

# Great River

## JOURNAL

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### William C.C. Chen

A senior disciple of the late great tai chi master Cheng Man-ching proves that in tai chi, softness is really suppleness, which translates into the ultimate source of *fighting* power. To Chen, tai chi is the "supreme ultimate boxing"—and emphasize the *boxing*.

**T**ai chi chuan, the ancient and quintessential Chinese internal art, is becoming wildly popular in the United States. Riding on the wave of the new fitness craze, tai chi practitioners may be found among harried executives seeking release from stress, "New Ager" looking for new meditation techniques, and many everyday Americans searching for an exercise softer than the bump-and-grind of aerobics.

Americans are beginning to discover tai chi's immense health benefits, but with the art's new-born popularity this precise practice of stylized movements and self-defense may be in danger of losing its true art and power. One of the handful of genuine masters seeking to maintain tai chi's integrity—and function—as a dynamic martial art is William C.C. Chen of New York. Tai chi chuan can be translated as "supreme ultimate boxing" (or hands), and today Chen is one of the few instructors in North America who teach students not only to coordinate the mind and body, but to use this coordination for *fighting*.

The small, trim and modest Chen, now in his late forties, is one of the senior students of the late Cheng Man-ching, a major master of tai chi in the 20th century. Chen has been teaching for 30 years and has earned a remarkable reputation as a boxer despite his almost frail appearance and unpretentious manner. (Robert W. Smith, in his book *Chinese Boxing: Masters and Methods*, praises Chen's teaching skill and remarks on Chen's extraordinary softness, which allowed him to effortlessly absorb punches to his upper torso.

Like so many Chinese youths, Chen became interested in the martial arts as a teenager, attracted by the numerous Chinese martial movies and comic books. Chen explained that popular films carried the

imaginings of Chinese youths to the point where "some kids wanted to go to the mountains, looking for a teacher . . . Their parents really had problems with them!"

Chen was also looking for a teacher, but was unsure with whom to study. Then one day his father returned home from a visit with an "artist friend." The painter had grown up with the senior Mr. Chen in the same village and had become a well-known tai chi master. The artist was, of course, Cheng Man-

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Shortly after he began his study of tai chi chuan with Cheng Man-ching, William Chen was asked to assist in Cheng's internal training.

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ching, and so, quite by chance, the eighteen-year-old Chen began many years of study with one of tai chi's ultimate masters.

#### Lessons With the Master

Chen began his study by arriving at Professor Cheng's house at dawn once a week to practice. Soon he was coming daily and was asked by the Professor to help him with his internal power training. For this training Cheng required the aid of "unmarried youths" who possessed purer energy. Chen was one of three students helping Professor Cheng. This training was done at dawn each day for a year and helped the Professor refine his *chi* or internal energy to take punches or receive energy. The teenaged Chen eventually replaced the other two students and assisted the Professor morning, mid-day and evening.

About a year later, another stroke of fate offered Chen a further opportunity to study closely with Cheng. During a typhoon and earthquake, a portion of the garden wall around Cheng's house collapsed. Since Chen was already arriving early each day and leaving late in the evening, he was asked to temporarily sleep in a back room, near the collapsed wall, helping to protect the house from theft. His temporary stay lasted almost three years.

This close work with Cheng provided Chen with special insights into the art, and his teacher, not afforded by a regular student. "Some people believe Cheng Man-ching had super power. But, then when you lived with him, you discovered he was just a regular person. He was good, but he had



some quality or method that made him that way," says Chen. He describes Cheng as having a simple nature and vast patience,

"I got beat up and didn't win," Chen recalls of his first outing in a free-fighting tournament. His teacher was not pleased that he had entered the competition.

dedicating a great deal of time and energy to his tai chi practice. Otherwise, he was the same as anyone else.

#### From Free Fighter to Master Teacher

This realization, that good boxers are not supermen—"They have two hands and I have two hands"—led Chen to try *his* hands at open, free-fight tournaments. His first experience was a rough lesson—"I got beat up and I didn't win," he admits. Cheng didn't approve of Chen competing in the tournaments, because they required the fighter to be aggressive. But Chen felt that he had to try out what he had learned.

Having been "beaten up" once, Chen entered more tournaments. Having nothing to lose (since he had lost before), he was relaxed, but more importantly, he entered with a knowledge of what he had been doing wrong.

"I would win a couple of times, then I'd get eliminated again. But I knew that it was a good experience. And I found out what was missing—maybe body coordination was not right, or maybe reflexes were not good, so I kept on training."

Finally in 1958, Chen took second place in the Taipei tournament. (It has previously been reported that Chen *won* the championship, but he says now that he took only second place.) Chen was only twenty-three at the time and had been studying tai chi for six years.

Chen so impressed people with his fighting ability that he was invited to teach in



Master Chen demonstrates the application of Single Whip.

Singapore. Chen had been teaching beginners on Taiwan for some time, under Cheng's instruction, earning him the title of "Little Master," since most of his students were older than he. The move to Singapore assured Chen's position as a teacher. Today Chen observes of his teaching that, "The only time I had off was three months and seven days for my honeymoon."

In the time he has been teaching, Chen has developed his own short form. While Chen's short form still basically resembles the original yang style short form developed by Professor Cheng, he has made slight modifications. Chen's form stresses function or application, deleting certain postures and adding others from the yang lang form. Chen also refers to his postures as "movements," stressing that quality.

#### Tai Chi Power: "Softness vs. Hardness"

Many martial artists have been perplexed by the idea of a "soft" art that is able to overcome a "hard" one. Chen explains that it is not really that softness overcomes hardness, but "that people have problems staying loose." By softening up and getting loose, one develops speed.

"In other words, speed is coming from [the change from] loose to tense . . . If you are soft and gradually tense up, it doesn't work. You have to be very soft and suddenly change to

being tense—that gives you the power, that gives you speed." Chen warns that, "If you are loose and can't tense up, that is a problem too."

Tense and hard mean the same thing in this instance, but when the body is tense continuously, Chen explains that it can't loosen up enough to develop speed and power. This does not mean that hard-style fighters never learn to loosen up, but that such knowledge comes to them at a later

Of his free-fighting experience, Chen says, "I found out what was missing—maybe my body coordination was not right, or my reflexes were no good, so I kept training."

stage of practice. Then the hard stylist's speed will come, according to Chen.

Chen applies his ideas about what he refers to as "body mechanics" to other sports. Professional boxers and runners are among the non-tai chi people who come to learn from him. Chen attempts to teach them



to train their muscles to loosen up and to change the interval between softness and tension, explaining this in the same manner he uses with his tai chi students in developing their speed.

"A lot of people can't loosen up, but (everyone) knows how to tense up," says Chen. He points out that the top ten boxers—"are loose."

"Tai chi is important because it teaches you to get loose," Chen continues. "And then you have no problem getting tense. Everyone knows how to get tense."

Chen sees no contradiction or problem with an athlete, or even a tai chi practitioner, doing weight training, push-ups, or other exercises designed to build muscle—so long as the athlete also knows soft-side exercises. Otherwise the body will continually get stiffer from the tension and eventually "freeze."

The idea of keeping soft or loose also relates to *chi*. By softening the muscles, *chi* is able to circulate freely throughout the body. Tense muscles cut off the *chi* flow. Thus tai chi practitioners try to stay soft so that the *chi* can flow through the limbs as directed by their minds.

"The mind leads the energy, but you have to work on it," Chen explains. "That's called coordination, coordination of not only the body—the outside body—but also

the inside body, and also the mind."

### Chi in Modern Terms

Chen describe the workings of *chi* in quite modern terms. "To me, the *chi* is just like hydraulic oil, or water or air, that constantly flows inside the body. Normally you are tense all the time; that cuts off the flow. So, if you're loose, the mind flows easily. The mind is the leader of the energy flow." The mind has to lead the *chi* or energy through the relaxed, loose, soft arm. When Chen speaks of coordination he refers to not only the body, but the coordination of the outside and the inside as directed by the mind.

Chen describes hard style as being "just like a (car) jack, with two pieces of metal using leverage, and you need a lot of force. For this type of jack you have to have good strong metal and a lot of force to jack up the car. Hydraulic pumps (jacks) are not only involved with the outside piece of metal, they are (also) involved with the inside. Sometimes people only think about muscles, thinking that is all. But actually it is not."

Chen explains that tai chi is learning to use the inside with the outside, putting together the parts of the "hydraulic jack" that we all possess. Hard style people will look inside, if they are good enough, according to Chen, but they are primarily concerned with the jack's framework.

Many people feel that they can learn hard style arts faster than a soft style art. Chen rebuts this belief: "That is not true . . . you feel you are learning faster because every day you are training the muscles, and a few months later, ooh, you see, the arm is stronger. But, then, they don't know the inside part is missing."

In tai chi, muscles are secondary (this does not mean they are not used) and the arms are replaced by the body as the prime means of doing work. Chen asks us to examine a baby. When they pull you, they don't do it with just their arm, they use their whole body. Learning to do things without muscle is the idea behind tai chi body mechanics, achieving the coordination of the internal and external. Chen also adds that tai chi practitioners who have developed this coordination, but then forget the development of their bodies, are missing as much as the hard stylist who ignores the internal.

Chen describes the need to develop the muscles in this way: If you have a nice small

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"To me, *chi* is just like hydraulic oil, or water or air, that constantly flows inside of the body."

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compact hydraulic jack for your car, what do you do when you have to jack up a truck? The frame will not be large enough. "If you want to jack up big cars, and the inside function is right, then you put on the big frame," says Chen. In the end, Chen sees hard styles and soft styles as being one.

### Self-Knowledge

For 30 years Chen has continuously questioned himself. "I don't wait for people to question me," he says, "Anything I do, I want to know why." In regards to the future health of tai chi, Chen sees "things always getting better, instead of worse." We can expect to see great tai chi masters in the future.

"To me, anything I have, you should have," explains Chen. He is trying to make a "concentrated juice" out of what he has learned over the decades. He is offering this "juice" to his students.

"While you're teaching, you're trying to help someone else. Because people spend time, effort and money, you feel obligated. You want to give them something, so if you want to give them something, you've got to teach them something." Chen wants to give his students the benefit of his 30 years of practice.

Chen is also trying to put his "concentrated juice" into a book to be titled *Tai Chi Body Mechanics*. He hopes this book will not only show tai chi students how to use their bodies, but also offer hard stylists and other athletes new insights into body mechanics.

# Taoist Meditation

## NEI KUNG

Traditional Taoist Meditation is known to the Chinese as Nei Kung — literally meaning Internal Work. It involves a process of learning to focus the mind. This focusing is used to direct or circulate the body's intrinsic energy. This energy, called Qi (Ch'i) in China, is moved through the body along various acupuncture meridians, initially in the Small or Microcosmic Orbit then throughout the entire body in the Grand or Macrocosmic Orbit.

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