The Use and Abuse of Pictures in I-chuan Training

"I cannot teach you anything you don't already know."
-- Gregory Fong

1. A central problem in the martial arts is how to generate power and refine one's control over it. In particular, one finds one's power simply evaporates if one's muscular and skeletal structure collapses when one moves. Such structure, however, is dynamic, not static. The body can convey power in movement only if all its parts move harmoniously in a balanced responsiveness to one another. The usefulness of the idea of harmony in this context becomes clearer when we remember that part of that idea is agreement: two or more things are said to harmonize with each other when they agree in such a way as to produce the effect of a whole. This conception of harmonious agreement between the parts of a whole is not restricted to music: harmony is "the just adaptation of parts to each other in any system or combination of things, or in things intended to form a connected whole."[1] The parts of a human body in harmony in this sense move in answer to one another, and there is no movement of one part without the intelligent response of the rest. By contrast, a person who lacks such bodily harmony moves at best in a mechanical fashion, more like a puppet than a living being.

Yet all one's deliberate, conscious attempts to produce such harmony are typically fruitless. At best, one succeeds in making one's body rigid and therefore unable to respond intelligently to the demands movement makes upon it. I-chuan training is meant in part to solve this problem. Wang Hsiang Chai (1885-1963) distilled this art from years of hsing-I training with Guo Yun Shen as well as extensive experience as a boxer. He found that a

[1] From Webster's Second International Dictionary, my emphasis

direct and natural approach to the problem of developing and refining one's power was superior to one that focused exclusively on learning forms and fighting techniques. I-chuan therefore renounces fixed forms, and encourages the student instead to understand and build upon the ways in which he responds naturally to the situations he confronts.

Although the six facets of I-chuan – standing, walking, test of power, test of sound, push-hands, and health dance – constitute less a martial arts system than an environment in which to develop this understanding, it is nevertheless a rigorous form of training that demands long hours of hard work and deep commitment from the student. The fact that it takes training to do something completely natural may strike one as paradoxical, but because the student typically comes to I-chuan with years of bad habits and confused training, he must have a teacher who, by chipping away at his conditioning, can gradually return the student to himself.

I mean in this paper to discuss one aspect of I-chuan – namely, standing – to the exclusion of other features of the training. Indeed, I mean to discuss only one aspect of standing itself: the use of pictures of simple actions as a means of taping into one's natural bodily responsiveness. I have nothing useful to say at this juncture about the difficulties one encounters as one tries to carry this responsiveness into movement. It will be enough for me now if I can make clear my understanding at present of how one might begin to learn simply to stand in a balanced and harmonious fashion. As the scope of that problem becomes clear, one begins to appreciate just how difficult it can be to do the simplest thing: namely, to take a single step. My remarks are intended for readers who have several years of martial arts experience and who are not new to I-chuan. Without a good background in this form of training, what I say about "pictures" here will be unhelpful at best.

2. In an earlier discussion of I-chuan on this website, I emphasized the notion of responsiveness as essential to understanding the aim of this kind of training. In general, one's responsiveness, as I characterized it, is expressed as a meaningful – or, as I put it,

"intelligent" -- answer to the demands of a given situation, and should be sharply distinguished from mechanical reaction to them. The idea that a situation can make demands on one, can require something of one, as opposed to the idea that features of one's environment cause one to react in certain ways can seem obscure. But we need not look far afield to find a ready illustration of what is meant. My response to the cries of pain of someone dear to me can only with great artificiality be considered a mechanical reaction to mere sounds. What I hear are cries, after all, and my response of rushing to that person's assistance is, as it were, drawn from me by those cries. And my response makes sense of the situation. As such, that response is intelligent even though it does not involve the application of any rules (of the form, "when you hear cries, offer assistance").[2] Indeed, though thoughtful and intelligent, my response need not involve any conscious thinking at all.

In the context of the martial arts, we can begin to see what the distinction between response and reaction comes to by considering a common pitfall of focusing one's training on learning techniques and applications of different features of the forms usually taught. Although learning that such and such a move may be used to lock an opponent's wrist or to block a punch or kick can help one to make some initial sense of a given movement in a form, in an actual fight such knowledge is most often useless. The demands a real combat situation make on a boxer call for a response the details of which could never be captured by means of rules of the form, "when the opponent punches with his right hand, step to the left and perform 'ward off'." A successful response must instead answer to the demands of this specific situation. Indeed, one needs to abandon formal applications and techniques in favor of a living response to the situation at hand. This last claim sounds, of course, vague and uninformative. What, after all, is a "living response to the situation at hand?" The whole point of the claim, however, is that there is no general answer to this question.

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[2]Even if I had such a rule, I would have no rule for the application of that rule. Or if I did have such a rule, I would have no rule for that rule.

Boxing is a skill, and, as such, problems have to solved on a case by case -- punch by punch -- basis.

But responsiveness is perhaps easiest to understand in the context of a simple bodily movement like raising one's arm. Here responsiveness is a relation between different parts of a single individual's body. In this context, movement of one arm calls for – "demands" – movement of the other. Indeed, other things being equal, the activity of moving one's arm involves the whole body; movements here calling for and answered by movements there, throughout the entire organism. Subtle and not-so-subtle shifts of weight and posture are required just to maintain one's balance and not to topple over when one raises one's arm. Such shifts of weight and posture are largely involuntary. Raising one's arm while carrying weight in one's hand makes these points obvious enough. Of course, failures of responsiveness are certainly possible: we have all had the experience of trying to open a refrigerator only to pull ourselves toward the door.

What the example of raising one's arm as considered so far may obscure, however, is the fact that, in normal circumstances, one does not simply raise one's arm: one instead reaches for something, shields one's eyes from the sun, waves to a friend, or, in a martial arts context, throws a punch. That is to say, arms do not reach for things, or shield eyes, or throw punches; people do. These are all activities that involve the whole person and that would become impossibly awkward if one had, as it were, to assemble oneself from parts each time one wanted to move. Instead, when one reaches with the right hand for a book on a shelf over one's head, the body stretches out along its length, and the left hand pulls back for balance.[3] The response of the left hand to the movement of the right is involuntary, natural, and holistic. This sort of responsiveness is the foundation for I-chuan training. It is what guarantees that a person moves as a unit rather than in pieces. If that responsiveness is interrupted, the body becomes a kind of heap, just shambling along. The training aims to

[3] And as one puts one's weight on the right foot, the left leg extends to maintain balance. And so on, throughout the whole body.

develop, refine, strengthen, and control responsiveness -- to put it at the practitioner's disposal for whatever use he or she intends.

3. But if responsiveness is the aim of I-chuan training, how are we to think of the method by means of which that aim is to be achieved? How does one actually train in I-chuan? In particular, how does I-chuan standing develop the sought after responsiveness? It will help here to draw a distinction between recovery and invention. "Invention," as I am using the term, involves deliberation. In other words, it involves conscious, rational reflection about the best means to accomplish some end. Presupposed in the idea of invention is that such reflection aims to develop or create something new. Invention begins, that is, in ignorance and passes, hopefully, to knowledge. It expands one's repertoire; one knows more at the end than at the beginning. There is a clear sense, however, in which I-chuan training aims to recover something the practitioner knows already. It does not give one anything new. Indeed, what the training aims to recover is not even something the practitioner can meaningfully be said to have forgotten.

My account of how I-chuan develops responsiveness presupposes that the reader has already spent enough time training to know how properly to position his skeleton in the basic health and fighting stances, and that he has developed enough strength to hold the skeleton in those positions long enough successfully to work in the way I propose. If the basic postures are simply too painful to hold comfortably for any significant length of time, the work I discuss here will be impossible to perform and therefore impossible to understand. On the other hand, if one continues indefinitely to develop basic muscular strength without, as it were, educating those muscles, one's progress in I-chuan will be negligible.

Assume, then, that the student is in the basic fighting stance: facing forward, one foot a step's distance in front of the other, knees slightly bent, arms as though surrounding a tree, palms facing down. The stage of training I want to describe involves the use of simple

pictures of physical activity in order to help the student tap into his body's natural muscular intelligence. By "picture," I do not mean a physical item such as a drawing or photograph. Nor do I intend any sort of mental picture or image. The pictures in question are not something to contemplate. Rather, they are directions for a certain kind of physical work. Let us consider two such pictures: that of leaning against a wall and that of picking up a tree. One thing to notice about these pictures is that neither is particularly obscure. We might have trouble understanding what it means to "embrace a mountain." If we're being honest with ourselves, we might well also wonder if, when told to imagine a waterfall, we are really imagining one or just imagining that we're imagining one. But we have all leaned against walls, and even if we've never actually tried to pull a tree from the ground, most of us have some experience wrapping our arms around a heavy object in order to move it from its resting place. How, then, should the practitioner work with these pictures?

The choice of very simple, straightforward pictures is meant deliberately to discourage what we might call the student's weakness for interpretation. Thus, whereas a picture like "breathe through your finger tips" invites interpretation simply because one has no idea at all what it might be like actually to do that, trying to interpret an injunction to lean against a wall seems pointless. One could hardly hope for more straightforward instructions. Indeed, it’s as though there’s nothing here to interpret. If I said to someone, "lean against a wall," and he replied, "what do you mean?," I would have very little idea how to begin to explain to him what to do. It’s obvious! And yet, even where there is no clear room for interpretation there is room for misunderstanding.

4. For the moment, then, let us stick to the picture, "lean against a wall." The only thing the picture tells one to do is to lean against a wall. Just that. It does not say, "figure out how to lean against a wall," or "invent a new way of leaning against a wall," or "lean against a wooden (or brick, or painted, or glass) wall. Just "lean against a wall." The difficulty of working with this picture is clearly <u>not</u> that one does not know how to lean

against walls. Nothing could be clearer. The trouble is, instead, that because in training one does not have a wall literally to lean against, one begins to cast around for some way of leaning against a wall without a real wall behind one. One begins, in a word, to invent. One tries this thing, then that in order to answer for oneself, "what does it mean to, or how does one lean against a wall?" But that was not the question asked. Indeed, no question was asked. The student was told simply to lean against a wall.

What, then, is the alternative to invention? As Fong, following Wang, puts it, the trick is to "do the real thing without the real thing." The best way to understand this claim is, as before, to inhibit one's desire to interpret. The real thing in the case of this first picture is to lean against a wall. That is a real action, but it can be done without the real thing. Without a real wall, the student must use all sorts of muscles to keep himself upright while leaning. In effect, he must use his own body to provide the missing resistance.[4] (In practice, this feels like the whole body is being pulled forward as one leans back.)

There are two further points worth making at this juncture. As we have seen, the picture instructs the student really to lean against a wall (though without a wall), not simply to imagine that he's doing so. But notice, first, that the picture tells the student that that is what he must do. It does not say, for example, "lean your back against a wall." That, too, is real work, but it is neither something we do every day, nor is it directed to the person as a whole. In other words, people lean against walls; backs do not (except, of course, as aspects of persons). Leaning against a wall is an activity that involves the entire person, not just some part of him.[5] Second, the injunction to lean against a wall is meant to be followed the entire time one is standing (and, eventually, while moving as well), not just once or twice while one stands there. In practice, one picture tends to cancel out another, so that one leans for a while, then picks up a tree for a while, then sits on a three legged chair for a while, and

[4]As far as I can see, this is exactly what is going on whenever we hold ourselves upright. When standing up from a chair, we are, in effect, providing the resistance provided a moment before by the chair.

[5]It is true that most – if not all -- physical activity involves the whole person, but the sense in which that is so become clear only once one has a sense of how to work with the sorts of simple pictures we are discussing here.

so on. Part of the challenge of standing, however, is to do all of these things simultaneously throughout the duration of a period of standing.[6]

5. Now leaning against a wall is a certain sort of physical work. Doing so without a real wall, however, involves heavy mental work as well. The mental work in question is difficult to describe, in part because it is not separate from the physical work involved. Making good sense of I-chuan training at this level is a matter of understanding the relation of mind and body. In the West, our understanding of this relationship is frequently confused by what Gilbert Ryle called, the Myth of the Ghost in the Machine.[7] According to the tradition Ryle rejected, the mind is a separate substance that, as it were, inhabits the body, directing its movements from within. I-chuan training is a direct challenge to this way of understanding mind and body. Let me explain.

As I indicated in my earlier paper, the student of I-chuan must, when standing, form a real intention – to stick with the present example – to lean against a wall. A real intention, as opposed to a daydream or mental image, involves real muscular work. The muscular work is an expression of the intention in question, and not simply caused by it. Where there is no such intention, the muscular work in question is simply physical exercise. Where there no muscular work involved, the intention is a mere day dream. The one cannot exist without the other. Indeed, the longer one trains in I-chuan, the harder it becomes even to make sense of the Myth of the Ghost in the Machine. When I formulate an intention to get out of my chair, I am, as it were, already leaving. It is not so much that a gap between intention and movement has begun to shrink as that one begins to recognize that there is no such gap to begin with.[8]

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[6] How long should a period of standing be? As long as the student can do what is asked of him. In the beginning, that will not be long at all, and the student will have to begin again several times. In the end, the aim is to train this way throughout the day. At this point, training has become a way of life rather than a formal activity.

[7] Cf., Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind.

[8] This is one reason I am reluctant to apply the notion of responsiveness to the relation of mind and body. There may be some room to talk intelligibly of the body responding to the mind, but this kind of talk

The demands that I-chuan training makes on the mind and body of the student steadily increase as the duration, intensity, and complication of the pictures mounts. To see what these increasing demands involve in a little more detail, let us turn now to the second of the pictures I proposed to discuss: that of picking up a tree.

6. Everything I have said so far about leaning against a wall is true of picking up a tree: it must really done, not just thought about, but it must be done without the real thing; doing it involves the whole person, and the various parts of the body must work as a whole; it must be done as long as one stands; and it is an activity that because there is no real tree involves intense mental as well as physical work. But picking up a tree is a picture that is importantly different from lean against a wall: it is impossible to pick up a tree. The point is not just that, unlike leaning against a wall, picking up a tree is not an everyday activity. Rather, picking up a tree is simply not something that can be done. The trees roots, in particular, will always prevent us from pulling off this particular action.

The significance of this impossibility is complex, but for our purposes here, the point is simply that, over time, the student will inevitably recruit more of his mind and body to accomplish the task. In practice, the consequence of the impossibility of lifting a tree out of the ground is that, if one is appropriately relaxed as one works, [9] one learns pretty quickly to discern how the body responds as a whole to the activity of hugging a tree, squatting slightly, and trying to lift the tree out of the ground: the head seems to lift off the top of the spine, the back expands (in length and width), the hands and fingers work as if to grasp the tree more tightly, the feet grip the floor, the legs seem to wrap around the tree, and so on. In effect, as one begins to understand the physical meaning of the picture – in this

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seems to reinforce a picture of mind and body as alienated from one another. Intentions, it seems to me, just are bodily. And the body just is intentional. They don't, by and large, stand outside one another. That one's sense of the intimacy of mind and body seems to grow the longer one trains may contribute to the sense that one really is learning something new here. As I see it, however, the training really does aim to perfect connections and responses that are already in place. It's not so much that mind and body become more intimate as that obstacles to such intimacy as they enjoy are gradually removed.

[9] See the "note on relaxation" below.

case, as one really begins to work with the picture, really to lift the tree as one leans against a wall – one finds the body expanding in different directions: up and down as one squats to lift and as one's body compresses under the weight being lifted, right and left as one grasps the tree with the whole hand, forward and back, as one pulls up and forward against the resistance holding one to the wall and back into the ground, and so on. Indeed, my experience has been that as more and more of the body – more and more of the involuntary musculature – is recruited to lift a bigger and bigger tree, the work done in applying the picture "lean against a wall" takes care of itself. It is in this way that one develops what I-chuan training "the six powers."

7. A note on relaxation: my emphasis on all the mental and physical work involved in I-chuan standing may seem at odds with everything one hears about the importance of relaxation in the "internal" martial arts. The mind and body are meant to be responsive, neither locked up nor collapsed. However, as that responsiveness grows – in both breadth (more muscles) and depth (more muscles working harder) – one will find oneself working harder and harder. The demands on mind and body are constantly growing in this form of training. So what should we make of the frequent reference in the literature to the idea of relaxation?

Certainly, if one is, in a conventional sense, too relaxed, one has no chance to refine the natural responsiveness of the body. On the other hand, if one is too tight, one will be unable to feel the body respond to the pictures being applied. So how much relaxation is the right amount? My experience suggests that this is not a question with an answer that usefully applies to everyone. In my own case, I have found that as I begin really to work with the pictures in the ways described above, I will work more and harder the more I relax. Paradoxically, that means: the more relaxation, the more work. The sense of paradox begins to fade, however, as one understands that the work done is the involuntary muscular response to the pictures in question. These are muscles that are not usually under one's

conscious control. They are the muscles that, for example, hold one upright while standing at a bus stop. They do indeed have to work. If not, one will simply collapse in a heap. But one does not by and large have to figure out how to stand upright. There is no need for invention here. The function of pictures in I-chuan training, however, is to stimulate these involuntary muscles to work. In very many cases, tightness is the result of trying to use muscles over which one has voluntary control to do the work of the involuntary muscles. But the idea that one's muscles should be relaxed is simply misleading. One needs to relax only enough to inhibit one's tendency to use voluntary muscles to do the work of the involuntary muscles. It is the point of the pictures I have been discussing to allow one to do that. How much relaxation is required to do that? That is a question, to say it again, without a useful answer. It's something that each student must discover for himself.

It may also be worth pointing out that physical work generally involves movement of some sort. Movement, however, is impossible if one is either too tight or too relaxed. In view of the fact that one's movement in I-chuan standing is nonexistent or at least extremely limited (after all, no one can truly lift a tree from the ground!), what responsiveness there is will be a function of one's ability both to increase the load the body lifts and to increase the number of muscles involved in lifting. If the load does not gradually increase, the muscles will simply clamp down and clench. So, while standing, it's as though as the tree gets bigger and bigger, more and more of the body must go to work. Remember, don't lean against a wall just one time; do it the whole time. The same is true for picking up a tree. One must keep doing it. In the beginning, perhaps only the thighs and the arms may be involved in lifting the tree, just as perhaps only the back will be involved in leaning against a wall. As one progresses, however, the neck (indeed, different parts of the neck!), the back, the abdomen, the fingers, the jaw, and so on all have to go to work. The effect, once again, is of the body gradually expanding in all directions.

8. By way of summary, let me remind the reader that I have been discussing only one aspect of I-chuan training: the use of pictures in standing as a means of uncovering one's natural responsiveness. I have said very little about other important aspects of standing and nothing at all about walking, test of power, push-hands, test of sound, or health dance. It would the subject of another paper entirely to explore some of the ways in which the responsiveness one develops in standing carries over into movement. And it would take many more pages to begin to explore how responsiveness in movement expresses itself in push-hands and the other aspects of I-chuan. Finally, my remarks here reflect my understanding of this aspect of the training only at this point in my development. They barely scratch the surface of this remarkable art. With luck and the continued patience and generosity of my teacher, my understanding will hopefully deepen.

Randall Havas