

I-Chuan Basics

From the training of Sifu Gregory Fong

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF *I-CHUAN*

I-chuan (“mind boxing”) was developed in China in the 1920s by Wang Hsiang Chai (1885-1963), a renowned martial artist who began training as an asthmatic youngster. Wang regained his health and strength from his *hsing-i chuan* (“form and mind boxing”) practice with Guo Yun Shen, a well-known master. An intelligent student, Wang traveled and studied with many famous masters, gaining widespread fame as a fighter. He was successful largely because he focused on extracting the essential elements from martial arts practice and discarding superficial aspects of various styles. Foreshadowing Bruce Lee’s *jeet kune do*, Wang developed a new kind of martial art not dependent upon forms practice. This distillation became known as *I-chuan* (also *dachengquan* and *sum yi*) which he continued to develop throughout his life. One of his top students was Dr. Yu Yong Nian of Beijing, who has trained Sifu Gregory Fong as a student for many years.

INTRODUCTION

The *I-chuan* practitioner trains to become quick, balanced, alert and powerful. *I-chuan* founder, Wang Hsiang Chai, said that the *I* (mind) is the general of an army of bone, muscle and nerve. It is this fundamental relationship that the *I-chuan* student works to achieve: mind directing body by the methodical creation of efficient neuromuscular pathways through intelligent, coordinated practice.

It is important to analyze what works and what doesn't. To be successful at this training, you will have to think deeply. You will develop *I* as you develop your body. Training for practical effectiveness begins by locating and analyzing skeletal structure and specific movements to understand which muscles, joints and tendons do what work and how they do it. By experimenting with body mechanics, you can explore how both movement and stillness are needed to create power. By thinking about what you are doing as you do it, you can test your interpretation of what is meant by movement and stillness and change it as you go. Then, you can train to develop the neural sensitivity needed to listen and respond to pressure or to initiate an action by consciously refining natural physical reflexes into considered responses. By way of this process, one begins to understand how to coordinate and intensify natural body movement to develop explosive power.

FUNDAMENTALS

THE "GENERAL": *I*

I is a Chinese word usually translated as mind or intention. Those words, however, are inadequate to express the full meaning of the term. Using *I* (the "general" in Wang's description) to control the body could be described as intelligently developing a mental state of awareness which encompasses simultaneously both the broad overview and the precise details of any situation. By knowing exactly where one's limbs are, the direction of power of each one, and where the center of power is located and how this all is coordinated, as well as what an opponent is doing and what other external factors may come into play, one has the broad overview. By monitoring how the body acts and responds down to individual muscle fibers, one has the details. Ideally, the fully developed *I* can track and direct both kinds of awareness appropriately and effectively.

Start with the details: how the body works, how to create and maintain good structure for support, how shoulders coordinate with hips, and so on. This develops the internal precision needed for good structure and coordination as well as the ongoing awareness of how the muscles and nerves respond to stimuli. One also trains the *I* to develop more general awareness of the body and where and how defects exist, such as weakness, clenching and imbalance. Continuous analysis of structure and simple

movements leads to the development of powerful *I* as well as physical flexibility, dexterity and coordination. One's *I* progresses from mentally involved, sequential control of many movements (a form) toward an expanded awareness and alertness which allows mentally detached (yet mindful), simultaneous direction of all movements (no form). This was Wang's goal: think about what you are doing and don't force it. Develop your ability to respond at a deep, inner level so that your *I* oversees a trained, intelligent physical nature rather than managing an inventory of techniques.

Using *I* means being alert, aware and in control, yet detached from any single movement. The *I* directs, but is not distracted by, involvement with particular actions: it remains outside of specific responses, yet it remains deeply aware of those responses and their effectiveness, ready to instantly change direction, advance, retreat, speed up, slow down or wait. One harnesses the power of the unconscious mind (which perceives the opponent's intention first) with the conscious mind (which has been trained to respond to the signals as they are perceived) to develop flexible, powerful *I*. It is fast but unhurried. Think of the eye of the hurricane. It is at the center of speed and power, but totally still within.

This is how one can be ready to respond to any situation: by being calm and relaxed, simultaneously detached and alert. One can be hyper-aware of every aspect of what is going on and therefore can quickly respond in many ways. If one does not use *I*, one is simply reacting mindlessly, chasing an opponent and seeing no alternatives. Using *I*, one can sense the potential effects of different choices and so can act wisely. One is not hamstrung by expectations or loss of perspective. The appropriate response is made instantly because one has a current, balanced *I*.

THE "ARMY": BONE, MUSCLE AND NERVE

BONE: The positioning of the skeleton determines which muscles work and how well they work. That is why standing (*zhanzhuang*) is so critical to this practice. Without good structure, the muscles either sag or freeze. With good structure, the muscles and tendons can do the work demanded by the *I*. To analyze physical movement, one uses the considered application of the principles of simple physics and anatomy. The skeleton should be positioned so that each joint is at the optimal angle for support.

For example, when the elbow functions as a fulcrum, it functions best when held at a certain angle. You can experiment with this. Find the angle which can counter resistance with the least effort. That is why it is taught: sink the elbows. When held correctly, this joint can extend or contract very little from that angle before it changes from a powerful structure, able to resist force, to a dead weight, easily moved.

The area within which a joint moves with adequate support can be called the range of movement. Every joint has this range and when combined in proportion, they define

the range of movement for the body. *Zhanzhuang* is used to practice and develop the optimal angles of skeletal support which can be expanded and contracted within the range of motion when performing *I-chuan walking*.

MUSCLE: Gravity provides constant, predictable muscular resistance, always down. The body must provide the up direction or we would collapse. Our bodies are accustomed to this predictable, constant resistance. Why don't we falter when we stand up? Because the many involuntary muscles, which we don't even notice as being active, do their work quietly and precisely to support the body with exactly the right balance of firmness and relaxation. It is this balance we strive for when we use voluntary muscles. Almost every move we are conscious of is voluntary. Both involuntary and voluntary muscles are activated simultaneously in highly developed *I-chuan* movement. Just as we use both conscious and unconscious mind for maximum mental power, we use both voluntary and involuntary muscles for maximum physical power.

With practice, one learns to identify particular involuntary reflexes. To such a reflex, one learns to add corresponding voluntary movement. To distinguish one from the other takes great sensitivity and a relaxed, coordinated mind and body. Learning to identify and enhance physical reflexes is a goal of **test of power** training. Once this skill is developed, the blend of involuntary reflex with voluntary response becomes both natural and powerful. Once you've trained your mind to develop and manage your body, you can learn any technique and it will be powerful.

Compression and expansion of specific muscle groups in response to resistance is part of *zhanzhuang* standing practice. As mentioned previously, gravity is the most predictable type of resistance. Using the downward pull of gravity, one can feel numerous physical connections and take the time to analyze the effects of directional resistance on particular muscles. Less predictable, an opponent provides muscular resistance as well as many other factors, all of which are constantly changing. Effective response to such resistance is developed through sparring and **push-hands** practice.

As one develops *I*, one learns to move the muscles in an interconnected, balanced manner. When one opposes muscles in harmony, one can move effortlessly and yet be fully active. Just as the range of motion is determined by using optimal angles of skeletal joints, it is also affected by muscular activation. The combined relaxed and active muscular work must stay within the internal range of motion which, like the hub of a wheel, determines the external range of motion (the limbs).

NERVE: By listening deeply to the responses of the nervous system as one experiences pressure, stress, relaxation, or other forces, one can detect existing neuromuscular pathways. One can then create similar new pathways by using mental images designed to elicit physical resistance. During **zhanzhuang** standing practice, one actively focuses one's attention on connecting one area to another as if by invisible rubber bands. By creating a mental map of those connections, the developed *I* monitors

their continuous expansion and contraction as one adds connections to intensify the mental and physical work, thereby reinforcing the multiple neural pathways.

For example, stand with knees slightly bent, feet parallel, shoulder width apart, facing straight ahead. As you push your hands downward, create a mental picture of your hands pushing down against a table and use it to make yourself feel the resistance of pushing down, compressing the table. Likewise, while you raise your hands, use the image of pulling the table upwards to really pull the table up. Then, combine these pictures so you have both kinds of resistance going up and both pushing down.

Such pictures reinforce the physical connections that make the work you are doing heavy and powerful. If someone looks at you they can see the weight and power of your movement because you have used your mind to activate the resistance that would be generated using real objects. You look like you are lifting a heavy table because your mind has told your body to feel the weight and you have trained your nerves and muscles to respond accurately.

Why develop these connections? It takes considerable horsepower, both mental and physical, to get your mind and body to cooperate and coordinate so thoroughly that you have real resistance to your actions. Never be comfortable with what you have achieved. If you can make it work for up and down, add side to side, forward and backward, all at once. This training changes how you respond because it develops mental and physical power which is so deep, it is instantly available.

However, before you can move, you must learn to stand...

PRACTICES

STANDING (Zhanzhuang)

Excess tension causes muscles to be held habitually out of balance in an uneven, unhealthy way, causing collapsed or constricted posture, poor muscle tone, bad digestion, and many other health problems. Standing can begin to remedy these problems by working unused muscles and relaxing overused muscles. Sustained, properly relaxed effort against resistance develops endurance, balance and internal resolve. We have learned that standing improves the muscle memory and increases neural connections within the brain and nervous system. So the mind can remain calm and focused while under stress. Again, there is the idea of the calm center anticipating and responding to outer forces.

Effective standing starts with learning to align and adjust the skeleton. For example, stand as previously described: knees lightly bent, feet parallel, a shoulder width apart, the neck raised, chest relaxed, looking straight ahead. Let your weight sink to your feet. At the same time allow the top of your head to rise upward, as if suspended. Knees are bent so that the muscles of lower abdomen, thighs and calves bear the brunt of the body's weight. Skeletal alignment must be correct: straighten the lower spine because if the lumbar area is too curved, the weight of the abdomen will begin to pull the middle and lower vertebra forward and such pulling stresses the spine and its connective tissues.

When you learn to stand, you learn to continuously embody the physical requirements your instructor gives you. Many requirements exist and all are important, but you must realize this critical concept: they are all interdependent aspects of the same process. The goal is to incorporate all at once in active balance. However, the beginner must work on them one at a time to get some idea of the specific nature of each. Again, these requirements include: raise the neck because it is the key to unity, relax the chest, release the shoulders, breathe deeply and naturally, gently extend the top of the spine upwards and feel the weight of the tailbone pulling downwards, coordinate upper body with lower, left side with right. Do not allow your skeleton to sag, do not clench muscles, do not collapse.

As you learn to balance and support the skeleton, your muscles can relax into an alignment that is healthy and efficient. An able teacher will point out areas where exertion is excessive or deficient so the student can distinguish exertion from tightness and relaxation from collapse in specific areas of the body. The ability to perceive these differences is the foundation of muscular control. Muscular exertion should be continuous, mindful and efficient. No collapse, no excess exertion, no blind tension, no absolute extremes. This steady effort forces the cardiovascular system to work hard to replenish the working muscles with oxygen, sugars and electrolytes. The hard work conditions the heart, the lungs and the internal organs as well as the muscles and nerves.

Where developing the muscular strength to stand well is a relatively straightforward process, it is the power and acuity of the practitioner's mind (*I*) that determines her level of skill. The motor control center in the mind functions at a subconscious level normally. While standing, the conscious mind, simplified by stillness, can monitor these conversations between mind and body and tap into the dialogue, usurping control and pinpointing the subtle signals from muscles. Once the desired posture is achieved, the student can then memorize and adjust the picture of muscular activities that produced it.

The *I-chuan* student exerts intense attention and intention (*I*) to define and keep what works, discarding what doesn't work as a failed practice, not a personal defeat. Work toward achieving maximum expansion with balanced support. To do this continuously takes great sustained focus and mental energy. You must constantly remind yourself of what you are doing and yet you cannot force it. You cannot fulfill these

requirements by imagination alone and yet you must have a mental picture that you physically recreate.

For example, work on “holding the tree.” Arms are held as if encircling a tree, alternately compressing the tree and expanding it, pulling it apart. Keep the resistance from up and down, front and back and left and right all working, coordinated. First, observe your teacher to learn the proper movements, coordination and sequence. Then apply exertion. To coordinate the body, the *I* must awaken, first consciously, then naturally, all the power of the body. Like a cat ready to pounce or a hawk about to dive, the *I* is focused and committed. It is that instant, before action begins, that one is looking for when standing. Find that moment, identify how it feels in every part of your body and what your mental state is, and keep it alive for as long as you stand.

With diligent and thoughtful practice, the student develops many such pictures and gains a deeper understanding of how the body works. Areas of tension are released, weakness and collapsed posture banished. The balance, support and leverage that you develop through standing can then be applied throughout your training.

For the more advanced student, standing training actively engages the *I*. One directs mental attention into specific workings of nerve, bone and muscle to feel how they are outwardly expressed. For example, you contract and relax certain muscles to raise your arm. To raise your arm against resistance, many other muscles must be used. The *I-chuan* student has the intention to raise the arm and that intention will allow her to activate the most efficient set of muscles to move the arm, in proportion to the force exerted.

Normally, each joint is moved by two groups of muscles: one active and the other relaxed. In *I-chuan*, one activates both groups, each reinforcing the other, using progressively smaller movements in dynamic balance: gradually, the two movements become one. This is what is meant by stillness in motion; it is also movement in stillness. As Wang said, “Small movement is better than big movement, and no movement is better than small movement. It is actually stillness that is perpetual motion.”

But, long before you achieve perfection in standing, you must learn to move...

WALKING

Walking in *I-chuan* practice is the application of everything learned in standing to the natural act of walking. Use the *I* to maintain balance, muscular control and skeletal support along with the added properties of timing, momentum and speed. As you learn to move in this way, each new effort will likely throw everything else out of balance. Analyze both mental and physical strategies and apply the results of your analysis to test your efforts. Abandon what doesn't work and retain what does, just as a writer erases

every word that doesn't add to the message or a sculptor ruthlessly subtracts from the stone, refining and reducing until only the essence remains.

An example of the mechanics of *I-chuan* walking: start with right foot forward, then slowly pull the left foot forward until it is next to the right. Then, sink your weight onto the left, open hips and shoulders, extend right foot forward, then let the weight go to the front foot. At the same time, use the body to move the arms in a coordinated manner, sink down again, and repeat. To better understand this example or any others in *I-chuan*, you will need a skillful and knowledgeable teacher so that you can observe and analyze how it is done. Once you understand it, don't memorize it. Throw it away. You are not learning techniques, you are learning how to observe and think.

Whether walking with full step or half step, we use the power of the neck to initiate movement and to dynamically maintain the center of gravity. The opposition of the neck to the rest of the body keeps the body connected and moving as a single unit. When walking, concentrate on opposing muscles: when going forward, think about going backward. At the same time up and down, left and right, front and back all working together, are coordinated. Whereas we worked in a relatively simple way with gravitational resistance when discussing *zhanzhuang* standing, now we must develop a more complex awareness because constant movement means constant adjustment of skeletal structure and using dynamic muscular opposition to maintain balance.

If you can stand and you can walk, you can add power.

TEST OF POWER

If standing is like a still photograph, test of power is like a movie made up of thousands of still frames and in each frame you are standing, meeting all the requirements. This process continues as you add more requirements, vary the speed and complexity of movements, improve your coordination and timing, and, very important, get rid of old habits that are no longer beneficial. Once you can move smoothly, you begin to add power. With power, the timing and sequence of motion should not lose coordination. Mental intensity (*I*) is used to balance momentum, coordination of exertion, and depth of intention.

Test of power uses movements based on sparring: stepping and punching. Since many beginning students have no background in sparring it is critical to observe how the teacher moves. To learn *I-chuan*, you must have a skillful and generous teacher. Observe your teacher with a critical eye. Ask yourself how and why he or she moves in a particular way. The more carefully you observe, the more you will learn. For example: How does he direct his movements so they are efficient and powerful. Where does the power come from. How does the footwork coordinate with hands. Is he moving within his abilities and maintaining his structure, never exceeding the maximum efficiency of

the range of motion. Is his neck pulling the rest of his body. Why does his hand go up in that particular way. How are the muscles of the torso working to power the limbs.

At first, the student practices to develop body movement and coordination. Learn a few practical sequences and test at very slow speeds to be sure that one is meeting all the requirements of standing and walking. Then, increase speed a bit, add some power. Occasionally, test using full power and speed. Then analyze the results. By varying speed and power, one tests the efficacy and efficiency of structure and power.

An *I-chuan* practitioner should look as if he's performing a real task: lifting a heavy weight, rowing a boat, doing a push-up. Look at how the skeleton moves when balanced. Opposing joints should have similar angles, movements should be coordinated, and the body should respond smoothly to changes in direction or speed. Momentum generated in one direction propels the body in the opposite direction. To pick up the left hand, you push the right foot down. To move left, start by moving right. Making use of natural momentum in a coordinated way leads to the most efficient body mechanics, power and speed.

It is natural to put energy into extending an arm or taking a step. It takes extra effort to retract the arm or pull back the foot using an equal amount of physical energy and mental attention. It is the continuous physical effort of *I-chuan* movement that builds strength and endurance. Empty, thoughtless movement is not allowed. Just as one's *I* directed the building of proper skeletal support, here it demands stable, clear action which fires, then relaxes, ready to repeat. (See the *song jin* discussion in the Power section.) Thus, one is always ready to move in any direction because one is balanced, centered and ready.

Once you have some idea of how your own body works and you have tested your own responses, you must learn to respond to another person...

PUSH-HANDS

In addition to standing, walking, and test of power, the *I-chuan* practitioner should learn to actively engage an opponent in push-hands practice. The same principles we have been discussing are again redefined by being put to use in a different manner. Now, instead of recreating a remembered picture of real work or working against gravity alone, there is a real, moving, thinking person to deal with..

Your own thinking, speed and momentum have to respond to someone else's. Your unconscious mind will be busy perceiving cues from your opponent. Your first concern is to keep your mind alert and be extremely sensitive to the other person's intentions as announced in his movements. Let him initiate action, but you get there first because you anticipated what he is going to do and you responded quickly.

As you push with the opponent, only use enough energy to respond. Don't waste your energy: make it efficient. Maintain the structure of standing when moving, always returning to a ready position after using power.

The same requirements as in other areas of *I-chuan* apply, but there are different applications. Skeletal support must be maintained, opposing joints balanced both in degree and angle of action, listening deeply to involuntary movements: all these things are still in play. Most important, the *I* (Wang's "general") must remain actively engaged, directing and responding. By increasing one's ability to listen and engage while maintaining the center, one can respond and recover effectively. If the *I* is strong, it will not be distracted or stuck.

Now take everything you've learned and put it all together...

HEALTH DANCE

When everything learned from serious practice of *I-chuan* is combined, one can work on health dance. This is moving spontaneously and freely with no fixed plan, incorporating all the requirements from all the practices and combining them creatively. However, it is critical to remember that you must have a reason for your movements and you must move within their range of motion. This is where the art shines and where one develops the most personal interpretation of *I-chuan*. And it is the most difficult to do.

One practices slowly at first, using the *I* to carefully monitor continuous use of all the requirements. Since there is no pattern to follow, the demands on *I* are high. There is no moving "on automatic." One increases the speed and loosens the steps while upping the intensity of *I*. This, like all the training, must be seen and analyzed to be understood. Again, critical, intelligent observation of a qualified teacher is your best guide.

CORE CONCEPTS

BALANCE

Active balance is what occurs when the force of resistance meets the force of thrust. If they are equal, the result is stillness, yet it contains action and requires continuous mental effort to sustain. This is a core concept in *I-chuan*. First, balance your skeleton by correcting the angles of the joints. Balance muscles by expanding and contracting from the center of the body. Stretch the spine by raising the neck and sinking the tailbone. Then, learn to move while maintaining skeletal structure and balancing muscular exertion. Just as standing stores the energy you create, moving expends it. Since you can't

expend what you don't have, you must stand long and hard to bank enough energy so you have it when you need it.

Likewise, mental intensity must balance physical activity. You must increase mental focus to develop physical precision. If you only work on moving without standing, you will soon be running on empty and your health and martial ability will suffer. If you only stand and do not move, you will be stale and rigid. Just as the tai chi symbol has two halves in dynamic balance, so do all aspects of the training: to move, you must stand; to stand, you must move; to go left, you go right; to go up, you go down; to go forward, you go backward; to expand, you must contract. To reach the higher levels, you must spend most of your time on the basics.

And, just as the tai chi symbol has a dot of dark within light and a dot of light within dark, so does each aspect of the training contain its opposite. You are never absolute, never 100% this or that, always a mixture of both, striving for equilibrium. It is the continuous and demanding process of working toward dynamic balance of body, mind and spirit that brings the *I-chuan* practitioner the increased clarity and power she has worked for. And it is the continued demand to increase the intensity of all its aspects that keeps the *I-chuan* practice alive, growing and powerful.

THE SIX HARMONIES

The six harmonies, also called ***six powers***, are up and down, right and left, forward and back. All must expand and contract from the body's center simultaneously. To take a step, first move down and back, then up and forward.

How does this work? For example, consider up and down. Gravity pulls you down with a specific degree of force, so you must counter gravity with equal muscular effort to rise up. This is natural, done by involuntary muscles so accustomed to working this way that we don't notice them. Balance comes from contracting and expanding opposing joints.

Picture the head as the top of a triangle, the feet as the base. The head is pulled upward, the feet push down, as if you are stretching a rubber band from the top of your head to the heels of your feet. This should feel like a gently compressed spring, not tight. Relax, but don't let go: again like a spring being continuously pulled apart and pushed together. Maintain this stretching triangle (and others) while standing and while moving. Continuous practice engenders deep stability, dynamic balance and increased energy.

Work with opposite directions at the same time. To develop the forward and backward directions, use the same balanced muscular pulling/pushing you used for up and down. However, gravity is now working on both sets of muscles equally and the

forward and backward momentum is generated from within the muscles themselves. Different. You now have to use your brain, your *I*, to figure out how to move your body in a balanced and lively manner while you are standing still. To do this for more than an instant, your mind must constantly expend effort. It is easy to get lost, so you must return over and over to your purpose. Again, this calls for engaged *I* directing physical work.

Consider pulling an unseen bow: one hand holds the bow still while the other pulls the string back. Both are active, ready to move, but not moving. Feel the connection across the back. Compare this feeling to simply standing with your arms up and your hands six inches apart. Nothing. When you pull the bow as first described, your muscles are pulsing, oxygen fuels the muscles, your brain directs the activity, and your body is actively engaged and supported. As you work at this training, you gradually increase the number and intensity of mind/body connections (bows) which direct your physical posture, thus increasing the physical and mental vigor of your standing.

During heavy standing, excess tension is released because the body works hard and, ideally, moves toward the natural posture and coordination we all knew as small children. When exertion increases, it must be fueled by increased circulation from the heart and lungs. One must balance this by corresponding relaxation. This does not mean one goes to sleep or collapses. It means one stands up, and one responds to the heavy physical demand by letting go of all the minor hindrances such as excess tension, daydreaming and incorrect alignment. Relax, exhale and sink the breath to the *dan tien* area. Keep this relaxed, smooth breathing while doing the hard work. The harder the work, the deeper and smoother the relaxation response. With fewer diversions of one's energy, more is available to fuel the work. Regular practice in this way increases one's mental and physical capacity to store and expend energy efficiently.

Develop these mind/body connections, such as pulling/pushing one muscle with another, one by one until you are powering all at once and you are fully expanded and balanced. At the same time, don't lose any of the preceding connections. It's an additive process and the intensity of maintaining more and deeper connections is part of the goal.

POWER

When using power, most of the body is relaxed until the split second of impact when all the muscles tighten and shoot power into the point of contact. One brings to bear all the connections and bows from standing. All six powers are coordinated and active. At contact, the back foot acts like a shock absorber, taking the impact and springing back to readiness. The neck responds to impact so that one is not driven backwards but rather forward and up. After contact, it is critical to maintain structure and mental and muscular power: do not abandon your requirements because of a false feeling of accomplishment. Keep continuously ready.

Alternation of relaxation and firmness (*song jin*) is the key to explosive power. The quicker the *song jin*, the more power one can express. A person about to jump “cocks” the hips and knees: *I-chuan* trains one to strengthen this reflex throughout the body. Again, notice the mental state at the moment just before action begins. Once the student can command the mental state, she can put power into a normal movement, holding the *song* until, at the last instant, it's *jin* at contact, then immediately relaxes back to *song*.

CENTER

An important concept to be aware of is the centerline. This is the imaginary line that divides left and right sides of the body. When faced with an opponent, you must protect your own while focusing your attack toward your opponent's centerline. You relax toward your center and expand from your center. Your actions are likely to be clean and precise if they come from a point of balance. To develop awareness of the center, use your *I* to be fully present here and now, relaxed, open and available to whatever happens. You can tolerate distractions by staying within yourself. Recall the discussion of *I*. In push-hands, the centerline faces the opponent. Develop the habit of aligning and coordinating standing posture so that it remains aligned when moving. Nothing changes when you move, but it is also true that everything changes.

Gravity pulls to the earth's center. It is natural to expand and contract from one's own center. In addition to left and right center, be aware of top and bottom center. It is this center area (*dan tien*) which, with proper alignment, integrates the upper half of the body with the lower or, unhappily, it is often where top and bottom separate, resulting in disconnected, uncoordinated movement. This can be alleviated by raising the neck. The neck is powerful and keeping it raised brings the rest of the body into alignment.

SUMMARY

Why learn *I-chuan* training?

First for health and second for martial arts. To develop an active and alert mind which can then train the body to be intelligent, responsive, coordinated and powerful. To abandon unhealthy and useless habits. To develop the ability to anticipate and respond quickly and effectively to outside forces.

In *I-chuan*, essence is everything. The search for the source of mental power and physical movement will help an individual not only with their martial ability but also with their health. It will develop the capability to withstand and thrive under the pressures of daily life. It will train you to direct your life just as you direct your body. As you have learned to tolerate distractions and keep focused in training, so you will be less stressed because the distractions of normal life will not bother you. As you develop the

power of your mind to keep thinking when under pressure in strenuous standing or quick push-hands, so you develop the mental agility and physical power that will serve you well in every aspect of your life.

Finally, I've found that *I-chuan* training aims to bring back the natural relaxation, concentration and power we were all born with. As you delve deeper, you find there is always some new aspect to explore and, often, a new insight will cause you to re-examine everything you have learned. It is practical, demanding and requires heavy physical conditioning and creative thinking. That is why there is nothing magical about this training. After all, we have drifted away from our essential nature, lived with stress, bad diet and poor posture for many years. We can't expect to rediscover and rebuild our minds and bodies overnight. I am sure my next paper will be quite different as I invent new ways to discover what is within. With a positive attitude, a skillful teacher and dedication, you will do well. As the Chinese proverb says, every journey begins with a single step.

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Anne Snyder is an artist, graphic designer and web developer. The journey from fine arts to martial arts began when she joined Sifu Fong's t'ai chi chuan classes in June, 1995. Sifu Fong teaches *I-chuan* standing and movement in all his classes as a foundation for both health and martial arts. This training became more and more interesting as her exploration of how the body and mind affect each other deepened. As a result, she has focused much time and energy on *I-chuan* and has derived many benefits from this powerful art.

"This paper reflects my current understanding of some of the fundamentals, concepts and practices of *I-chuan* as taught by Sifu Fong. Any errors in understanding or expression of these concepts are those of the student, not the teacher. There is a great deal more to this art than can be expressed in words and I find that my understanding is always changing. As with any art, there is always room to grow. If you choose to learn *I-chuan*, you must find a talented and generous teacher, as I have."

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