

Building a mental framework for I-chuan training

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Based on the I-chuan training of Sifu Gregory Fong
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*Note: I-chuan is also called yiquan and dachengquan.
For clarity in this paper, I have used the spelling yi
to avoid confusion with the English word I.*

Introduction

When most people think of martial arts, the first things that come to mind likely include self-defense techniques and dazzling athletics. Those individuals that are a bit more knowledgeable about Chinese martial arts might also think of internal power or relaxation. For me, I think of the first day I walked into my teacher's t'ai chi class. I had seen t'ai chi in San Francisco parks and once or twice in movies. The continuous, elegant movements were appealing, and I was looking for a challenging workout. A friend recommended longtime Portland martial arts teacher, Sifu Gregory Fong. When he performed his t'ai chi with such effortless grace and power, I was hooked. This teacher had found what I was looking for. Of course, I had no idea then how deeply this practice would change my life.

Over the years, my tai chi workout has been enriched by the practice of another Chinese martial art which Sifu Fong includes in all of his classes, namely I-chuan (literally, mind-fist or intention boxing). He learned this art in China from Dr. Yu Yong Nian, a direct student of Wang Xiangzhai, the founder of I-chuan. Sifu Fong has a deep knowledge of the principles and practices of this art. He uses the teaching of I-chuan to help students build a foundation for improving their health and martial arts training. What is I-chuan and what are its benefits? How do you learn? Where do you start?

I-chuan is a subtle and complex art, and words are easily misinterpreted. Therefore, this paper is an effort to clearly and simply begin to answer those questions by discussing the theory and practices of I-chuan training, as taught by Sifu Fong, and by suggesting ways to build a framework for mental preparation. First, some history...

Wang Xiangzhai (1885-1963)

I-chuan, one of hundreds of Chinese martial arts, was developed by Wang Xiangzhai in China from the 1920's through the 1950's. As a young man, Wang

traveled throughout China to learn from the most accomplished martial artists of the time. He learned numerous styles from these masters, focusing principally on xingyiquan and xinyiquan, and became a skilled, well-respected fighter, as had generations of students before him.

At that time, it was generally thought that forms practice was used to teach precise techniques and that knowledge was thereby passed from one generation to the next. Likewise, most people thought that those practitioners who were able to beautifully execute forms and skillfully use techniques had achieved the goal of the art. To this day, this is how most martial arts are taught. Wang, however, questioned the usefulness of this method when applied to real combat, so he began to look for alternate methods of training.

If you don't memorize a set form to learn techniques, then how do you train? Wang's answer to this question evolved as he proposed and tested his theories. At the core of his thinking was the importance of applying rigorous analysis and testing to define and study the fundamentals of physical and mental training.

Wang applied scientific principles of physics and anatomy to natural movements to develop effective training practices that would cultivate a quick and intelligent physical responsiveness, develop power for martial arts, and nurture vigorous physical health. This paper introduces one interpretation of I-chuan theory and associated practices. Everyone is encouraged to work with these ideas and test them, ideally with the guidance of an open and able I-chuan teacher. I have been very lucky to learn from Sifu Fong, a truly remarkable and talented teacher.

Start with a thought

Sifu Fong often paraphrases Wang, who said, "Every action begins with a thought." What does this have to do with martial arts? To analyze martial arts practice in terms of its most essential components, it is helpful to look at how

humans learn to move for the first time. Observe how a baby learns to walk: falling down, getting up, managing to balance and stand on two feet, falling, then getting up and moving, eventually taking a step or two until he's walking. Why does he learn to walk? Because he is motivated: he wants to go somewhere. Even before he has language, he has intention.

How the toddler follows his intention naturally results in experimentation with controlling his body. He repeats and varies his experiments to get where he wants to go. In the language of I-chuan, he has *yi* (intention) to move first and everything else that he does enables him to follow his *yi*. By observing the toddler's learning process, you can begin to see how to use your *yi* to guide your training. The quality and depth of your intention for the most part determines what you do and how you do it.

To better understand this, look at the opposite of intention: aimlessness.

Without a goal in mind, the tendency is to blindly follow what is presented and to repeat whatever you are told without examining it or knowing its purpose. Daydreaming is aimless behavior. It is like being on automatic pilot: the journey is smooth but you don't know what you are doing, where you are going or why.

Thoughtful repetition is better: you are following someone else's intention but at least you will get where they want you to go and do something that looks just like what they did, so in this case, your goal is to follow well.

In contrast, I-chuan practitioners use the *yi* they develop through training to integrate the body and mind. They strive to gain awareness of what they are actually doing, what they are not doing, how they are doing it and why. The conscious, awakened journey may be rougher, more awkward and have more detours at first, but the more you know what you are doing, what you are not doing, and what you want to do, the more honestly you can say that you have effectively engaged your *yi*.

Balance opposing forces naturally

Like the toddler, in this training we learn how to stand, how to balance our bodies in different ways and finally, how to move with support and efficiency. The theory is that, by gaining an innate awareness of how it feels to be well supported by muscular activity, one will be able to recall, retain and eventually assimilate that awareness and support while moving, whether in daily life, in training or in combat. With hard work, you may find that you are recovering the natural and effortless quality of movement you had as a child.

Another area we work on is how to reconcile opposites, both physically and mentally. To be able to reconcile opposing ideas, both in training and in life, is very challenging (and often confusing). As you work with the numerous contradictions and dualities of this training (such as finding the balance between relaxing and tensing the muscles), you may notice that your mind becomes more open to accepting contradictory ideas and the new ways that you see and do things may surprise you.

To describe this kind of thinking, Fong often says, “don’t make it happen: don’t forget what you are doing.” In other words, don’t force yourself to follow a preconceived pathway; instead, let it happen naturally with intention and awareness fully engaged.

For example, when moving in any way, it is important to finish one movement ready to start the next. There is no gap, no hesitation or extra steps or leaning this way and that while trying to get lined up. You know exactly what you are doing, but it is not forced and you don’t have to remind yourself of what is next. Since this way of moving is natural and efficient, it is also graceful and powerful. Its essence is its effectiveness.

Experience the benefits

Concerning improving health through I-chuan, many of my classmates have reported reduced back and neck pain, greater mobility and flexibility, increased energy and added stamina, which they attribute to their efforts in I-chuan. By increasing their energy and learning to move and breathe naturally, they have begun to tap into the many health benefits to be derived from diligent and sensible practice of this art. You can easily find ways to use the training every day to enrich and strengthen your daily life.

For instance, I'm a web designer and I spend most of my day at a computer. I used to have problems with back pain, hunched shoulders and tight wrists. For years, I have found it very helpful while at work to take short breaks to stand. This involves positioning the body in such a way as to gently stretch, relax and align legs, back and torso until I find the support and balance I need. After a few minutes of standing, I have relaxed into a supported posture, released tense areas, feel energized and am ready to go back to work. This not only soothes sore areas, but also reminds me of how to hold myself as I sit at the computer.

I-chuan training has been valuable and challenging for me. Every day I work on it and every day it is different. Some days, it makes sense and there is an awareness of dynamic balance and a feeling of connectedness: other days it is a struggle to find any clarity at all, so on those days I work on endurance or other aspects.

To get the most benefit from this training, you must incorporate it in small ways into your daily life. For example, at work, I use it to relieve stress; when standing in line, I get a little extra exercise by standing using zhanzhuang principles; and while walking, I can get a little extra benefit by gently elongating the neck. I have found both in my own training and from working with others in the class that it is the consistent daily practice of fundamentals that gradually leads to more developed martial skills, better energy, and better health.

Align and support the physical structure

Looking back to the baby's progress, one may see that the natural balance and energy of the toddler is often followed in later years by an adolescent slouch. Over time, many people become self-conscious, neglect physical activity, and generally develop habits that gradually weaken and contort the body. This is why one of the first topics that one encounters in training is how to align and support the body effectively.

Any place in the body where bones are connected by tendons is called a joint. Expanding and contracting the muscle pairs and tendons attached to individual or multiple joints (knees, elbows, hips, etc.) will move the body in a specific way. To move the body efficiently, let alone with power, you must begin to develop an aligned and supported structure. Joints that are unsupported will likely weaken and lose suppleness over time.

Since the standing human body is inherently unstable, one maintains balance through continuous mental, neural and physical exertion. To learn how to develop support in the joints, one practices standing in postures specifically designed to align and strengthen particular weak muscles and tendons. How to do this is a fascinating and complicated process that we will only touch upon briefly herein. It could be said that standing is the physical expression of the mental direction to contract and expand the body harmoniously in opposing directions at the same time.

A gradual and gentle increase in time and intensity spent defining and enduring a properly aligned structure allows the muscles and tendons to stretch, relax, strengthen and slowly take on the work of sufficiently supporting the joints. Using directed standing to build up weak areas might be somewhat painful because these areas have likely been neglected for many years. Hence, the requirement of guidance from an able and open I-chuan teacher.

Without a teacher's direct supervision, one's brain and body will likely revert to old behavior by promoting the already strong, familiar muscles to do most of the work. Over time, this could lead to aberrations in structure since the overused strong muscle group and its opposing weaker muscle group are out of balance. One becomes perpetually expanded and the other perpetually contracted. It might not be obvious at first, but with age and disuse, the shoulders become drawn in, the body sags and slouches, and the neck weakens and cannot support the head in an uplifted manner. To the extent that the muscles are being underutilized, the body cannot stand or move in a healthy manner.

Training to build proper alignment and support can help alleviate and eventually begin to reverse many physical problems. When your I-chuan instructor lets you know that you are too tight (or disconnected, or unfocused), remember that it is not a personal affront: it is in fact a generous effort to help you with your training which the wise student will heed humbly and without argument.

With proper guidance, one can strengthen weak areas without sustaining the damage that might be caused by stressing an inadequately aligned structure. Training should make you think, it should make you sweat, but it should never cause inappropriate pain.

By working on alignment while standing, one also begins to locate and release areas of tension. Most people don't notice their tension because they are so used to it that they don't feel it. It is not easy to find and release these areas: it can even precipitate an intense emotional experience. Knowing that this is not uncommon or unexpected should help the student handle such an experience. As the considerable energy bound up in tense areas is released, that energy becomes available to the rest of the body, making one feel more alert and vigorous. Such results help motivate the student to keep working at it, making continuous, patient progress.

As you continue your training, you will likely find that your learning is directed by the depth of your understanding of the requirements that your teacher explains to you and how you apply those requirements to your training and to your everyday life. The more you think about what you are doing, the more productive your workout will be. Ideally, one should diligently cultivate an aligned and supported posture by using the mind to direct the nerves, muscles and tendons to support the bones effectively.

Use your whole body

At some point, you may wonder: what principles describe how to effectively work at this training? One possible answer would be: use your whole body. Remember the example of the toddler using his *yi* to work his body to get what he wants. This is based on the same idea. It is easy to explain, but difficult to do. It is the same as doing any real work. Row a boat, lift a heavy barrel, hug a tree, lean against a wall. All these concrete, familiar pictures illustrate different requirements of standing and moving.

Doing these activities while standing or moving unifies the body and mind as surely as doing the real thing. The only difference is that your mind directs your body to work against mentally recreated resistance rather than the real thing. For example, everyone knows how to lift a heavy barrel. Set up, get underneath, use the legs, and pick it up. When you pick up a real barrel, you are naturally aligned and supported correctly because the weight and shape of the barrel forces you to do so. I-chuan merely asks you to do the exact same heavy work, but without the barrel.

The way we invoke and use resistance is vital to understanding this training. It is a heavy, almost insuperable sort of resistance: it is impossible to move but you must move. It takes a strong mind and the whole body at work to deal with these

contradictions in a useful way (and there are many contradictions in this training). You use your mind and body to make your thought real.

How strong is your thought? Can you lift the heavy (nonexistent) barrel and move it from side to side (not moving) with continuous resistance as if you are an instant away from actually moving? This concept could be described as the bodily equivalent of visualization in that you don't even try to see the resistance; but you do really feel it. This is one of the methods of mental preparation that distinguishes I-chuan from other martial arts.

Test the training

In a naturally evolving environment, one can collect and manage information through the cumulative effects of basic processes. Similarly, in I-chuan, we work to hone fundamental mental and physical processes, then test and analyze their effects. This work allows for the compilation of experience from regular practice. Upon examination, errors in training may be revealed, tested and eliminated so that other strategies can be examined.

At least, that's the theory. In practice, I have found it often takes a lot of work to get in tune with what I am doing well enough to analyze it usefully. More often than I'd like, there are obstacles such as daydreaming, inattention, confusion, laziness or just blind repetition. Some of the strategies of this training consider these ubiquitous human frailties and are meant to rouse one from such states of dulled awareness. In many ways, this is a continuing process of awakening to the honest perception of one's own physical and mental state and then developing a training framework to rebuild and energize the body and mind.

The successful use of these methods requires continuous direction of the body's work through physical, neural and mental processes. If you have, to some degree, attained the goal of standing with appropriate support, you may notice that there is still something missing. Although aligned, there is no movement. You must first

do some mental and physical work to change the aligned structure into the energized structure (that will be the subject of another article). Then it is time to discover the surprising degree of effort it takes to keep your structure integrated while you take a single step.

This is because the addition of movement to the standing process changes everything. It quickly tests and changes the quality of connection and alignment achieved through standing. When we learn to move within the context of I-chuan training, we are required to use lessons learned from standing practice and add new requirements that intensify the experience. Turning left requires a different structure than sitting down. Continuously balancing the shifting weight and changing directions of the body provides further information that we can analyze by asking: where, when, how and why does the body lose its balance? What requirements from standing are forgotten when moving? How is movement directed by thought? Where is the attention focused? How do we use the energy from standing to build power?

Answering such questions requires much thought, analysis and physical experimentation: it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these issues here, although some may be discussed in my next paper. In any case, for these answers to be useful, they must be analyzed, tested repeatedly, taken apart and put back together until they make sense and, when thoroughly assimilated, the result becomes part of one's natural responsiveness.

Pursuit of this training is likely to be a lengthy and fascinating journey as you continually better your understanding and your ability to execute the principles of the training. It is no less demanding physically and mentally than learning to play the violin professionally or hitting a curve ball reliably, and it requires no less thought, discipline and dedication. And, if on occasion you happen to hit a sour note or strike out, keep in mind that how you handle failure and slow progress is part of the training as well.

Take it apart and put it back together

As one's understanding of this training grows, a framework of tested concepts and methods based on the analysis of one's successes and failures begins to emerge. By using earlier results to determine the next step in training, one connects what has been done in the past with current and future practices.

Within the framework of one's experience, one applies the principles of I-chuan as rigorously as possible: align and connect the body for efficient movement, develop and use power effectively, and be alert to your thoughts, actions and goals. Testing is not meant to bolster the ego nor is it meant to showcase physical strength: it is meant to reveal errors in thinking and in training that are blocking progress. Just as there are physical areas that are clenched and need to be released, so there are mental blocks to be dispersed. In addition, just as there may be flaccid areas in the body, there are poor mental habits such as daydreaming, excessive pride and being habitually inattentive.

I-chuan teaches us how to identify and purge ineffective and harmful habits that lead to slow reaction times, loss of power, overconfidence or weak mental attitude. As you work at it, you will likely discover a new idea that doesn't fit within the framework you have been using and you may have to decide that the new idea is right and the whole system you've been using is wrong. Can you do it? Should you? As you think about such issues and develop answers to the questions that arise from training, you will realize that you are constantly weeding out what doesn't work to make room for new growth.

In training, we learn that it is possible to remain alert not just for a second, but also continuously. We learn how to set up the body so that it is supported effectively and freed from excess tension. We learn to stay engaged and observant while we move. By maximizing mental and physical energy and by studying how the mind and body function, one can determine what works and what doesn't.

When something works, it works because you have applied your knowledge: testing, analyzing and changing how you do it until it feels right to you. You put into your movement everything you learned from your standing and you put into your standing everything you learned from working on your movements. You become physically more nimble and your mind is less likely to be limited by unrealistic expectations and useless techniques.

In other words, you have learned to use the mind to spark the nerves and consequently stimulate the muscles. Through diligent application of these methods, you should be able to make any movement balanced and natural. Moreover, after many years of training and reflection, you should increase your ability to understand and apply your I-chuan practice so that, eventually, you no longer need to use methods to do your work.

Why we train

By working hard under the direction of an able I-chuan teacher and using the mental framework described herein, we can cultivate robust health, improve circulation and coordination, let go of tension, strengthen and relax muscles and tendons, and achieve a more balanced and invigorated physical nature. We can achieve better coordination, increase body speed and develop proper timing. We can train for efficient structural alignment, correct muscular support and more relaxed and natural breathing. We recover wasted energy and cultivate habits that build energy and power.

By studying what, how and why we train (not just this work, but any work) we learn about ourselves: how the mind functions, how to set up the body for optimal support, how to move efficiently and also how our emotions and mistaken notions sometimes unintentionally block us from achieving our goals. Often, training will mirror life: whether you are doing well or poorly, it tends to show up in the training.

When you use the mental preparation described herein, you use a flexible method that can help you learn how to improve your health and martial arts abilities: the reflexes quicken, the body becomes stronger and the mind more alert. It is important to keep in mind that the ego should be held in check, as it will do you no good in this training. You can use the knowledge, experience and mental toughness that you gain from your workouts to deal with daily stress, overcome difficulties and enjoy life more fully.

Even though we train for martial arts, it is not often that we have a real fistfight, but we do have daily struggles with other people, with our own faults and bad habits, with aging and with all the other conditions of being a human on this planet. If we can strengthen our bodies, awaken our minds, relax, and focus our efforts, we will likely handle our daily struggles with greater ease and have happier, more productive lives.

Increased energy, better physical and mental health, natural movement, good physical support and powerful *yi* can be developed by working hard, thinking critically about actions and their consequences, and by analyzing and applying all that we learn. The well-trained body and focused *yi* can combine for great effectiveness and it is for such power that we train so hard. By working toward our goals and remaining humble about our achievements, great or small, we cultivate the body, mind and spirit to be effective, creative and free.

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