

The Six Powers

(An introduction through the mechanics of walking)

Randall Havas, July 2004

1. The doctrine of six powers or directions is at the heart of I-chuan training, and yet for many students it remains one of the most stubbornly difficult aspects of this training to understand. I would like therefore in these brief remarks to try to shed some light on one aspect of this doctrine by means of an exploration of the daily activity of walking. It turns out that simple, everyday walking requires the body to move in exactly the six directions in which the student of I-chuan must learn to let his body expand while both standing and moving. Once the basic concept of six directions is understood, the student can begin to increase in a balanced and intelligent way the power he builds in each of those directions.

In the martial arts, great emphasis is rightly placed on the goal of moving naturally. The paradox, of course, is that as soon as one tries to move this way, what should come naturally often does not. And practice does not always make perfect, because it is quite easy to practice something until it becomes habitual only to find out that what has become habitual is in fact something quite unnatural. This is part of what Fong is getting at when he admonishes students not to learn to do the wrong things perfectly. Another part of what he has in mind is that the acquisition of habits, in this sense, renders one unable to respond to the changing demands of any given situation. A person living under the sway of habits does not respond naturally to what the world asks

of him, because he has, in effect, always already made up his mind about how to react to anything demanded of him. And the longer one has spent living this way, the longer it will take to recover a living sense of what's natural.

In training, therefore, it helps to have as a model a concrete example of natural movement. To this end, I would like to say a few things about the natural activity of walking and to try in the process to shed some light on the idea in I-chuan training of the six powers or directions. To say that walking is a natural activity is not to say that, for most of us, our walking isn't compromised to one degree or another by various bad habits. For example, the length of a person's stride is frequently too long. Or he may have acquired the habit of craning his head forward and down to look at the ground before his feet. Or he may have learned to support the weight of his body down his back rather than along the front of his spine. He may also arch his back and raise up his chest. And so on. But many of these habits are gradually undone by regular standing (Zhan Zhuang) practice under the guidance of a competent teacher. And, such bad habits aside, walking remains for most people a fundamentally natural activity in the sense that interests me here. What I have to say about walking will, I suspect, seem obvious, but one should bear in mind that the word "obvious" is related etymologically to the word "obstacle:" what is obvious is what stands in the way, and as such it is something that we tend to stumble over rather than make proper use of.

2. To begin to recover a sense of what's natural about walking it can help to do something we are not in the habit of doing: namely, walking backward. Although we do not usually walk this way, I have yet to meet a person who can't do it without instruction. It comes naturally. Moreover, people typically find that walking backward for even a

short distance tends rather remarkably to erase many of the bad habits they impose upon their walking in the other direction. Thus, they stop looking at the ground before their feet and gaze instead at the horizon. Their stride shortens to whatever length is necessary to keep the head over the feet, no more and no less. They carry their weight along the core of the body instead of down the length of the back. They let go of their chests. And so on. The relative naturalness of one's movements when walking backward may be in large part a function of one's doing it so infrequently: one simply hasn't had the time to acquire the sorts of bad habit a life-time of walking forward tends to perfect. Whatever the reason, though, a few points of significance for I-chuan training emerge almost immediately from this simple exercise.

First, walking backward makes clear that it is pressure off the balls of the feet that propels one's movement and that what makes that movement possible is a lengthening of the spine that is initiated by the head. If the head does not lead the body in this way, the best one can do to move is simply to fall over – something we are understandably reluctant to do, especially backward! Oddly enough, in fact, it is when walking backward that the truth of the claim that the head leads the body becomes clearest. One's habit of looking at the ground before one's feet when walking forward makes the importance of this claim harder to appreciate than it should be. And when the head leads the body, the structure of the latter is maintained without conscious effort. Notice, in this connection, that each step backward leaves one in a perfect position to move forward – no adjustment of the stride is necessary. This is often not the case when walking in the other direction, because one's steps forward tend to be too long, requiring one to shorten one's stride

before initiating movement backward. The head cannot properly lead the body if the stride is too long.

The fact that the head leads the body and that the spine must lengthen for movement to be possible illustrates the first two of the six powers or directions stressed in I-chuan training: up and down. A basic point of the doctrine of six powers is that the body moves in three dimensions, not just one or two. The dimension of up and down, in particular, is on display in walking in the simple sense that the spine must gather and expand along its length if the body is to move at all.

The second salient fact about walking that walking backward teaches is obviously that movement involves two other directions as well: front and back. If all the body did was to gather and expand along its length, a person would basically just bob up and down in place. But we shouldn't let this second fact blind us to the third: namely, that a body moving backward or forward also moves right and left. This much should be obvious if we consider the fact that when walking forward the left arm accompanies the right leg and vice versa. But it is only walking backward that makes clear that a body moving in a straight line must, in effect, zigzag diagonally from foot to foot. We tend not to notice this fact when walking forward, because we are so focused on getting where we're going. But because we don't typically "head" anywhere backward, features of movement normally occluded by our usual orientation toward a goal come to light more readily when we do. What attention to walking backward teaches us, in short, is that a body moving naturally from one point to another tends to spiral into that point and then spiral out of into the next point. This, I think, is the basis for the fact that a cross is a more

powerful punch than a jab. The former has the weight of the body naturally behind it in a way the latter does not.

3. None of this is meant to suggest that one should practice walking backwards. The virtue of walking backwards is simply that we do it artlessly, without form, just as we do when we walk forwards but without the usual bad habits. There's no point in making a form out of what comes naturally. The point is rather to make whatever form we do learn natural in just this way. Moreover, there is obviously a very good reason for walking in the direction we usually do: only in that way can we see where we're going. We don't have eyes in the back of our heads. But the experiment of walking backwards does teach us at least what I've said it does about what's natural about the movement of walking.

Now I said that the basic point about the six powers of I-chuan training is that the body moves in three dimensions, not just one or two. There is, however, much more to the matter of the six powers than that, beginning with the fact that the student of I-chuan aims to understand in practice that each part of the body moves in three dimensions. Initially, this means that each joint moves in three dimension, but in time the student should learn that any part of his body – say, some point on his forearm -- can in principle move in three dimensions. Any part of the body, that is, must be ready to respond to demands made up on it. Furthermore, part of the reason for speaking of six powers in this context and not just six directions is that movement in any one of the directions must be balanced by movement in all the others, but such balance is achieved only by working in the other directions. I have restricted myself here to speaking mostly of how the skeleton operates in the natural movement of walking. How the muscles work is a further, more difficult topic.

Randall Havas
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