience has been that it doesn't always come quickly but eventually the sensations come with diligence. I think that visualization is the beginning step to re-introducing and / or reconnecting the mind with what the body already naturally knows how to do. But it is the physical work which allows this to eventually happen after years of consistent training.

Begin the Physical Work

The mind and the body are connected and interdependent, functioning best when they work with and rely on one another. To draw an example from organizational psychologists, this dynamic is not unlike the practice of humans working together. The

practice of interdependent individuals working together often creates energy and synergistic solutions not possible from a single individual. When the mind and body begin to communicate with each other and work together, incredible results can manifest themselves. Note that without the physical work you cannot develop the mind, and without the mind you cannot develop the body. With that said I have found that my natural tendency is to either over-emphasize the focus (wishing too hard for something to happen), or over-tax my physical limitations which compromises one or other of the parts working together. Attempting to seek a balance and a continuous conversation between the mind and body is more correct than attempting to force one or the other parts to make something happen. With patience what you seek should come, but without learning to slow down and relax you will only restrict and slow down the body's natural process.

Listening to Your Standing

Once you achieve the initial phases of beginning to repair and strengthen your body through standing you will begin to achieve some fundamentals in your stance that will help you mentally to begin listening and learning from your own standing. From what I have learned I use the following process.

[Setting up] → [Seeking Dimension] → [Connecting]

Setting Up

In my mind I begin by attempting to check all the basic fundamentals of my stance. (Sitting down while raising the crown of my head, tucking in my tailbone, relaxing my chest, relaxing my abdomen, etc.). Once I feel I have a grasp of these fundamentals I seek to perform these with a sense of relaxation and form. I have found that once I feel I have achieved this state of balance periodically one or more of the fundamentals will weaken due to tension or underdeveloped muscles and I will begin to slip, being forced to gently start the process over again. I attempt to do this without “unplugging the TV “ or disconnecting the connection between the mind and the struggling body part.

Seeking Dimension

The next step of standing I try to achieve is a symmetry of the body; This is something that Sifu continually talks to us about exploring. He urges us to explore the bows in your body, touch the front wall while touching the back wall, etc. Find the opposites and associations of the body parts that involuntarily work to balance the body as well as our natural range of motion. The association of these body dynamics will improve and strengthen your symmetry and ultimately deepen the roots and balance of your stance. I try to identify one or two and work them into my stance in addition to maintaining the structure of my stance. The challenge as you advance is to work as many of these associations as possible simultaneously. The longer I stand the more awareness is developed in the groups of muscles that make up my stance.

Connecting

After identifying and creating some form of dimension in my stance I will attempt to identify a certain area my body where relaxation specifically stops and tension starts. For me this area is currently the muscle groups of the neck, upper back and the shoulders. In my mind I will start with this spot and attempt to convince the muscle in this area that it is relaxing like the relaxed muscle it is connected to. By gently expanding and contracting the movements of voluntary muscles in your body you can begin to sense and feel the secondary and /or involuntary muscles that play the less obvious and silent roles in maintaining the symmetry and balance of your body.

Some days some muscle groups feel stronger than others do and compromises occur in different areas forcing me to re-examine and adjust my set up. Sometimes I will focus on stretching my bows in an effort to take pressure off the tension before refocusing to the area I am trying to improve. Standing feels different each day, sometimes sensing notable breakthroughs and other times feeling nothing but tension and barriers.

Applying I-Chuan to Tai Chi

I think what I am seeing is that standing is eventually training the mind and body to rediscover its' natural ability to respond and react in movement and martial application. With the movement of tai chi we are encouraged to pay attention to the natural function and movement of the muscles, joints, and body parts while maintaining proper skeletal alignment. Maintaining the balance of the body is the ultimate objective while learning to maintain and use a body that is always alive. In the end I think this is what natural movement is, and partially what Sifu means when he talks about us training our body 24 hours a day to maintain its' proper structure and health. Taking your body back to its natural state.

We have all heard the formula $\text{weight} + \text{speed} = \text{power}$. Thus, movement in tai chi is power or the transference of power from one position to another. With the movement of energy through a properly structured body, it will generate significant power rather than attempting to apply localized power from a single body part once it reaches the point of impact. If done properly you will strike the target with your body and its' parts and not just the muscle from an isolated appendage. This is true power in movement.

I think the body is capable of creating and maintaining its own active muscle and generation of power. The body doesn't seem to have opposites, but rather, works together sometimes in opposite directions to create and maintain balance and power. We often use the examples of rubberbands in training. As I think about a rubber band it stretches, possesses substance and tension when in use, yet is flexible and has the power to maintain the integrity of its function. It gains its strength and power from itself, the power is circular, it never uses more energy than is called for, and never completely

yields its activity unless it is inactive or broken. These components are all similar to the natural functions and responses of the body.

The same comparison can be made regarding the example of pulling the bow. When I actually did pull a high-tension bow it became very obvious to me that there is *equal* tension and pressure on the front hand, arm and left side of the body as there is on the opposite side. This experience was enlightening in the fact that in the past in an effort to replicate this motion without this experience, my balance of power of the front side did not have the same duplication of power as on the other side.

These facts for me define the foundation for what I think is meant for the term sung (relaxed) – gain (firm). Sifu and the advanced students use this term frequently to describe a muscular state and function that encompasses the muscles' ability to *retain* and *deliver* explosive amounts of energy in movement while maintaining the bodies' proper skeletal framework. Too much tension destroys this power and a structure that is empty or goes empty during the process of delivery negates the power and compromises the skeletal structure.

This is what is defined as staying connected. When the student breaks up, he is failing to keep his structure proper and active and one or more areas of his body disconnect, not allowing the power to properly move through the body to the target. The energy is also blocked and dissipates in these areas and the power never gets out. I believe this is why Sifu constantly reminds us to relax and feel for it. Asserting aggression and power in your movement without being capable of releasing it is incorrect and may end up stressing your body. Unfortunately, for many students this is the only way they feel they can exert power, but contrary to the motivation of the movement. In external martial arts we were always taught harder is better, but I now think I understand why softer is better. If we exert physical strength, our true natural power will be blocked.

At first, big slow movement is taught and practiced in an effort to emphasize proper form, motion and movement. As your sung-gain improves your ability to internalize movement increases as does its' generation of power, allowing you to produce more power with less external movement. I think this progression is linked back to the effectiveness of your standing and the progress of your minds' ability to improve its' connections with the body. The quintessential example of this is to watch Sifu demonstrate transference of power. If you were to watch how he discharges his power it is not at all obvious to the naked eye, yet merely standing in its' presence you can feel it without even touching him. I doubt few people can ever duplicate this example of internal power.

An Enduring Art

After some involvement in this art it becomes hard to ignore the fact that the more we learn about I-Chuan the more we realize how enduring this practice is. Though on the outside this art appears to be nothing but stillness, on the inside it is evident this art is anything but. At some point your perception of this practice will give way to a clearer understanding of the commitment it takes to learn and experience it. This study becomes as much a tangible as an intangible study, a simple yet very difficult form of study, a physical yet equally mental form of discipline and though a teacher is absolutely fundamental to this experience, he cannot do any of the work for you. I suppose a student could come to class for years and never progress beyond the basic physical movements of this practice if he or she didn't have the desire or the intensity to do so. For the classroom is your body and you are the only one in class. The homework assignment that never stops is the challenge to experiment with and learn from your own body how it naturally works. If you don't go to class regularly, you will never learn. If you cheat, you only cheat yourself. No one else is looking and no one else cares.

Health Benefits

Most all of us over our lives have fallen prey to gravity, stress and other ailments that have physically changed the shape of the spine. In some cases these modifications of the spine over time can permanently damage and or cause serious health conditions associated with spinal stress and mis-alignment. In my case, it was several months before the standing eliminated my pain. In fact, I can pinpoint the day that it happened. It coincided with the same day that for some reason my mind convinced my body to allow my chest to relax. This dropped my shoulders away from my neck and for the first time in many months I could feel a natural range of motion in my neck. The next day the pain dissipated.

The brain, through the spinal cord with the nerves, monitors and regulates most unconscious bodily processes as well as coordinating most voluntary movement. The spinal cord through the spinal nerves is connected to the rest of the body and monitors and relays information about the internal and external functions of the body. Our nerves are constantly alive with millions of electrical and chemical signals and actually grow and repair themselves when damaged. When the spine is not straight these natural processes will be compromised and interrupted. Most people are not aware of the absolute power the spine has over the body until it is compromised.

When the body's natural system is modified and or damaged the body cannot function as it was naturally intended and begins to make adjustments in an attempt to continue to function and survive. Some of these adjustments create minor ailments and others can end up contributing to serious health problems. The by-product of standing is a healthy spine that can return health to the various internal systems of your body.

With diligence in your standing you will no doubt begin to experience some of its' many health benefits. Some of my responses to standing consistently have include an inexhaustible supply of energy, increased physical strength, sounder sleep patterns, a

significant increase in my immunity system, and the disappearance of any pain associated with my neck condition. Other unusual sensations I have experienced include accelerated growth of my hair and fingernails, sensations of heat in your hands and feet, and an expansion of my midsection. A certain peace and pleasure falls about you after sessions of standing, not unlike the runners high caused by the release of endorphins into the blood stream. Ultimately, in the long run of day to day life I generally feel more prepared and at peace with the day to day pace of life.

Standing will become a way of life if you seek the benefits it has to offer. I-Chuan is a progressive practice, and you get out of it what you put into it. It does not respond well to taking breaks or inconsistency of practice. Just like we shower everyday, Sifu says there is no break to taking care of your body.

I'm sure my small understanding of this art will continue to change. As new experiences and growth take place it will force me to re-examine my paradigms as they are developed today. And this is how it should be if I am to continue to grow.