

## Interview with Peter Ralston

June, 2005



Epi van de Pol and Rob van Ham interviewed Peter Ralston during the 1 Cheng Hsin Holland Camp in De Glind, Holland in 2005. The interview was published in “Taijivizier” the magazine of the Dutch Tai Chi Association or Stichting Taijiquan Nederland (STN).

*Q: I wonder what you did in your Tai Chi training? Because for most people, I think, it's the set which they train. When I hear you talk about Tai Chi it is more than just a set.*

People who think Tai Chi is only a set are mistaken. Tai Chi Chuan is an internal martial art that was started about 800 years ago, by someone unknown, and then found its way into the Chen village, by somebody who is known – Wang Chung Yueh. The Chens were impressed with the art and they are probably the ones who developed the first sets of movements, known as Chen style. Yang Lu Chan then got it from the Chens and made it into one longer set.

Before there was any set of movements, there was Tai Chi Chuan, a martial art based on Taoist principles. Over time, the sets were developed and, later on, games like Tui Shou or push-hands were created to help people learn and develop certain skills. Also added to Tai Chi practices were Ta Lu and San Shou, and then later, sword. All these things were created for people to practice so they could learn the principles of Tai Chi. Various people came up with their own movements and different ways of doing Tai Chi, and these became the various styles. But in the beginning probably none of that was there, and yet Tai Chi still existed. So Tai Chi represents some kind of human development that was obviously also a martial art based on principles that weren't well known at the time. They weren't just about strength against strength, using weight and size against an opponent, or blocking attacks, or the other usual elements of fighting.

*Q: When did you start with Tai Chi?*

As a teenager, I did Judo and Jujitsu and Karate and then got interested in the Kung Fu's. After that, I started getting more and more into the softer, and more fluid styles. And when I was nineteen, I started Tai Chi.

*Q: In California?*

Yes, San Francisco, Chinatown. I started doing a set of movements and some push-hands

routines. I became interested in the whole idea of Ch'i flow, and what was behind the set of movements, why they were created that particular way. I was also very interested in the idea of yielding and internal power, which I thought of as a power that didn't require brute strength. There was a long way to go, but it was the beginning of what eventually became the Effortless Power that I teach today.

I would practice Tai Chi movements and very quickly in my training I was feeling what I thought was the ch'i flowing. I would go up on the roof of the place I was living then, and if it was cold, I could make my body warm when I did the Tai Chi set. I had all sorts of feelings in my hands too. It felt like I was developing something, and indeed I was. I didn't know what it would become, but I kept doing Tai Chi.

Since I was interested in what's effective in martial play, in time I became discouraged with the idea and feelings of ch'i because I had no power with it. It felt good, but I couldn't throw somebody down simply because I had these feelings. I thought I should be able to make flies fall out of the air with my ch'i, but I couldn't, so I continued my search.

In those days I was doing lots of training (8 hours a day), and I was also teaching. In all my practices, I was conscious of looking for something that I wasn't finding, and so I began to create. One of the first things was a game I called Yin Tai Tao. It was a way of practicing, and it had different stages in it. First you couldn't grab or hold, you had to just yield and maybe push and knock people down. At another stage, you could grab, but most often it was all about being relaxed and doing things without effort. I knew I wanted something in that domain.

After awhile, a friend named Emmett Linderman came along and showed me William Chen's Tai Chi Tui Shou. That was a good direction, so I quit creating from scratch for awhile, and I went after what was already available. I learned William's Tui Shou, first from Emmett, and eventually from William himself. I also learned San Shou from someone else, and Tai Chi Sword from another person. I learned the Ta Lu from Wong Chia Man. The more I learned, the more I became interested in power with less strength. I kept moving in the direction of grace and ease and effortlessness.

*Q: How old were you then?*

"My early twenties. But I did Tai Chi Tui Shou for a long time after that."

As you know, I also did Aikido and Judo and boxing, various Kung Fu, Hsing I and Pa Kua. In learning to appreciate what these other arts could do, I began to see what was missing in each art. I also realized that it didn't have to be that way. Around 1980, I started creating Cheng Hsin Tui Shou to broaden the scope where Tai Chi was limited. It involved throwing as well as uprooting, and the principles if not the techniques from many of the other arts. Pa Kua, for instance, has a lot of mobility and motion, and that's very effective. Aikido has expansive motion and throws and falls. Judo has grappling and flipping.

*Q: And groundwork.*

And groundwork, yes. I started to include everything to make it a truly effective multi-dimensional art. Making the art big enough -- still in the Tui Shou domain -- and with the basic ideas of yielding and relaxing at the center of it. Cheng Hsin Tui Shou is not just a game. Not just an exercise, you see?

*Q: Who has really impressed you in Tai Chi -- is it William Chen?*

I have a lot of respect for William Chen, and, sure, William impressed me. He is skillful and powerful, but perhaps even more impressive is the fact that he is an honest and straightforward teacher. I've known lots of teachers and William is one of the more direct. Most teachers are not, and I've studied with many.



In the beginning, as with most young martial artists, I was fascinated with the Chinese culture. I lived in Japan too for a long time and I was fascinated with the Japanese culture. So of course, in the beginning, there was lots of fantasy about Tai Chi and other Asian martial arts. All the idiosyncrasies and cultural differences that you run into just become part of the fantasy. But they shouldn't be. Once you get past the fantasy and you really want to learn, these start to become stumbling blocks, difficulties, a lack of communication, sometimes a lack of straightforwardness, a lack of honesty. As I kept working to understand, I came to realize that not every teacher is a good teacher. Not that they are bad people, but sometimes they don't know what's true and they don't want to say so, since their teachers never did. They hide behind their beliefs and the traditions that they were taught.

You rarely get a teacher that says "I don't know." I ended up wasting too much time studying with people who didn't understand, they just "believed." William Chen was refreshing because he could say, "I don't know," and he could also try to work things out, and he was pretty honest and upfront about it. He wanted to make things work and he wanted to make things work for you. So I really appreciated that from William, coming from the background of other people who didn't do that. So yeah, Chen... and Huang Sheng Shyan was obviously impressive. The Malayan guy in Kuala Lumpur

*Q: But you never met him?*

No, but I saw videos and it was impressive. Huang was doing more with Tai Chi Tui Shou than most people do. He also had good grounding and probably used intrinsic strength. He was joining people, throwing them down, and popping them this way and that with ease. Looks like he was having a good time . . . .

I have seen and met some excellent teachers, and some pretentious phonies. But most of what people are doing just isn't what I'm interested in.

*Q: So what is it that you are interested in?*

I am interested in the truth. I am interested in people being honest about what they actually experience and understand. And, in a martial sense, I'm interested in how something actually works. I am interested in mastery, not just hearsay, not just fantasy, but actually being able to make it mine, make it work in reality.

*Q: In what way was Tai Chi convincing to you when you started practicing and investigating these things? Was it the teachers or the principles that were put forward?*

Well it's always the teachers, isn't it? We can hear about a principle or method and we'll say, "Hey that sounds right." But if the teacher is not presenting it well, or has no real understanding of it himself, then you are probably not going to be interested. And sometimes a teacher is just excited about a fantasy rather than the real thing. But, in time, I learned to look for the principles, the ideas that were put forward. Yielding, sticking, grounding, relaxing and internal power, ch'i, listening, joining, things that are intelligent and real and actually work. I have done lots of martial arts and I learned over time that being hard and rigid is not the way to go. There is more effectiveness and mastery in being supple, and being more relaxed and graceful, than there is in trying to use strength and brute force. I was moving in that direction already, and Tai Chi helped that development a great deal.

*Q How did you discover that fluidity or relaxation was more effective than the strength approach?*

Well, I don't think that there was one thing that stood out. One of the things I realized early on in Judo was that it was supposed to be easy. It wasn't supposed to be hard, and when you flipped somebody or threw them, there was a way to do it that was easy and a way to do it that required lots of strength. It was obvious to me that the easy way was better. Doing it the easy way required more grace, more sensitivity to balance and timing, more subtle skills than just picking a person up and throwing them down using strength. So that gave me a direction to go. Also, while competing, I'd run into people who were more flexible or more fluid, and people who were less so. I could see who won. Being rigid just blocked people up.

I would play with people who were like rubber, which can be very impressive compared to a rigid person. They can bend and twist and yield and get into a position to throw you before you know what's happening. Karate was just wrong for me, all that blocking and rigidity. I liked it when I was a teenager, and it was exciting, but it only took me two years to master it and realize it was flawed. I had to have experience to say, "Hey, this doesn't work well."

When I got into the Kung Fu's, it was the early seventies, late sixties. Nobody had heard of Kung Fu then. I stumbled on it, and I liked the fluid movements, and I could see it was better. Fighting with this fluid changing and rolling from one move to another. And no blocking. It was more in the direction I wanted to go, so I started studying that. Over time, with all this actual experience accumulating, and being intelligent about it, you begin to realize the power of yielding. Skill is about thinking it through, understanding it for real, not just staying with what you can understand at first or going with a fantasy that sounds good but you can't do. You learn what people can and cannot do, beyond what most people can see. There's power there.

*Q: But to go back to the original question, what did you find in Tai Chi that you didn't find in other martial arts? As a very deep and profound question.*

Tai Chi was far more subtle and more intelligent than most of the other martial arts. It had more complexity and a broader range of principles. Some martial arts are good, some of them are not so good -- but most are pretty simplistic. Sometimes they're clever, but even these have few principles and a kind of general methodology that is limited. Even if it's good, it's limited, you see? They practice one idea. But Tai Chi has more than one idea, and I liked that. There are many ideas and different levels of practice, including the idea of a mastery that is more than just proficiency. To achieve it, you have to have a kind of body transformation and mind transformation. It's not just learning techniques and that's the end of it. There is more to it.



*Q: You had to change as a person?*

Yes, you have to change, to develop your mind and develop your body and your reactions, your nervous system. It's much more profound and subtle than many martial arts. Things like relaxing and grounding, and the care taken with posture and how to stand on the ground, and how you receive a force, and what you do with your body. Many arts don't work such fine distinctions. Tai Chi has a lot of good principles and it's a very interesting art, a very big art

and that's what attracted me. The softness appealed to me, the ability to be gentle in warfare appealed to me. And the idea of mastery, being able to handle things without working up a sweat appealed to me.

*Q: I think that idea of mastery is attractive to a lot of people who start doing Tai Chi. So what made it possible for you to achieve that mastery? Obviously a lot of hard work...*

Yes, of course. I think mastery is attractive to a lot of people, especially those who get

into Tai Chi and Aikido. That's why so many switch over to Cheng Hsin. As I've said in one of my books: it's funny that, with an art as big as Tai Chi, as profound and as sophisticated and as intelligent as it is, you have almost nobody who can do it. You have almost nobody who actually deeply understands it, or can really do it in a fighting context. That's a problem in the Tai Chi world.

I think that Tai Chi has limited itself. It becomes very difficult to achieve the kind of mastery that's talked about in the classics when people limit the art to a set, and to fixed-step push-hands. Practicing those will not give you the mastery that you're seeking. There is too much pretense and not enough honesty, and the way it's practiced is not inclusive enough, it is not open enough, it does not have a big enough heart, so to speak. People have to be bigger than that before Tai Chi will actually grow into what it should be.



*Q: This boils down to your criticism of Tai Chi?*

Yes, that's more or less it. That is my criticism.

*Q: In pushing hands, for example. Because a lot of people do pushing hands and...*

And there are people who developed some good skills in that. But how many? Not enough. Not a fraction of the amount of people who practice it and there are some real genuine skills to be had in fixed-step Pushing Hands. But it is only one limited field of practice. You asked what I like about Tai Chi as opposed to other martial

arts. Well, many martial arts focus on a limited field and that's also the problem with Tai Chi. One reason is probably that people are afraid to fail. Mastery of Tai Chi can be difficult. It's easier to live in the fantasy -- just easily getting a little better over a long time and fantasizing about great things -- than it is to really learn to be skillful.

It's like Sun Lu Tan said in his book, *The Real Explanation of Internal Boxing*. He was going around asking his friends, masters of Hsing I, Pa kua, and Tai Chi, questions that people didn't ask in those days. One guy said: "The reason most people don't take up internal martial arts is that they're afraid of failure." Nowadays, you can pick up martial arts and just pretend at it or be superficial so you don't have to be afraid of failure. But in his day, which is a few hundred years ago, that probably was not so popular or safe to do.

Something that's easy to do, like Karate . . . it's easy, but it's not big enough. Tai Chi Tui Shou is not a big enough art, but it was never supposed to be a big art -- it's just a

practice, a fragment of the art. It wasn't created to be the whole art of Tai Chi, just look at the history. Tui Shou wasn't created until centuries after Tai Chi was already there, so what were they doing? What were they practicing? We don't know.

*Q: Mostly you start with the form and then you go, for example, for some pushing hands....*

Nowadays.

*Q: Yes, and then you learn sword, then you start to learn the San Shou which is a moving set, the Da Lu, the four corners, the Xa Lu, is there also I believe. But I have never heard of a free fight practice within the Tai Chi.*

Well, that's right and obviously they used to do free fighting practice.



*Q: Yes the masters did.*

Yes, obviously. They did that not just with their practice, but also in fighting people. Serious matches.

*Q: Killing people.*

Yes, killing people. So obviously what they were doing hundreds of years ago wasn't pushing hands. I don't know what it was.

*Q: Well, you are pretty convinced about the fact that Tai Chi in the beginning wasn't a set or a form.*

Yes, because it's a matter of history.

*Q: Just the thirteen movements?*

Or not, we don't know. Probably there was some kind of practice, some kind of training that took place. But you have to remember, when the Ch'en clan took it over from Wang, they were studying a different martial art. Their own martial art undoubtedly influenced the Tai Chi that we know today. Like, for example, the sets. Look at the history. The Chen's had five sets in their martial art. After Wang (who had NO sets) came and went, Tai Chi had five sets. Hmm...

Obviously the Chens tried to modify their martial art to fit the Tai Chi principles, so what we end up with is a modified art. Trying to apply the Tai Chi ideas, they learned from Wang, to the movements they already had in their own sets is not the same as creating an

art originally designed by the principles. Maybe they did a good job, maybe not. But I can tell you from lots of experience, such a thing rarely works out well. I have watched people come to me to learn the Cheng Hsin principles and then try to apply them to a set of Tai Chi movements that they have already learned somewhere else, which was not created with the Cheng Hsin Principles in mind. It just never works.

Decades ago, I didn't care if students learned my set of movements or not. I tried to teach principles, and help them re-create their set of movements to be aligned with the principles and structure of Cheng Hsin. I finally stopped because nobody was able to do it. The habits that they learned first always took over. No matter how hard they tried, they always reverted back to the way they had learned them, which meant they were wasting their time. After awhile, I'd just insist that people learn my set of movements. Some people just don't want to learn another set, but most will take me at my word when I tell them that it is very hard to change movements that you've already programmed into your nervous system.

It actually saves a lot of time for them to learn a new set of movements. It's not like starting completely from scratch because they already have the basic choreography and general ideas. Learning a new set from the ground up allows people to learn the movement in a new way that is not confused with what they did before. It's strange, because even though we're doing generally the same move they learned somewhere else, when I teach it to them differently, they'll do it differently. But if I try to get them to do the move they learned somewhere else differently, they won't. I always ask, "What are you committed to here -- to actual learning or just hanging onto what you already know?"

*Q: What importance does the Tai Chi set have in your system? You said already that you have your students use it to develop a better way of movement.*



A central aspect of the Cheng Hsin "system" is the body-being work that we do, which is based on five key principles and various structural points. Developing a better way of movement for us means working with the way the body is actually designed to be used -- in other words, with the anatomical realities of being a body in the physical universe. The term "body-being" also suggests the inclusion of mind in our study of physical effectiveness. What's happening in our minds -- including thought, emotion, energy, psychology, perception, reactivity, etc. -- is inseparable from any body training.

Tai Chi can be an excellent path for discovering and training the diverse levels of the Cheng Hsin body-being work. In fact, in my new book: "Zen Body-Being" (available 8/06) I recommend Tai Chi as an ideal training for serious students and beginners alike.



Not only does it provide a means to train all the body-being points and principles, we also use the Tai Chi set to work on important mind shifts that increase power and presence. Some people think that it's supposed to be magical just to move in those crazy ways, but it's how you do the set that's important, and Cheng Hsin is all about the "how." No matter what your level of commitment, Tai Chi is an indispensable practice for both body and mind.

*Q: How do you teach it? Do people have to learn the principles first or the set first?*

You can approach it in different ways. It's possible to work on the basic body principles before ever doing a choreographed set of movements. It's also possible to start practicing the general choreography before you worry too much about how the principles apply. Mostly they go together. Some understanding of body-being principles is going to expand your ability to make finer distinctions in the set. Practicing the set is going to give you grounding to help you find and work on the principles.

Just working on body-being principles -- like relaxing, centering, grounding, and using the whole body -- is more difficult without a form to practice. How do you train a principle? I might suggest practicing all day in every activity, but few people will, so a routine helps structure their practice. Also a specific routine gives them something they can improve over time, a kind of gauge. If people only practice with random movements it's difficult for them to judge their progress.

One reason beneficial to do somebody else's set (anything you didn't invent) is because it challenges you in ways that you would never think to challenge yourself. It forces you to do movements that you wouldn't have thought to do. If you only do the movements you make up, you might create a comfortable set for yourself, but it'll be limited because you'll tend to invent what you're already good at. Learning someone else's routine forces you to expand. You have to stretch certain muscles and develop different postures and different ways of moving. You get better at things you otherwise wouldn't have thought to train.

*Q: After you studied many martial arts, you travelled through Asia looking for people who were good, to see what you could learn from them. Did you also meet Tai Chi people who you could learn something from?*

No.

*Q: Or who impressed you?*

No.

*Q: A little?*

Not really. That was back in 1975.

*Q: Cheng Man Ch'ing died in 1975. Didn't your teacher Wong Chia Man tell you to go see Cheng Man Ch'ing?*

That's right. Wong always said to study with the best. He said it may cost you more, but it will save you time and mistakes in the end. Wong said he was the best at what he did, but that at that time Cheng was the best at Tai Chi. So, I wanted to see Cheng Man Ch'ing but I waited too long. That's why I keep telling my students, "Hey, I can die. So don't put it off, study now." People don't live forever. Especially us old guys.

*Q: Especially those with intense lives.*

Wong said to me when I went off to Asia, "You can search but you won't find anybody." He said they all moved to the U.S.. (laughs) I saw a few good people here and there, but nothing I was really excited about.

In Taiwan I got to know some young men doing push hands. They asked me if I wanted to join them and so I did. I played with their top guy and I threw him and they were very impressed. I was surprised by how impressed they were. Why? The guy tried to push me and I threw him. What else should I do? They actually followed me around and hung out with me for days. They invited me to their house for dinner. They asked me to move to Taiwan. They said: "Americans can't appreciate your skill, come here where we appreciate you." I was very flattered. But I didn't want to do it.

*Q: Didn't you meet somebody who could walk under a table or something?*

That was Sun Lu Tang in Hsing I, it wasn't Tai Chi.

*Q: It wasn't Tai Chi?*



Sun Lu Tang created Sun Style Tai Chi. But the table story was about his Hsing I. Wong gave me a letter of introduction to see Chu Hao, who was the last living "inside" disciple of Sun Lu Tang. Chu was 80 years old and living in Taipei. I brought him a little Bonsai as a gift and spent the afternoon with him. Nice old man. He told me stories about Sun Lu Tang. In one, he said Sun could do the Sparrow Hawk form under the table faster than his students could run from one side of the table to the other. I said, "He was a very flexible man." And Chu said, "Yes, he was also very short." (laughs)

I did some push hands with him, you know, gentle push hands. And he was a little confused, because I didn't push hands like he did. But then he said to me: "I think you have a good teacher. You know how to change, that's good."

Later, back at my hotel, I was sitting on the edge of the bed when an unusual thing happened. I started bouncing up and down on the bed. My body started vibrating and bouncing for about half an hour, just 'padabadabada.' I assumed that was from my encounter with Chu Hao, but who knows? There are stories of other things like that, like getting Shaktipat from a guru in India, that they give some little shot of energy to the student. So I figured Chu Hao did something like that.

*Q: You never had that before?*

I have encountered different interesting things, but not that, no bed bouncing. Don't know what it was worth, but it was interesting. Maybe it freed something up internally.

*Q: It was just very strange to you?*

The bed bouncing? Yeah, but I had a way of holding it. It wasn't the first unusual thing that had happened to me and it wasn't the last. I didn't freak out or anything, I just thought it was interesting.

*Q: Let's first talk a little bit about your teachers. How did you meet Wong for instance? I remember a kind of story that you were learning Kung Fu from someone who tried to keep it secret or something?*

It's a very long story. I'll do the short version.

I was doing lots of martial arts, Judo, Jujitsu, Karate. And I was studying Kung Fu with a guy named Bill Owens who was the US All American Karate Champion. He was a student of Al Decasco's who was hooked up with the Bruce Lee people. In any case, they were very secretive. They thought the Chinese were trying to keep Kung Fu a secret, so they said that everything we were doing was a secret. This was back in the Sixties and nobody knew about Kung Fu then. These guys thought that the Chinese would be very angry if they knew that anybody was teaching Kung Fu.

So to make a longer story shorter, Bill and I had a falling out. They turned out to be pretty bad and stupid people. But when I left them I was still interested in pursuing Kung Fu. It so happened that most of the sets that these guys did were Wong's, but I didn't know that at the time. I went to Chinatown and boldly went into Kung Fu schools, watching and asking around. I went to different places but nothing really interested me until I went to Wong and I watched him. I liked what he did so I decided to study. I just walked up to him and said, "Sifu, will you teach me Kung Fu?" He looked at me and said, "Yeah, sure." That was it.

*Q: That was a surprise for you? That he said, "yes."*

I don't know if it was a surprise or not. I didn't think about it much. I was pretty determined.

*Q: And that was in the Sixties?*

Yes, around 1969, I believe.

*Q: The teacher of Wong was one of the Five Tigers. What does that mean 'the Five Tigers'?*

Actually the person that taught Wong was a student of Ku Yu Cheong who was a Five Tiger. The person who taught Wong directly was Yim Sia Mo.

In the Five Tigers there was also Man Lai Sing and three others (read: Fu Chen Sung, Wang Shao Chou and Li Hsin Wu). The Five Tigers were these five friends. They were the top boxers of the time. I don't know if they had an official association or anything, they were just called the Five Tigers. Wong said there was a joke about the Five Tigers, who did northern Chinese martial arts, when they went to Canton in the south. He said the joke was that Canton means Goat City and 'you know what tigers do to goats.'

*Q: Ku Yu Cheong, he was that brick breaker?*

Ku Yu Cheong was famous for being able to break thirteen bricks or stones with one slap. He could also break any one of those stones without hurting the others. He's also the man who slapped and killed a horse at a carnival. And he was one of the thirteen finalists who fought in the 1928 Nanking Tournament.

*Q: We would also like to ask some things about your own art, Cheng Hsin. The other day you were talking about transformation in body and mind within the Tai Chi set. And this is also something which comes back in the whole study of Cheng Hsin, maybe you could say some more on that?*

In Cheng Hsin, you learn about the body, about movement, interaction, skill, and about yourself. To me, learning about yourself is what engaging in an art is all about. It's about improving your relationship with your body, skill, and mind. In order to really improve those relationships you have to understand them. You have to understand the principles that govern the physics of your body and your bodily design, as well as the principles that design or create interaction and everything that interaction depends on, such as perception, how one thinks, awareness, et cetera. That's a marvellous and thorough study, because you're studying your body, your mind, your movement, your interaction with other people in stressful situations, and even not so stressful situations. You're even studying learning itself – you're studying how to learn and how to learn better.

In Cheng Hsin, you see, that's what we do. That's our focus. Not just learning a fantasy, not just learning some self-defense, not just learning something that maybe someday will serve you in some strange mysterious way, like your ch'i will flow and pop out your nose or something. But actually studying, investigating: What is perception? What is the body? How does the body work? How does the body work best? What is grounding? What is centering? What is your own level of sensitivity? Can you feel your whole body? Do you

know what interaction is? Are you spatially aware? Can you feel forces as they occur? Can you change with them? Can you join them? Can you listen to them? We investigate all sorts of powerful questions (and a few silly ones as well).

We study the body in detail -- the design of the body, the way the body functions. We study the mind in detail. We have workshops just on mind and self. What is consciousness? What is being? What is emotion? What is thought? How do we think? How do we learn? What is communication? We engage in this work to improve and grow the whole human that we are. Becoming a profound thinker and more sensitive and conscious will actually help in learning, in changing your body, in changing your outlook, and even in learning Tai Chi.

You can learn Tai Chi on a much deeper level when you've opened your mind, when you're able to grasp natural principles, and when you can see more clearly what's going on between two bodies in an interaction. Once you're able to recognize universal principles for yourself, they come to life and exist not just as a thought but as an experience that you can actually use.

You don't just have a belief that principles like relaxing, centering, and grounding are good -- you actually experience the truth of their effectiveness. This is the Cheng Hsin goal -- to experience the principles not just hear about them.

We work on many skills -- boxing skills, sword skills, throwing skills, uprooting skills, grappling skills -- but it's not just about having lots of skills. It's understanding what skill is, so we can apply it to anything. You can apply the skills of Cheng Hsin to any other aspect of your life because the principles of skill are not just applicable to the martial arts. They are applicable to anything that involves skill.

*Q: You created a whole workshop around being effective didn't you?*

Yes. It contains a body of knowledge and work that focuses on the Principles of Effective Interaction. What makes one person good and somebody else not? Most of the time we think it's just talent, but that isn't the whole story.



We ask: Why are they good? And find that they think and perceive in such a way that makes them good, and we can do that too. Those who aren't good don't think and perceive and feel the same way as someone who is effective. People who are good have a different thinking, and we can learn to think that way. They have a different perception and we can learn to perceive that way. They have a different level of sensitivity and ways

of feeling, and we can learn to be that sensitive and feel in those ways. So we study the principles and components of being effective so that anyone can actually become more effective.

*Q: And this is not just for martial artists?*

No, no, of course not.

*Q: But somehow this also makes the body of work in Cheng Hsin quite immense, very large.*

Yes, it is very large, but you don't have to do it all at once.

*Q: No, and you also offer special opportunities for people who are really interested and really want to go more deeply into it. Could you say some more about that?*

Are talking about the Apprentice Program?

*Q: Yes. The interesting thing is that in Tai Chi, or in martial arts in general, there is something called an "indoor" student. There are different definitions of it but mostly it means that you live with the master for a period of time and that you are studying the whole day and that you take care of the school and so on. You are considered to be someone who is really devoted and willing to learn the art. Does the apprenticeship look a little bit like this system?*

Yes. The best way to learn something is to throw yourself completely into it and to study with somebody who knows. The apprentice program is basically that. There are stages or levels to the Cheng Hsin apprentice program. We start with a kind of basic training, working mostly to transform the person's level of honesty, integrity, and accountability, their ability to keep their word, learn, be open, and such. These are the basic principles we begin with.

Why do we begin with that? Well, not just because they become a better person and so that I don't mind being around them so much. (laughs) It's true, the graduates of the apprentice program are people I like to be around. For most people in the world, their level of integrity, honesty, communication, clarity, accountability, etcetera, is quite low. What's amazing is that quite responsible people, good people, frequently successful people who think of themselves as honest, when they begin the apprentice program, it's amazing how much work there is to be done. It's just amazing. People have no idea.



*Q: In the field of honesty?*

Yes, yes, and by the time they finish they are so much more honest, so much clearer, so much more straightforward. They're able to keep their word, period. One of the goals of the program is to increase one's level of honesty. Now you think, what does this have to do with martial art? Well, once again, Cheng Hsin is not simply focused on martial art, it is focused on the human being. You live with "you" all the time. Why not work with what's there all the time? Why work with a fantasy that you only visit once in a while? But still, you ask, what does this have to do with martial arts? When you're talking about the indoor student or the apprentice, it is done like that because

their attitude towards what they are doing is very important. If they can't be honest with themselves, they can't learn deeply. People think they can, but they can't.

*Q: For instance, in Tai Chi you may think you are relaxed when you are not, and you keep yourself thinking, "I am relaxed, look, look, I am relaxed", and it's not really that way.*

Right, and that's not necessarily something that a person is trying to be dishonest about, or would even think they are being dishonest about. They think they're being honest, but they don't know, they're not clear. They haven't been taught how to be clear and how to be honest in a new way, a deeper way, that actually can transform people, you see? They haven't studied honesty itself.

It really makes a difference for an apprentice, or inside student, to hear the teacher, really hear them, not just hear the words, but hear what the teacher is actually communicating. What the experience is that they want to teach the student. The student has to be ready for that, and for the student to be ready for that it's incredibly important and very useful for them to develop a deep level of honesty, responsibility, clarity, keeping their word, etcetera, you see?

In the apprentice program we have people who actually come to the center and live for seven or eight months. They live here, learn, train, contemplate, and take care of the dojo – that's the training space. We use the Japanese word "dojo" for school because it's a simple and well known word. So we just call it "the dojo."

*Q: You studied a lot of Japanese arts?*

Yes, I learned a lot of Japanese arts. So anyway, they take care of the school, train all day, and contemplate. I also challenge them personally, addressing what stands in the way of their learning, what within their thinking stands in the way of their own transformation. It's a very deep and intimate kind of work. Apprentices are people who're really serious and because they're so serious we can create a situation where they give the teacher permission to treat them however they need to be treated in order to learn. For example, such a situation creates the opportunity for the teacher to be completely straightforward and honest with them, so that together we can move through all the crap that usually creates barriers to progress, and instead create real learning and real transformation.

It makes a difference. It really does. People come out and they're different. I don't mean you don't recognize them after one year. After ten years, they'll probably be quite a different person. But in even one year they change significantly.

At the old center in California we always had a huge staff. We had many teachers and apprentices as well as normal students. Sometimes half the students were apprentices, and all of the teachers of the school came out of the apprentice program. So whenever somebody was an apprentice there was a lot of support because there were a lot of graduates. It's always useful to get feedback from more than one person. In this new situation there are fewer people involved, it's mostly me and a few returning graduates, upper level apprentices helping and supporting. But it works out remarkably well.

Apprentices go through substantial personal transformation. In the beginning we might get someone who has very weak energy or mind, and is not particularly straightforward or some such, but when they graduate the apprentice program you hardly recognize them. They're like a real and substantial person. I know, of course they're a real person anyway, but the way I am using that phrase is sort of like the story of Pinocchio. He starts out trying to be a real boy and finally becomes real. Most of us are sort of like Pinocchio still trying get real. When someone graduates the apprentice program they're a huge step closer to being a real person. They're actually a more genuine person, more present, honest, and grounded.

I've gotten lots of feedback from people who say they can't believe the changes in the graduates. Like someone who went in as a kid and came out as a man. He's a mature person now. He is not just this childish individual. Perhaps someone comes in rather selfish and sort of sneaky, but comes out generous and straightforward, honest. Outside people usually are startled by the changes because rarely do humans undergo that kind of change. Usually people remain pretty much the same in life even as they go through changes.

*Q: Or get damaged?*

Or get damaged. They can get worse, yeah. But the apprentice program is about really learning Cheng Hsin, and a lot of Cheng Hsin isn't just the martial arts. Sure these people train eight hours a day in the martial aspect and they train very hard. But they also do



contemplation, study their minds, and work on personal transformation. So it's a big deal. It's a very good thing. I am very glad we have the apprentice program.

*Q: OK, that's a good answer. We're also curious about how you see the future of Cheng Hsin. A future in the next couple of years but also in a longer period of time, the time you won't be able to teach Cheng Hsin anymore.*

Well, by then I am counting on you guys to get really good at it. In the next few years one of my main goals is to help people become as advanced as possible. I would like to see people become capable of carrying on the whole thing without me. That will be a challenge because, like you say, it's immense. It takes a lot of work and also it takes a lot of understanding.

So as far as the distant future, I really have no idea. It depends completely on how many people become good teachers. It depends completely on the depth of understanding that is passed on and the amount of people that depth of understanding is passed on to. I am sure there are many arts throughout human history that were very good and died out. We don't know about them because they died out. So maybe some great and wonderful things died out just because there weren't enough people committed to carrying it on.

I have been in the martial arts since I was nine years old, and I have watched the martial world change. Of course for the first twenty years I was just learning about it. But it's been over forty-five years now. And I have noticed that the Cheng Hsin principles, and what Cheng Hsin has been trying to teach these many years, has started to influence other martial arts. Some of the ideas which came from Cheng Hsin are starting to pop up in martial arts all over the world. Definitely in the Tai Chi world. My book 'The Principles of Effortless Power' is read by a lot of Tai Chi people. But it also pops up in Karate, or Judo or Aikido and other arts. People have written whole books for Aikido or Tai Chi based on things I have taught them. So these ideas are spreading.

Maybe how Cheng Hsin will survive in a sense is just through the influence it has had on the world of martial arts and the direction it has helped push people. That might be the thing. But I would really like Cheng Hsin itself to survive, because there is so much more depth to it. And if it is just known as the influence it has had, there won't be a great deal of depth.



*Q: You created a degree system also, with six or seven levels?*

Eight, there are eight degrees. I have noticed over the years that people get better if they have goals. People get better if there is some kind of standard that they need to live up to, and it also helps them to be more well-rounded. When people study on their own without any kind of degree system or ranking or any short and long term goals, without any standard, they usually only do what they want to do and they specialize in things that they are already good at. They become limited, involved in a small personal world, like a piece of the whole, and they don't usually grow very much either. They stagnate pretty early on.

A degree system gives them goals, something to train for and a standard for them to get better and better, and be acknowledged for that growth. In Cheng Hsin it is not the amount of time put in, and it's not just how many techniques you know. Of course you need to know techniques and many other things, but to get a degree you need to understand and be able to demonstrate the principles. You must experience the material for yourself and have the skills necessary for that degree. The standard keeps getting higher and higher with each degree so people keep progressing toward mastery. So there are eight degrees.

*Q: And you are?*

Seven.

*Q: Why not degree eight?*

Because when I put together the degree system, I created it so that one only gets a degree eight when they have taught someone else to be a degree seven. And I have never created another degree seven, yet. So until I do, I can't be an eight.

*Q: You created once a degree six?*

Yes.

*Q: One. Only one person?*

So far.

*Q: And degree five? How many persons?*

A few.

*Q: It is really hard to get. Five is already! If you would compare it with the black belt system, the Dan system. This is idiotic of course, but what would you say that a degree five would be?*

Perhaps somewhere around Godan, fifth degree black belt.

*Q: Fifth degree black belt?*

Something like that.

*Q: Peter, you spoke a few times of energy. A lot people talk about energy in the world and you usually don't. But lately you started to talk about energy again. So what's energy in your opinion?*

It's a long story.

*Q: Well tell us the long story in the two minutes remaining.*

In my work I invite people to notice how they can move their feeling and awareness around in their body, and how they can create a new level of feeling awareness. We can actually create many different kinds of feelings in and around the body through changing body and mind states. We can do many things with the mind and feeling and awareness and attention, once we learn how. When we become very, very sensitive to this domain of mind, feeling, attention, awareness, and the creative potential and power that it has, we can do lots of things we couldn't do before. We can do wondrous things. We can change our relationship with the planet. We can change our relationship with our own mind and body, and our perceptions and interactions. We can develop new powers in interaction. We can change how we feel in the body and how we use the body. And all of these things you could call energy. So it's very useful to focus on that aspect of your practice.

Most of the time people only have access to the kind of domain that I am talking about when they think of it as 'energy.' I could elaborate on what that is using many different terms. I can explain what I am talking about in concrete terms, but that's only an explanation, it doesn't do the job. An explanation, like a scientific explanation, doesn't get the job done. What gets the job done is what you do, you see? What you do in your mind and your own experience, not what someone says about it. So most people have access to this only through the idea of something like ch'i or ki. If you think in terms of "flowing your ch'i" or "doing something with your ch'i, or your energy," you will have an image or sensation and an idea of something to do, a feeling that you created for yourself, and that's good. You may not understand how it all works, but it might get the job done anyway.

The nice thing about the term "feeling-awareness" is that it's grounded within your experience. If you can open your mind to the fact that you don't really know what it is, it's not any less mysterious than ch'i, but it's more creative. Because when you think of ch'i you think of it in one way -- whatever way you think of it or whatever way you have been told to think of it. But when you think of "feeling-awareness" there are so many ways you can think of it and work with it. It's open-ended because it's creative. In essence, you can create almost anything you want to help transform your body, or perceptions, or skills. A much better explanation about all this can be found in my book *Zen Body-Being*.

So, how's that?

*Q: That's great!*

OK. Well, I've got to run.