

Chern Chyu Kuan's New Approach to Teaching Rooting

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This past December, I journeyed to Chia Yi City, Taiwan, with two other Americans--- Sam Edwards and Bruce Shapiro--- to study with Chern Chyu Kuan at the Rur Yur Tai Chi Center.

Although all of us had practiced Tai Chi Chuan (Taijiquan) for over 15 years the week we spent in Chern's school learning his unique method revolutionized our understanding and opened up new levels of ability and energy.

What Chern has done is to distill the Cheng Man-Ching method--- itself already a distillation of the Yang Family method as taught by Yang Cheng Fu--- into a way of practice that puts total emphasis on developing "root".

I had always been interested in this aspect of Tai Chi, but Chern's method puts root as the first and foremost quality of the art, the one from which all its "branches" --- healing, meditation, push hands, fighting, sword work, etc.,--- grow and without which they are empty.

His students are renowned in Taiwan for their push hands ability, winning a disproportionate number of medals in regional and national championships. But push hands is surprisingly not emphasized a great deal at the school.

The primary method of developing root is the form--- the Cheng Man-Ching short (37 movement) set, done in a very precise and unique manner.

CHERN'S FORM

While it is impossible to learn a form from the written word, some of the essence can be described, and applied with great benefit to any form which one practices. The first quality is **deep relaxation**. Although we all imagine that we are relaxed doing the form, at Chern's school one learns to relax even more deeply.

The arm positions are much lower than in other styles (hands never going above shoulder level and usually at waist height or lower), encouraging the soft chest, and "sunk" shoulders and elbows called for in the classics. Further, the back, buttocks, and leg muscles are also deeply relaxed--- both from the shorter, higher stances and the continual checking for any muscular tension or holding by the instructors.

Although at first relaxing this deeply makes the body feel incredibly heavy (indeed, in some classes you feel as though you weigh a thousand pounds!), gradually the heaviness is replaced with a light fullness, as the energy which has been dropped into the earth is returned, with interest.

The second, and most important quality, is **awareness of the bubbling well**. While other methods utilize the dantian (within the lower abdomen) as the major locus of attention, or project energy out through the arms and hands with each movement, the Chern method puts the “Yi” (Chinese for awareness/intention/mind) at the Yong Chuen, (Yongquan) or “Bubbling well”--- a point in the middle of the sole, an inch or so back of the metatarsal arch.

The Yong Chuen is held to be the point on the body where one connects to the energy of the Earth, but this point must be opened or “activated” by putting--- and keeping--- the awareness/ intention there.

The third major principle of the form is that **all movement emanates from, and is connected to, the Yong Chuen**. When shifting from one foot to another in Cloud Hands for example, the shift is a continuous pushing or flowing pressure from the weighted foot, until that foot is completely empty and the other, now weighted foot, is full.

The body rotations are similarly motivated by an imagined turning or spiraling of the bubbling well, rather than by an initial turn of the waist or spine, although these are the over manifestations.

This quality of moving from the root soon gives the practitioner the experience of “moving root”--- that is, having the same stability and depth in motion as one has in static postures such as standing meditation.

This was the “secret” that unified the standing work for rooting with the moving practices (form, push hands, walking chi gung) which I had been doing separately for years but had never been able to combine.

The final principle of the Chern form method is that **all weight shifts are 100%, and all rotations occur after the weight shift is completed**. This again differs from the 70-30 stances typical of most Yang style Tai chi.

However, it allows the weighted leg bubbling well to be fully activated and allows much free rotation around a central axis--- much like the image of a globe which Chern often employs.

Once again, it is impossible to learn a method from the page; however, even a period of experimentation with the above principles will almost certainly produce noticeable changes. I leave this to the reader.

PUSH HANDS

In general, push hands techniques are not taught separately. Rather, it is expected that techniques will arise naturally in response to a partner/opponent, while the Chern method player focuses on staying in the root(s) and issuing energy, when required, from the ground.

To this end, stances are generally high--- often standing straight up--- and the back straight.

A powerful drill that develops both root and fa-jing (discharge force) involves one person standing several feet in front of a concrete wall, while his or her partner attempts to push him directly into the wall.

No neutralizing, deflecting, dissolving, or counter-pushing is allowed. While at beginning levels this may appear to be a mere contest of strength (and it does build the leg power and all connections out to the hands), at the higher level it is truly a contest of mind and energy: whose root can become the single root for the entire two-person system.

While I have “specialized” in rooting for many years, and have utilized effective rooting as a major component in winning three U.S. push hands tournaments in the past four years, I was powerless to resist Chern’s push.

Despite a strong, low, grounded stance and a strong intention to receive his force into my root, Chern effortlessly lifted me and pushed me to the wall--- not once but several times, at my insistence--- as if I were made of paper. With positions reversed, I tried to push him, but it was like pushing a mountain.

OTHER PRACTICES

While I cannot claim to have grasped the entirety of the Rur Yur school method in one week, I am aware of a number of other practices which they employ in addition to form pushing.

These include: the Yang style sword form, and a unique style of sword fencing; slow-walking and standing (postures from the form) practice; a “Bear Style” of chi gung, akin to Cloud Hands practice; and a special use of the concrete wall to develop internal substance.

The atmosphere at the school is extremely open, friendly, and happy, with children, animals, visitors constantly coming and going.

Chern and his advanced instructors also utilize their developed chi to heal, and there is a continual stream of people coming into the school for healing sessions.

Many evenings are spent with raucous dinners and impromptu gatherings, in which we were enthusiastically included. The open-hearted spirit of the school extends from Chern to his instructors and virtually all the students.

Living at the school and training from 5 a.m. until late evening, we were made to feel totally welcome and at home.

I know that I express the feelings of Sam and Bruce as well when I say that the week at Rur Yur was one of the most energizing and delightful weeks I have ever spent. Our week at Chai Yi ended for too quickly but we left with promises to all our new friends to return soon.
