

# Combat & Healing

March 2002 Issue

Issue Number 48

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## Why Push Hands?

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Peter Smith

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Rheumatoid Arthritis

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Practical Self Defence

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Training in the Land of Oz

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PLUS

WTBA News, New  
Videos etc.



**Bluey, Trying to Melt the Snow Using Qigong**

# COMBAT & HEALING

The Magazine of the World Taiji Boxing Association

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## FRONT COVER

‘Bluey’ practising his morning Qigong!

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## Magazine News

Please note that this magazine as from sometime during this year will no longer be available in physical form. We currently have around 12,000 free downloads each issue and only a handful of paid subscriptions which makes printing only a few copies too expensive. Please go to our site at <http://www.taichiworld.com> or <http://www.taichiworld.net> and download the magazine.

# Why Practice Push-hands

by Michael Babin

This is a question that I think many, if not all of my students, must ask themselves on those class nights where I say “Switch partners and try it again!” The relative beginners are already nursing stiffening shoulders and those with martial experience are grumbling because they want to do “the interesting stuff”. Well, after 27 years of various push-hands methods, I still find it interesting to try and get push-hands to be even a pale reflection of the great martial learning tool that it can be.

I think there is a great deal of truth in the rumours that push-hands was invented as a relatively safe manner of training basic taiji-style close-quarters tactics. As with those taught by Erle, some of these martial “abstractions” are still useful for developing tactile sensitivity combined with an offensive and defensive use of quintessential taiji tactics, most notably: Ward-off; Roll-back; Press and Push. Such methods don’t have to be brutal to be effective learning tools; however, you shouldn’t take it too far the other way. Sadly, most modern versions have become overly sanitised

to make them safer to practice in a large group setting or for competitive purposes.

Today, instead of training sensitivity to a partner’s gross and subtle body movements as a prelude to being able to negatively affect their balance as you attack; such exercises can easily degenerate into competitive style “vertical wrestling” or going carelessly through the motions while discussing life’s tribulations or who won the latest sporting event.

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***You have to build your skills from the ground up in push-hands. Whatever style of taiji that you practice,***

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Having said that, it is also true for the highly skilled that you can do “lively” push-hands without seeming to pay attention. One of my former instructors, Allan Weiss, used to relate how his teacher, the late Lee Shiu-pak, would do vigorous push-hands with him and the other senior students while holding a lit cigarette in one hand as he easily fended off their frantic attacks.

However, not many are capable of such a display of skill and most of us should bring

our full attention to bear on our interplay with a partner.

As with doing taiji form; paying attention when you longer have to in detail is the foundation of developing real skill.

In terms of push-hands, it will probably take years before your body can respond instantly and spontaneously to your partner’s attempts to penetrate your defences — even in a relatively slow and civilized manner. You have to build your skills from the ground up in push-hands. Whatever style of taiji that you practice, there are a few generalities that should be observed:

The legs must be (or grow strong) as they must not only support your body weight but be lively in the sense of being able to move smoothly and instantly as required. In the beginning this refers to shifting smoothly from leg to leg in time with your partner’s weight-changes. In the long-run, you learn to move the feet so subtly that your partner doesn’t even know that you are “creeping” up on them until it is too late!

You also have to ensure that your body mechanics are structurally sound. For example, the ankles and knees are not meant to rotate, except minimally. Rotational movements must be in the hip joints

and the waist; however, if you are stiff or suffer from old injuries it is essential to gradually strengthen and stretch the ligaments in the groin/hip area.

As in form, one way of ensuring that your legs are structurally aligned is to ensure that the knees stay over the toes of the legs and that your lower leg stays relatively vertical in relation to the foot. This applies whether your weight is on the front or rear leg. The waist must be relaxed and supple so that it can direct the energy from the feet to the hands. You must learn to differentiate between the waist and the hips as well.

The spine must be erect with the chin lightly tucked-in so as to keep all the body's energy and physical centres aligned. Keeping the spine straight and relaxed with the buttocks lightly tucked-under connects the palms directly to the rear foot in terms of the potential for power generation. The shoulders must relax and not hunch upwards with muscular effort. This is particularly important when receiving force as raising the shoulders will likely upset your balance even if you can prevent the incoming force from making contact. The elbows must stay slightly bent and relaxed; the elbows only rise momentarily to be able to open as a prelude to a "closing" action to issue energy. They must never be allowed to rise or fall more than is necessary, as doing so opens the ribs and kidneys to

the tactics of a skillful opponent. The forearms must learn to "spiral" so that their twisting is connected to the total effort and not just a gross attempt to gain leverage by jerking the arms forcefully.

The wrists must always be changing from one state to another and never double-weighted (ie., you never have both hands Yin or both hands Yang). In addition, they must become sensitised to those subtle physical movements in your partners's limb that signal a change of direction or force before they occur. To put it simply, each hand has to be able to grab suddenly and effectively or open just as instantly, if necessary.

Similarly, while contact with your partner's limbs are essential; it should not become a case of sticking for sticking's sake. A skilful opponent will lure you into paying too much attention to one arm so that he or she can attack you suddenly with the other. You have to be able to connect and disconnect smoothly and in a supple manner while doing push-hands otherwise your skills will never rise above a basic level. This is based upon sensitivity in the forearms/palms that allows the experienced practitioner to feel the opponent's balance and force, while simultaneously adjusting his own balance and force accordingly (to obtain or maintain an advantageous position).

It is important to practice with

a variety of partners in terms of body weight, height and skill. If I may offer a few clues to developing skill, they would be: practice both light and heavy intensity as "lightness" of touch can aid in developing speed while "heaviness" of touch can aid in developing what Erle has called "connectivity" in terms of using all parts of the body in a synchronised and coordinated manner; vary the speed between slow and fast so that you get used to being able to flow and change directions at a variety of speeds; and, remember to help each other learn rather than turning it into "O yeah, pig-dog, I'll get you now!" when you are pushed over or touched in Stomach Nine!

At higher levels, sticking and following is primarily directed by the Yi or "intent" and this combined with the requisite technical skills are the keys which allow smaller and lighter individuals to develop the potential to defend against and defeat larger, stronger and experienced individuals. The goal of sticking/following should be to control the opponent's centre and domination of his freedom of movement and ability to issue force through his arms. This results in the experienced student having more and more constructive options while his or her opponent has less and less. Usually the right moment occurs when your partner is changing from a yin to a yang state or vice-versa. For example, you don't start to strike your partner when he is finish-

ing his own attack — he or she is just approaching the climax of their issuing force. You should start when he or she begins their withdrawal or starts another tactic (once you have a reasonable certainty that they are not trying to trick you as to their intent), that is when he or she will be most vulnerable. In some ways, however, the key element in learning how to use these physical skills is to develop a sense of timing. Responding instantly and intuitively to a defect in your partners attack or defence without “stopping” mentally or physically is the key to successful push-hands (and self-defense for that matter).

While it is true that skill in “timing” and “sensitivity” are often dependent on inherent aptitude (good boxers — whether Chinese or western — are usually born, not made); it is also true that long-term practise with a variety of partners under supervision can lead even the most obtuse to the “doors of the miraculous”. Don’t be surprised if it takes a while though, especially if you only get the chance to practise with a partner once or twice a week. Oh, and it can be tedious if you don’t have a good training partner — and that cuts both ways — so keep it in mind when trying to deal with your partner’s efforts!

## Tai Chi Workshop in Spain

Paul Brecher

Before I mention the one week Tai Chi workshop in Spain this June 2002. I would like to thank all the students who came along last June for making the workshop such a great successes. Seventeen students from London came along plus people from Finland, Germany and Spain. The eight hours a day training was all out doors in the mountains of western Spain on the Portuguese boarder. We had three eat as much as you can organic vegetarian cooked meals a day and glorious sunshine.

The students were an excellent group who learnt the first three Qi Disruption forms and the first three Wudang hand weapons as well as some Old Yang Style double pushing hands attacks and counters, some anti grappler methods and how to attack a knifeman as well as deeper explanations about the subtle internal mechanics of fa jin and the medical explanations of dim mak. As well as the use of intention, awareness and vision in the build up to and the heavy contact of combat. And many of the chi kung healing benefits within the forms and training methods were explained, so there was a balance between the martial and the healing aspects of Tai Chi.

This **June** we will do more of the Wudang Qi Disruption forms and Wudang Qi Disruption Hand Weapons and a lot more Old Yang Style double pushing hands attacks and counters. And whatever else people want or other stuff that just happens. The one week workshop will be in southern Spain near the little Andalusian fishing village of Tarifa it is at the southern-most point of Europe. There are many hotels and camp sites near by and we will probably spend the days training on the beach in the shade of the pine trees. Being out in the fresh air with the natural energy of nature all around makes for the best training.

Paul Brecher is the Senior Instructor for the WTBA in London. To find out more about the one week workshop in Spain in June visit [www.taiji.net](http://www.taiji.net) or call Paul on **020 8 264 8074**

# Peter Smith's Hao Ch'uan Taiji Workshop

Held on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> & Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2001 in Folkestone Kent

*(Workshop appraisal by Colin Orr. WTBA)*

**P**eter Smith the WTBA Representative for the UK recently hosted and held his own Hao Ch'uan advance level taiji workshop in Folkestone, which was organised by Christina Campbell the WTBA Secretary for England. The seminar venue was held at the Metropole; a huge Victorian building that still retains its olden day grandeur; an ideal location, situation and position, that forms part of the beautiful Kentish landscape positioned on the cliff tops overlooking the Channel, with Dover and the Channel Tunnel just three miles to the East.

The two-day intensive seminar was well attended by various Taiji students travelling from various locations throughout the country. The first day started with a warm welcome from Peter, which cast aside any inhibitions or worries anybody might have had who had never met him before. The workshop area could not have been more ideal, very spacious, with an inlaid pine floor, offset with very large windows emitting plenty of natural light, creating a good ambience for the workshop.

The first day (Saturday) started with some really good detailed warm-up movements. These eased us into the day, realising yet again how important these simple preliminary moves are prior to our taiji practice. Not everybody had touched the Hao Ch'uan level including myself, but it was refreshing to run through the basic Yang-lu Chan first third movements, then correcting and working our way through the advanced level of the Hao Ch'uan old Yang style, also covering the small and large circle movements.

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***With Peter's teaching technique it made learning very comfortable. "Fine details" were the words of the day. Peter's congenial and individual attention made everybody feel at ease***

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This was good for somebody like myself, as I am still trying to refine the basic postures. Once we had revised the Yang Lu-Chan with corrections we were ready to progress further with the finer details of the Hao Ch'uan level. With Peter's teaching technique it made learning very comfortable. "Fine details" were the words of the day. Peter's congenial and individual attention made everybody feel at ease, espe-

cially during the explanation of correct balance requirement and the necessity of the position of CV1 over the heel!

On the Saturday evening it was decided that most of us would go out for a meal. Christina managed to book us in at a favoured Chinese Restaurant in Folkestone (where Peter is very well known). The evening turned out to be most enjoyable, with the thought that the evening out had bonded the workshop together. We left the restaurant feeling very satisfied and just right with the amount of red wine that flowed. The Proprietor bade us goodnight and genially thanked us. It was like saying goodbye to an old friend.

The next day (Sunday) we began early, starting with warm-ups and continuing our form correction with detailed Qigong we covered the previous day, including refined corrections for the 'Three Circle Qigong' and 'Leg Slapping Qigong', which enhanced Qi circulation greatly, and then progressively continued on working through the form corrections and the Hao Ch'uan level. The remainder of the day we worked through and up to 'White Crane Spreads Wings', as always paying attention to full detail of movement.

The day also brought the added bonus of the Folkestone

Annual Air show, with Jets intermittently thundering overhead. After a lunch break taking in the fine weather and the Air Show on the Cliffs, it was then back for “Any Questions?” and revision in general. It was decided to finish early because the Air Show populace was expected to depart at around 16:30 hours; consequently we anticipated the exit roads to be jammed at that time. We said our farewells and departed at around 16:00 homeward bound, filled with new in-depth knowledge of Taiji. We all found something special in Peter’s extraordinary teaching skills. I for one am looking forward with anticipation to the next Hao Ch’uan Workshop to experience once again the quality of Peter’s knowledge.

## And Again!

Peter Smiths latest workshop appraisal

Another interesting and thorough workshop was held in Folkestone, hosted once again by Peter Smith the WTBA UK Representative on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> and Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November, this being the 2<sup>nd</sup> seminar and follow-up of the September workshop on the Hao Ch’uan advance level and once again was organised by Christina Campbell the England WTBA Secretary.

The turn out was good, with participants from various parts

of the country keen to learn more of this advanced taiji level. The weather was fine with plenty of autumn sunshine that creates that special ambience at the Metropole where the workshop was once again held. Although initially the temperature was chilly, Peter soon had us warmed up with invigorating warm-up movements designed to open the tantien to encourage our internal energy to flow, ready for some revision of movement and posture the September workshop covered.

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### ***warm-up movements designed to open the tantien to encourage our internal energy to flow***

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After corrections Peter set to, with his minute detailed explanation of movement and posture from single whip onward, reassuring us and going over movements as many times as anybody wanted, showing that now familiar gentle yet thorough teaching technique that is his hallmark of precision and assurance immediately setting everybody at ease. Mid way through the morning the three-circle qigong was practised to loosen and relax any stiffness that may have crept in. At the end of the first day some of us decided to meet and eat out again, only this time on a democratic vote we went for an ‘Indian’. After a wet at the bar we sat down to a delicious meal with plenty of choice and hence sampling of

each other’s various dishes. This was accompanied by some of Peter’s ‘Italian’ stories where most of the time the socialising with his Italian hosts went into the small hours of the morning after ‘twisting his arm to stay up’!! Enjoying every moment but however unable to understand very little of what was being said at the table!!!!!! By now it was time to leave our restaurant and a most enjoyable meal. Peter then presented single roses to the ladies, closing the evening on a very pleasant gesture.

The next day Sunday, started with refining the Yang Lu-Chan fa-Jing movement ‘punch and deflection’. With everybody else I found this to be an excellent warm-up. With Peter’s refined explanation and demonstration we were all practicing this dynamic move much better than we had previously. I have found in the past that this letting go of Qi from the tantien root has been most beneficial to ‘release yang’ but now after these refinements found the physical benefits even more so, releasing negative energy and excess yang that we all know is so important to dispel.

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### ***The next day Sunday, started with refining the Yang Lu-Chan fa-Jing movement ‘punch and deflection’. With everybody else I found this to be an excellent warm-up.***

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The rest of the morning was spent finalising the Yang Lu Chan first third hao Ch'uan level. This took us up to the lunch break when some of us made for home while the rest completed the day specialising in Fa-jing development and Dim Mak point strikes to fine tune the martial aspect of the workshop.

Once again, where had the time gone! I know I can speak for everybody when I say, thanks again Peter for another enjoyable and learned workshop; we always leave with a lot more in depth knowledge than when we arrived at the beginning of your seminars. We are all looking forward to the next continuation in the New Year.

... Further details telephone Christina on (44) 01227 730039 or Email

## WTBA Annual Gathering/Workshop May 2002

**Book Early as we are limiting this camp to 50 only!**

Erle Montague will hold his annual workshop for all levels of student/instructor in Australia with an **arrival date of Friday the 17th of May 2002 and a leaving date of Friday the 24th of May**. Erle Montague will begin teaching on the Sunday and will finish his sessions on the following Thursday. Training for the first Saturday and last Friday will be taken by Mause and Rob Eaglen. NB:// Price is the same for attending only Erle's sessions or all of them! So please make an effort to come for the whole week as it is an important part of our WTBA organization for people to have time to meet and train with each other.

**Where:** It will be held on Taiji Farm Australia's permanent training facility. An article on this is on our web site.

**Accommodation:** (BYO tent). Or one can be hired for you.

**Cost:** We will try to keep the costing at the same level as it was in 2000. However, this could change if we come up against any unforeseen costs etc. Please contact Mause Eaglen at **wtba@better.net.au** for the various prices. Or phone her on **+61 (0) 2 6679 7015**. I think the cost for last one was around AUD\$650.00 which includes accommodation, food and training! (that's around \$US350.00 or £220.00 for the week!)

**What Taught:** This year Erle will teach the 12 Wudang Hand Weapon sets. Also covered will be Yang Lu-ch'an's form corrections. Also **half of the Baguazhang Linear form** will be taught as well as the Yang Shou-hou **Broadsword form**. Qigong will also be covered at an advanced level. And as usual, anything else that everyone wishes to cover at the time. This time, Erle will be a captured instructor as he will be staying at camp. NB: Wooden Broadswords will be available for purchase at the workshop. **We may not, however, be able to fit all of this in!**

From overseas you would either arrive at Sydney airport then take a domestic flight to the Gold Coast where you will be met. Or take a flight to Brisbane, then a bus to Murwillumbah where you will be met.

From elsewhere, you could take the train to Murwillumbah Rail station where you will be met. Or you could bus it from perhaps Sydney etc.

# RA, Pain and Tai Chi

Josephine Anderson

Everybody, at one time or another in their lives, gets sick. And for most, the recovery of health is a foregone conclusion, usually a simple matter of responding sensibly to the body's warning that life is made up of limits, the internal balancing of which is our physical and mental well-being.

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***There are those, however, for whom the normal limits of life have been involuntarily and intractably exceeded, those upon whom the infernal marriage of a chronic, disabling condition has been foisted that wears away at them slowly over an entire life-time.***

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There are those, however, for whom the normal limits of life have been involuntarily and intractably exceeded, those upon whom the infernal marriage of a chronic, disabling condition has been foisted that wears away at them slowly over an entire life-time. It is this smaller, but more significantly tragic, group of life's travellers

to whom I address what follows.

My own experiences teaches that we can be healed, if not cured. We can return to a full, energetic life if only we can define, objectively, and set a limit to the sum of our fatigue and discomfort. The illness, after all, which is inextricably mine, can only be as the other of the potential for well-being that is also mine. If this lesson can be taken to heart, a new balancing of forces should be possible which casts ascending energy and exuberant life against the ever receding background defined by our pain and disfigurement.

The first step in defining, objectifying and setting a limit upon our illness, is to embrace it slyly. Rather than turn away from our unwanted partner, the body which harbours the painful disease, we must cajole it into revealing the nature of its discontent — what in our behaviour is most likely to provoke its anger, or make it withdraw into the secret recesses of our being to work like slow poison. Its intelligence, which appears hideous at first, because it is hidden, will become revealed, transparent, in the end not divided against us at all, if we begin to realize that the pattern of its attacks is consonant with the pattern of our neglect. It turns against us just as we have turned away from it in anger,

despair, fatigue or complacency. A new marriage of sorts emerges, and although not one made in heaven, or the one which prevailed in our mother's womb, it is one which can make us more sensitive, aware, and in some ways, more productive than before.

The crucial step in defining this new relation to our disease is to realize that our pain can be a re-integrative force. The original symbiosis of mind and body, which at birth is unconsciously upheld, and which falls apart, in the face of modern living, is strangely restored when we fumble upon pain and disease. In tearing our health asunder, pain puts mind and body back together; for when the body is in extreme pain, the mind is taken up with nothing else. But herein lies the ultimate paradox. Pain that is preoccupied with itself can either lead to a new insularity, a new blindness, in which the mind loses sight of the body's wholeness (the cycle of its life and energy), or, in so arousing us to the primitive, it can prompt us to act back upon ourselves, the wholeness of our body being reinstated and mobilized through specific actions we can choose to take. Pain is thereby transformed into the grimace which signals the goal of fresh effort.

This new relationship of body and mind, which is curiously contrived out of a return from

pain, involves a third party. This, of course, is the context or world of our action. But, for us, this must be a world within the world, a world that is freed from the bondage and pressures of an external environment. The meaning of this will become clear in the course of the following discussion.

I have been afflicted with Rheumatoid Arthritis for eight years, and I am still trying to come to an understanding of it. I have thrown up my hands in despair many times because the disease could only be grasped indirectly, as those inverted shapes in the mirror of my mind by which I was told what not to do. It is possible, however, to find in each of the body's prohibitions, or negatives, a corresponding proclamation or positive. One can arrive at a clear-headedness about the links between these "don'ts" which combine to create an image of what can still be done. Everything hinges, however, on a will that does not falter or fall into retreat. When I am in a mode ready to test the limits of the disease, the mind can be brought to bear on discovering what will be the fullest disposition and most salutary system of movements for my body. This disposition and these movements are my empowering; they are my new sense of self — my Tai chi self.

Through the ups and downs, the joys in the small accomplishments and the griefs in the many set-backs, I have learned

not only to cope with RA by means other than medication, but to succeed better than where medication would have taken me. This is not to say that medication is not necessary in the acute stage of the illness. I took Methotrexate for two years. But to continue taking medication indefinitely, without at least a break from it now and then, blinds us to the body's ability to compensate, adapt, and possibly recover on its own. Although there is a great deal of advice already in print, it is written by health care professionals who lack the personal experience, and that salutary, if shocking, punch of inspiration that could help others to break free from a history of anguish and dependency. For in the end, no list of household appliances, bodily prosthetics or health supplements will help, if we don't feel like getting out of bed in the first place.

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***I always emphasize the importance of energy work before anything else.***

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When people ask, therefore, about how to deal with their arthritis, whether it be osteo-arthritis, or the autoimmune conditions, like Rheumatoid Arthritis, Lupus, and Psoriatic Arthritis, I always emphasize the importance of energy work before anything else. All diseases, especially autoimmune disorders (diseases in which the body attacks itself), are ultimately

manifestations of an energy crisis, a pattern of imbalance in which the body suffers a loss of meaningful communication within the whole of itself, and with the environment. That is, the body is no longer able to tell the difference (establish a limit) between itself and a hostile invader. One is reminded of Picasso's famous painting, Guernica, in which human, animal, and even inanimate, bodies are represented by their constituent parts; torsos, limbs and heads are ordered with the same abstract freedom as elements of geometric reality; their flat angular shapes, which fall, tumble, slide, and bump into each other, reflect an ongoing metamorphosis that is both fluid and forced, open-ended and trapped — in the end a picture of unbearable pain.

Nevertheless, an energy, infusing and yet surpassing every single part, is transmitted through the jumble of heads and hands. Each dismembered body contrives, in falling apart, to force the onlooker onto the next in a kind of guided disarray of movement. Hence, despite the dismal outlook of the picture, or rather because of it, we are left with the impression of creation itself, of pure and primordial force which holds the final product together even as something essentially unfinished.

If I may extend the metaphor slightly, our experience as observers of Guernica is akin to the situation of the clockmaker at the beginning of his work.

Once he has collected all of the pieces on the table, he must refer back to the idea of the clock in his mind, both in the sense of an activity which will assemble the pieces in a particular temporal order to produce the clock as a finished product, and in the sense of an organization of functions, which is threatened on every side by small variations and contingencies, that, in turn, can lead to a final break down and a return of chaos or pure energy. In other words, to move forward, the clockmaker is continually driven back to the source, to the idea of the clock in his mind, which he feels compelled to revise into a more encompassing system of movements and countermovements that takes into account new variables. The idea stands in defiance of mechanical systems; and yet, in support of those very systems, as forms are put to the stress of their own inherent movements against the movement of other forms.

The fragments of Picasso's painting strewn before us — the grotesque visual puns, the forced connections, the unholy alliances — reflect the strain of a consciousness at once crippled by the deconstruction of its pain, and yet descending to the source of a new bodily regime. It can choose, therefore, either to break free into a more comprehensive, more internally articulated world that undermines its previous sense of limits, or it can break against that world with ever more frightening alienation. In

illness, it is easy to recoil into Guernica's confusion of identities, its endless round of rampant disintegration, its stalemate of redemptive action, but the consequence is identification with the disease.

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***My point, then, is that pain can drive us back to the primordial creative act, to that pure energy (or clockmaker's idea) which is prior to every anatomical system***

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My point, then, is that pain can drive us back to the primordial creative act, to that pure energy (or clockmaker's idea) which is prior to every anatomical system, and yet the field within which those systems, if they are to exist at all, emerge as integral, functioning wholes. It forces us back to the origins of our disease, and therefore, to the possibility of our return to the whole of health. Hence, the importance of energy work, which can facilitate this process and enhance the outcome.

"Energy work, what's that?" a person may ask, "and if it involves moving around, forget it." When exercise of any kind is suggested to those who suffer from RA, the reader may well understand why they frequently turn a deaf ear. In their state of unbearable pain, they can't even contemplate a walk around the block, much

less a sustained discipline. How does one break free of this dilemma? The answer lies in Tai Chi. For Tai Chi is energy work par excellence. When I use the term energy work, in connection with Tai Chi, I mean activity which opens up the meridians to the internal organs for the free flow of energy. Free flowing energy is circular energy, which, in running its circuit from core to extremity, brings a potential for healing to every afflicted part.

Tai Chi actualizes this principle, making use of the mind in the body's recovery, so that not only are multiple aspects of the physical person newly acquainted through the "goal" of the action specified by the posture, but the body, in turn, through this act, takes its place once more in a universe of other, less recalcitrant entities. One begins to sort out the confusion between myself, the world, and what is possible in it.

The thing to be emphasized here is the "imagined goal" of action. If Galileo was right in believing that motion is the essence of life, Aristotle was even more correct in believing that every motion has a goal. The goal of motion is especially critical for those who occupy the abbreviated time and truncated space dictated by disease. I have found that through the right sort of goal, and thus, through the right kind of motion, one can find release from the strictures of one's "immediate environ-

ment” — the world of staircases and heavy doors, of tuna cans and shower controls that converge upon the RA sufferer as insuperable obstacles. The goal is always free flowing energy which is manifested in the motion of pure form — the patterns of movement, that is, that encourage a new articulation of the limbs, not as things opposed to an encumbered world, but as integrated extensions of the hips and spine. Through this form of repetitive, but ever deepening, and self-aligning motion, the environment fades away as the body reoccupies its own proper internal space.

The RA sufferer can readily imagine how the strengthening of the joints, which is implied by this kind of “free work,” is less intrusively approached here as the uninhibiting of the original suppleness of the anatomical parts involved. Other forms of motion (exercise programs with purely external goals) often only renew the narrow demands of an environment, the result of which is comparable to a bad brace, a recompression of the joint which can increase inflammation, and prevent energy from reaching the rest of the body. In Tai Chi, by contrast, the practise of the same form, in ever varied expressions, imparts to the limbs the lasting consistency of being tied to the body on its own terms, and only then, to the world at large.

“But the pain, how can we get past the pain, just to be able to take that first step?” Let us return, for the sake of those still bedridden, to those first steps, or the practice of walking, which, like Tai Chi, “requires the functional integration of a great deal of sensory and motor experience.” When Andrew Weil, in his book *Spontaneous Healing* says that the criss-cross pattern of the limbs in walking “generates an electrical activity in the brain that has a harmonizing influence on the whole central nervous system” (p. 188), we may add that the “disinterested goal,” by which the body is abandoned to the nobility of its own limits in such activity, encourages the pure variations, the infinite substitutions that can be grasped as harmonies capable of deeper meaning.

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***Let us examine walking more closely, so that we may recommend to she who is still disabled, that the decision to “walk through” the Tai Chi form be made from the depths of a spontaneity onto life.***

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Formerly, without pain, our bodies moved through the world somewhat like automata following familiar paths laid out since birth. But to lose the unselfconscious connection to this picture, as though traversing its byways for the first time, to feel against our pain-

ful lumbering steps the unevenness of the pavement, as though we were learning to walk all over again, is to be made aware of the possibility of “pure movement.” In a world no longer familiar, simple movement recoils into countermovement as the body continually shifts position in order to get around itself. I begin to take a step, but by the pain of the forward motion I know that I must readjust my hip, which, however, brings my foot into contact with the street in a way that forces me to realign my toes and heel.

We are forced, in other words, to adopt a way of being and moving that is based on an interplay of opposing and unstable forces — the proto-dynamics of yin and yang, if you will. But the dynamics of accommodation illustrated here (or opened up to us through difficult walking) suggests a resolution in the kind of self-possessed motion exhibited by Tai Chi. Reconsider how the shock to the body of a newly de-mobilized world strikes home into our consciousness. Inert in the face of the uncertain, every step confronts us as a perilous venture; our attention becomes galvanized by those small changes in the environment.

The zig-zag lines in the pavement, the cracks and holes, the smooth and uneven planes, all impress us by the breadth and volume of their recurrence; and what begins as a fixation on the accidental, gradually becomes a responsive tension

throughout our being, a balance and an elasticity that allows us to handle the world anew. In other words, the succession of our faltering steps, and how we have learned to compensate with some other part of the body, will help us to master quality and rhythm, and not the steps themselves, a certain field of action, and not a separate body in an independent world. The body, then, and the world to which the body belongs, are henceforth always in the making, and what is presently visible, is but a preliminary version standing in relation to a greater, gradually evolving whole.

Walking compels us to renew our relationship to an immobilized world. This world, in which we will never again feel entirely at home, is real for us, not so much as permanent objects, as currents of sensation (often shocking and aggravating the joint) with which we are continually recovering grounds for trust. As such, it is not the world, but the process of recovering movement with which we now become familiar. By walking again, then, the world can seem not only a moving stream happily carrying forward our past experience, but an ever-widening stream in which the body sports in the endless variations of our first attempt to deal with our handicap. Resistance and reaction, movement and counter-movement, diastole and systole, their oscillations establish a new regularity providing the foundation

for an internal, or escalating power of action.

Movement, then, which begins as discontinuous or disjointed activity (yang) emerging out of immobility (yin) to which it feels compelled to return from accidental obstruction or fatigue, becomes movement which finds rest within itself, achieving equilibrium by accepting change (yin) while imposing change at the same time (yang). The result is a “rest-in-motion,” or the self-regenerating motion of the Tai Chi form. The ability to find this rest-in-motion is critical for the rehabilitation of anyone suffering from chronic joint pain. We heal by practising the art of rest-in-motion — not only as something brought to a high point of formal development in Tai Chi, but, within the choreography of the disease, as a daily design for living.

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### ***We heal by practising the art of rest-in-motion***

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The goal of action, the rest-in-motion which transforms the symptoms of illness into the system of energy, can equally be approached from the other side. The idea of achieving effortless motion allows us to go back to a moment before the first step where we can speak of “motion-in-rest.” RA sufferers learn to rest all over again within the restrictions imposed upon them by the disease. When we sit, we sit com-

pletely still, in an attitude which, seeking to avoid pain, denies the substance of the chair, rather than possesses it. The healthy person “takes her rest.” The chair or bed is a source of palpable support which, at an organic level, is immediately accepted as an enhancement within the regenerative cycle. The RA sufferer, in contrast, can only be “released from discomfort.” The reality of physical support binds and pulls so that the chair or bed has true regenerative value only when it has disappeared from sensation or become indistinguishable within the diminishment of pain. The difference is that between the rest that confirms the mutual dependence of self and chair within the structure of support, and the rest that needs to forebear weight and pressure until, by some other means, it achieves independence from all structure. For the RA sufferer, rest begins where the shape of the chair leaves off.

From this experience, however, two saving graces of an opposing, yet unified nature emerge. Rest that seeks the margins of support yields what, in antiquity, the followers of Aristippus of Cyrene called “internal contact.” This is a form of self-awareness bent so acutely towards the interior that nothing on the outside truly exists, except for sensations, like pleasure and pain, which have reached us, “made contact,” by way of the mind. For the RA afflicted, the sensation of pain, into which

the morphology of support has been resolved, can never be brought to an end by rest. Rather, the sensation, that begins as a disruption in the regularity of weight and pressure on tissue, and which is not diminished, but often aggravated by palliative support, is, instead, overwhelmed and reversed in the restoration of the energy cycle, just as a stream is overwhelmed and reversed by an incoming tide. We rest, in other words, not to stop the pain, but to restore the internal resources and frame of mind needed to deal with it. On the one hand, then, we discover where the physical shape of the chair leaves off; and, on the other, how our pain defines its limit and is transformed into its opposite, or pleasure.

The margin of the binding and pulling physicality of the chair, where we take our rest, is energy — energy that is restored to the body by no other means than the prolongation of pain within the formal constraints of the chair. As such, it is precisely what is finite and limited about the chair (or imposed structure) that focuses the power of emergence of what is potentially unbound or infinite. It is this unbound or infinite (renewed energy and ebullient health) which becomes our pleasure just because it lends new meaning and direction to the effort of rest.

By means of the energy cycle, a certain equilibrium, even independence, of the interior world is reasserted in the abil-

ity to restore pleasure from chronic pain. But, by the same token, the outside world is also reasserted (in the wide open repertoire of objects in which the mind orders and objectifies itself). The chair into which we forced our bodies, becoming both source and limit of our pain, now resumes (through our renewed vitality) its place as a thing among things. When we leave ourselves as pain ridden behind, what comes into view through the aura of heightened health is the innocence of what appears at first sight, the simple arrangement of objects in their unaffected, inherent brightness.

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***The chair into which we forced our bodies, becoming both source and limit of our pain, now resumes (through our renewed vitality) its place as a thing among things.***

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What had been most individualizing about our disease, what had absorbed us in a kind of obsessive attention to the details of our pain, now washes clean into the immensity of space around us, any part of which can be summoned by the “strangeness” with which we have come to feel pain — pain as though it were a memory of our pain, pain as though we were feeling it vicariously, through the walls, the potted plants, the furniture; pain which is low, high, off to the

side, but pain which is no longer only itself. And it is the force of this estranged pain — pain which is always on the verge of something else — that, like a reverse electrical current, pits itself against what is most debilitating about our condition, inciting us to take on our pain — to play with it, to rediscover our bodies through it, in the same way that a child becomes aware of its body by the space in which it performs its tricks and gestures.

The attempt to rest in defiance of pain and palliative support for the sake of something other than simple absence of pain is the road that leads to motion-in-rest. It is motion, understood as the transformative ebb and flow of the energy cycle, that emerges from complete stillness when pain and the desire to master the pain achieve a responsive co-existence. I rest to restore the will to accept and deal with the pain, and the pain returns as a sign that I have lived fully, that I have expended, or gone beyond the limits of, my health once again. In this circle we have motion within rest, but equally, we have the unity of a perfect form; the same form structurally that is achieved (although obversely) in effortless motion or motion that revolves through obstacle and adaptation out from a central core.

The inner resource gained from rest, from truly having learned how to rest, then, lays down a definitive goal and pat-

tern of action, even before taking the first step. Just as in walking and in Tai Chi, we strive for primary form (where the body is statically so well integrated through the postures that they become one form), so in rest, we seek a circularity of movement within which the body can renew itself infinitely; the body from the excess of its pain, overflowing, and opposing itself through internal action which, as its own aim and satisfaction, returns to and replenishes the body like a cycle of blood.

We get up from our rest, then, and say, “no more of this grovelling in self-pity. I am still alive, the same life that is in the air around me, in the earth which bears up under the weight of my convalescence.” And just in that instant, when you no longer care about what others may think of your limp, you venture that first step — painful at first, but almost endowed with an elementary life as you feel compelled to emerge whole, not withstanding the unevenness of the pavement against your hard, inflexible feet. Yes, you’ve done it. You take the next step, and you’ve done it again. You look up, dizzy with effort, a little worn in fact, but encouraged. You breath the air deeply, just as you imagine your stagnant lungs being awakened for the first time in a long while. You feel the sun on your skin, just as you’re able to imagine it without the miserable distraction of pain, and there’s almost something golden about the warmth; you

become more aware of the sounds around you, like a prisoner who has been let out of solitary confinement. It doesn’t matter if you’re not free of the disease yet. The sound of laughing children makes you want to jump hoops too. You just want to see if you can do it again.

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***We get up from our rest, then, and say, “no more of this grovelling in self-pity.”***

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Yes, but there’s still that damn’d joint at the back of your foot; you know, the one that connects the heel to the back of the ankle, the one you had no idea existed before the disease. And your toes and your knees... and oh yes, it’s also creeping into your left hip. Should I crawl home to bed and die. Or, do I take that path to the end, ‘singing a summer song, smoothing over the interval of pain, with the smell of roses in the garden beyond,’ and your motions will begin to reflect the “onward” rhythm of your thoughts. The gait becomes slower, more methodical, and in a sense, smoother than normal, as the swinging of the arms helps you to take that stride over the interval of pain. The limp gets smaller and smaller until it may finally disappear. In the course of time, the natural gait, replacing the limp, opens up the necessary channels of energy which will bring about a more permanent reduction of inflammation. The meridians,

which are said to pulse and flow in the world as well, are tapped and localized in the surrounding space by the goal of action, enlarging your scope of movement into an invisible topography that allows you to transcend your limitations. Though disease may flare up again, inflicting some other part of the body or an old sight with greater intensity, one’s success in being able to adapt to the unexpected continues to grow, exerting its influence on the body, which is thereby unable to reject ever more complex enhancements to its “energy systems.”

In a way, one is given an opportunity for health usually not available to an individual who is simply “not sick.” One painful body part calls up another to help it along, and that one calls up another to help it along, until the body becomes transparent with all of its functions, and one begins to fathom health as “optimal health.” Health, then, becomes more than the routine medical definition of a body restricted to an efficient running of its parts. It is a “will to health,” an enlivened state of being which continually transforms who we are and the world around us.

Pain, then, which can so easily lead to a sense of emptiness from the disturbance of daily routine, of those abilities which even a child takes for granted, can also become the cue for a secondary kind of action — the abstract posture or the Tai chi form. By reintro-

ducing a sense of routine within a very real world of its own, Tai Chi not only pinpoints the disturbance at the heart of the pain, but allows one to deal with it by the purity of its integrative actions, thereby reinforcing our weakened sense of self when we realize we can do just that thing we thought we couldn't do.

However, to ensure such integrity, one must pay attention to proper form: for example, using the body to deliver the action of the palm, rather than pushing the hand out independently of the body. If movement doesn't begin from the centre — although no harm is done in the short term — vital energy will eventually become trapped in the shoulders and in the chest, and in the long run, stiffness and blockage will lodge itself in the rest of the body. It is the purity itself, the abstraction of form, which allows us to mimic real action in the world, and, thus, bypass the disturbance of pain altogether.

Disease, then, may shut us down or open us up. If we want to turn a bad situation around, all that is required of us is that we surrender ourselves to the disease, while still wanting to beat it, a state of "waiting receptivity" and "expectancy." It is like the hunter in a daily quest for food through unknown terrain, single-minded in our purpose, and yet, paradoxically, that inner resource for discovering the direction of the trail will have surfaced only if the immediate

purpose is suspended, and we get caught up in the trail itself, looking about us with unaccustomed eyes, and registering the signs with unclouded vision. Movement and counter movement, following the signs, and yet completely losing ourselves as we become one with the prey. It seems a far cry from the mind-set of the hunter to that of the disease-afflicted individual, and yet both are expressions of a return to the primitive.

The trail itself will have liberated us from the primary drives — hunger or pain — which opened us up in the first place. We return to the picture of the clock in the clock-maker's mind, the symbol of a world — "the form of forms" — which continually takes its rise out of the pressures of an environment, and yet encompasses it timelessly. As we falter in our steps, and learn to recover, we begin to see how what used to be common and familiar can work in tandem with the small and the out of the way — the neglected and marginal; an uncommon eye for their common pattern identifies them not only for "me" but for "you," to the extent that we have fused our personal suffering with a larger experience.

## NEW VIDEOS

We are currently trying to get into full DVD. However, it takes around 20 hours to encode one title! So it will be a while before we are able to offer full DVD. And the media is still very expensive which will add to the cost.

### **MTG225:**

#### **The Formal Day to Day training of the Montaigne Children: V. 3**

Carries on from Volume One below. Including YLC form up to "Fishes in 8" plus some push hands and some punching and kicking practice. \$30.00 (USA) or £20.00 (England) [33.00 (Europe) (Plus Postage)

### **MTG224 (Also On VCD)**

#### **Chang Yiu-chun's Broadsword of the Yang Family (Now Available)**

Probably the most dangerous weapon ever invented, this form is also one of the greatest healing forms ever invented. It comes in a direct lineage from Yang Shou-hou and is considered to be the Original Yang Family Broadsword form of the Old Yang Style. With fa-jing movements, leaps and jumps, this form will balance you internally as well as balance out the amount of minerals and chemicals in your body. For fitness, there is nothing finer as it works every muscle and sinew in the body over only a five minute period. This is not the broadsword form that most people are used to seeing as it is based upon the Original Yang Lu-ch'an Taijiquan form and not the Yang Cheng-fu version.

# Practical Self-Defence?

Alex Yeo

I was reading the article “Realistic Self Defence” (June 2001 Issue) and was reminded by a conversation with a friend a few months back and also all the nagging thoughts I had all this while about self-defence.

As you can see in the title above, I titled this article ‘Practical’ with a question mark. Let me explain.

I’m fully convinced about the lethal self-defence capabilities of Taijiquan. Only an idiot, and a very stubborn one at that, will still insist that Taijiquan is a New Age dance thingie. I am convinced that most violent situations in the streets have to be met with realistic and violent methods. Just standing there pushing here and there ain’t gonna get us anywhere except maybe the hospital, i.e., *if* we’re lucky.

However, the main question I always have is, “Yup, it’s realistic, but is it practical?”

First, let me say that I have no authentic combat experience whatsoever. The closest I’ve ever got to it was the time in school when two boys held my arms while a third tried to hit me and I had to aim at his family jewels to get out. But frankly, that was just a boyish school fight instead of a life and death issue.

The next closest would be sparring sessions, in school again, where the students would mindlessly “you kick me, I kick you back.’ Come on, how ridiculous was that!

So you see, I have no combat experience, so I can’t tell how true it is that encounters are usually over in 3-5 seconds with one man left standing, not I wish to find out!

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***I still want to find out how to defend myself without hurting the other guy so much until he’s half dead, or really dead, and yet without me having to sacrifice an arm or an eye.***

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BUT, and that’s a very big BUT, after hearing all this, I still want to find out how to defend myself without hurting the other guy so much until he’s half dead, or really dead, and yet without me having to sacrifice an arm or an eye.

You see, in my country, we have very strict laws about violence. The law on self-defence, even though written very clearly in black and white, is often very vague when the matter ends up in court.

There was once when two guys, let’s call them A and B, got into a fight. Apparently A had something against B, they quarrelled, and A picked up a stick (metal rod if I remember correctly) and attacked B. B then panicked, picked up a metal chain from the ground (how convenient was that!), acted by instinct and swung it at A. A then conveniently stopped the chain with his head and broke it (his head that is, not the chain).

And the verdict? B pleaded self-defence. After all, A was the aggressor and he did have a weapon in his hand and he did yell, “I’m going to kill you @#\$%,” but B still went to jail for manslaughter.

In another incident, this time a road rage incident, C attacked D’s wife and D went to her rescue (as every loving husband would), broke C’s nose, and got imprisoned for “using excessive force.” His sentence was lighter than C’s since C was the aggressor but hey, he still went to jail and spent a few months in jail worrying if C’s friends would go create trouble with D’s wife for revenge.

So you see, in some countries, we might be able to walk away from killing a guy by pleading self-defence, but in mine, the only guys who can do that are the police (and even then, they have to satisfy certain criteria

before they can open fire), not normal citizens like most of us.

When I practise the form, I usually visualise the applications in my mind, striking the imaginary opponent at this or that lethal point. Training our instinct this way can help us to react just that little faster to save our skins when we really need it.

However, I'm always worried about how I would react in a real combat situation. Already there had been a few occasions when I reacted instinctively when I was startled in the street or I sensed someone getting too crowded into my personal space. Remember, B still went to jail because he acted on *instinct* and in *self-defence*.

I have this nagging thought. What if one day I really got into a fight and I used 'excessive force'? Breaking a nose can be considered 'excessive force'!

I don't want to go to jail, I don't want to worry about the thug's friends going after my family for revenge, but then, I don't want to be the one scattered all over the ocean in powder form. So what can I do?

At this point the traditional 'I push you far away' comes to mind. Maybe this will work. I push that guy far away, he gets convinced that I have some superior martial art and goes running away in fear. Well, I've

been told quite a few times, this works only in movies.

Besides, what if they attacked me as a group? Contrary to what we see in movies, gangs don't attack one at a time, the whole lot of them jump on you instantaneously, so how many can I push and how fast? Before I finished pushing one thug the next is already at my ribs, and yup, unless they get thrown into the path of a moving vehicle, they're just gonna get up and get back into the fray. But then, if I drop them I see a future behind bars...

So please, tell me, the self-defence methods we learn now may be realistic, but is it practical? I was once told about this teacher in my country who refuses to teach the more lethal aspects of his martial art, not because he doesn't know it, but because, as he says, "What's the point? You still can't beat the law." (His classes emphasise more on evasive than on offensive methods.)

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***It would seem then that sometimes, our biggest enemy is not that drunken bloke coming at you with a broken bottle, but the law of the land.***

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It would seem then that sometimes, our biggest enemy is not that drunken bloke coming at you with a broken bottle, but the law of the land.

(I must say in defence that although my country's laws are very strict, they have resulted in my country being one of the safest in the world, though 'accidents' still happen.)

How about simply staying out of trouble then? Well, tell that to the poor teenager a couple of weeks back who was minding his own business when he was set upon by a gang and was already dead before the gang leader said, "Gee, sorry, it was dark and we couldn't see clearly, but it seems we might have taught a lesson to the wrong guy." Try saying that to the dead boy's mother!

From all my investigations and readings, it seems that there may just be a solution.

If I master Iron Shirt, perhaps I can stand there and let them hit me without hurting me. However, as I've been told in no uncertain terms – don't be ridiculous, it doesn't work that way!

OK then, Plan 2. Reading the manuals by the old masters, there is a level of skill in the martial arts where we are so good that we can control the opponent without hurting him.

There are basically three levels. First is where we are the opponent's match, no one can hurt the other. The second level is where we are twice as good as the opponent, we can drop him with minimal injury to ourselves. The third level, and this is the level I'm talking about, we are so good, more

than thrice as good as the opponent, that we control him without hurting him, much like a baby can hit an adult all he wants without even causing a scratch.

However, I have been told that there is no such thing. It is simply impossible to control an opponent without hurting him. It simply doesn't work in today's streets.

On the other hand, there are very esteemed masters who believe that this is possible, only that it is a skill either lost, or possessed by very few today. After all, the masters of old never had combat practice, their daily lives were a combat experience itself and they spent the whole day training. It was either fight or be killed, not like modern times when we can break our partner's nose and still go for coffee together after lessons still the best of pals.

Two other possibilities could be qin-na and the Qi Disruption Katas. Basically, we drain the opponent's qi such that he simply cannot continue to fight.

BUT, and that's another big BUT for you, qin-na requires years of training before it will work, otherwise it is merely physical (as opposed to its true internal nature) technique which any good opponent would readily get himself out and counter-attack.

As for the Qi Disruption Katas, frankly, I don't know

how they work (because I just graduated, am still looking for a job and can't afford to buy the tapes or get personal instruction in NSW) but I believe it can 'control without hurting,' right?

So then, what does that spell for the beginner or any practitioner who has yet to fulfil the years of training to reach that level? Or as some critics would say, "it just ain't possible."

In the end, I still believe that it does and can work. Guo Yunshen, of Xingyi (Hsing-Yi) fame, was said to have been imprisoned because he killed a man by accident in a duel. Upon release he concentrated on using his art in a 'control without hurting' basis, and his result can be seen in his disciple Wang Xiangzhai, founder of the Yiquan system. Wang is said that after he had fully mastered his master's teachings and travelled around China refining it, he was never defeated.

If he could do it, why can't we? Surely our modern-day streets can't be more violent than early 20<sup>th</sup> century China's?

Honestly, I have no answers. I still practise dropping the imaginary opponent everyday. I hope to get a job soon and start saving up to buy and learn more from Erle's tapes and also to fly over to NSW for some realistic combat training. Even then, I pray hard

that I would never have to fight.

Drop him and go to jail, or get carried by six men. Hmm... the agony of choice...

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### **Erle's Note:**

I think that we must distinguish between 'fighting' and 'self-defence'. If you are 'fighting' and you kill someone, then you could very well go to jail. However, if you are defending your own life, and it can be proved, then you will not go to jail for killing an opponent who has a weapon or if there are a group of men attacking you etc.

And it is my belief that it is indeed more dangerous nowadays in the streets. The reason is that anyone and his dog can get the means to kill you easily and there are many more maniacs out there willing to kill for pocket-money for drugs etc. At least back in feudal China, would-be attackers had to do some training before they attacked you and by that time, most of them learnt better!

*It's easy to stay away from 'fights'. Just don't! However, if life is threatened, you only have one choice!*

# TRAINING IN THE LAND OF OZ

Alan Clark

The head of the World Taiji Boxing Association may have left the Northern Rivers region of upper New South Wales, but the heart remains, beating (and fa-jinging) as strongly as ever.

The head, of course, is Erle Montaigne who has shifted south. The heart I'm referring to is the permanent training facility run by long-time WTBA secretary Mause and partner Rob Eaglin, where I was fortunate enough to spend a few days in October.

Anyone who's been involved with the internal arts for a while will experience or hear tales of rip-offs, exploitation and charlatans. My experience at the Eaglins could not be further from this often unfortunate truth.

Their knowledge, patience, wisdom and experience was inspiring, and I can't recommend their facility highly enough, especially for people like me who are relatively new to the Montaigne way.

I first obtained a copy of Erle's basic lu-chan video about two years ago after having learnt various other forms previously for about 6 years.

Other wonderful teachers such as Annie Blackman in New Zealand have helped me make some sense of this intriguing form. But the opportunity to leave a full "taiji life" for a few days at the Eaglins has kick-started my awareness of some of the foundations the form is built on.

They also pushed along my push hands, got me started on small san sau and "gave" me the first qi disruption kata.

Like Annie, they also make you feel part of a special family and that's important too, especially for someone who usually practices alone.

But the experience was special not just for the training, form corrections, and taiji fellowship with the Eaglins, including son Andrew, and the three other students there during my time at the farm, and who all were also my teachers.

The backblocks location adds a wonderful dimension. Snakes, dingos, wallabies and dozens of varieties of exotic looking and sounding birds all contribute to life there.

Though I have called it a farm, the only produce is taiji students.

The 100-acre property is in fact part of a wildlife corridor linking two major parks, and the Eaglins are currently stripping down internal fences and planting more trees to their bush-clad land to enhance its wildlife appeal.

There can be little more inspiring than to be halfway through morning qigong training when a couple of wallabies hop into a nearby clearing to look you over, then amble off, as happened on my final day. Or quietly doing some push-hands with Rob while a spangled drongo freefalls from 40ft to just above our heads.

Coming from a country where the most vicious predators are probably the Milford Sound mosquitoes, it was also a special thrill to see a sly, shy whip snake squirming off along a path near my tent. And then there was the two-metre long python skin shed overnight on the training ground. Though we never saw the snake itself, Mause reckoned the absence of rodents in the vicinity was a sure sign it lived nearby.

As for the taiji, the tuition offered depends on the students' needs and

interests. The various qi disruptions, bagwa including the rare linear form, "real" push hands, stick form, qigong, lu'chan and cheng-fu taiji forms ... the whole deal is on offer.

While most training is on a cleared level ground outdoors, there's also a large covered shed, walled to the sides and rear but open at the front for fresh air and the inspiring sight of sharp-peaked Mt Warning to the north. A couple of punchbags are usually swinging, while handpads and other training aids are available.

An annual camp is held in May, and next year's will focus on Yang's broadsword form. Probably about 80 people will be there, including Erle Montaigne, and that seems as good a way as any to check the facilities out.

But for me, as a relative beginner, slipping over to the Eaglin's during a quiet time was probably exactly the experience I needed. And I'd thoroughly recommend it to anyone.

Apart from everything else, it was superb value. At \$A40 a night including fine vegetarian food, the priceless instruction was virtually free! You'll need a tent and sleeping bag, but that's all part of the experience, and there are a couple of good showers and four "loos with views".

The only other costs were transport – flights to and from the Land of Oz, and a bus south from Brisbane to the nearest town, Murwillumbah, at about \$24.

Assuming Air New Zealand keeps flying and with fingers crossed that Virgin Blue goes trans-Tasman, I hope to make it an annual pilgrimage.