

The Meaning of Training
By Gregory Fong

All movement, whether in daily life or in the martial arts, has an inside and an outside. The outside is the form of the movement, say, that of raising one's arm. The inside is the movement's content, the actual muscular work its performance demands. I aim in all my classes to teach students, young and old alike, how to put content into their movements, how to develop and refine that content, and, ultimately, how to use it. There is nothing mysterious about giving content to one's movement in this sense, and because my teaching is based entirely on a common sense understanding of mind and body, it is available to everyone regardless of his or her background.

Generally speaking, one's movements in daily life have precisely the kind of content my way of training seeks to develop: if one wants, for example, to push a piano or lift a heavy pack, one must, as they say, put one's back into it. In training, one learns to support all one's movement in this way. In the absence of a real object like a pack or piano, however, the student must, by means of intention, generate the resistance that provides his or her movement with content. Consequently, my students learn from the very beginning to do more than merely memorize the various forms and techniques I teach. Learning to control the content of one's movement – that is, learning to make that movement meaningful -- demands that one challenge oneself to the utmost both mentally and physically, for ultimately it is the mind that governs the body both inside and out. Whether one's goal is increased health and vitality or martial arts skills, then, everyone stands to benefit from this form of training.

Although the distinction between the form and content of movement is quite general, each student is, of course, unique. For one thing, each person comes to training with a different personal history and different goals. My first task as a teacher, therefore, is to help each student work through the particular bad habits that stand in the way of the natural function of his or her mind and body. My second task is then to help each student develop that function to its highest level possible. In short, my goal for each student is that he should learn to recognize precisely where his movement lacks content and to know how to work to provide it. I would much rather a student learn how not to do something wrong than that he or she learn to do the wrong thing well. And because there is always further support that can be added to a person's movement, training in this way is the task of a lifetime.

In my classes, therefore, I encourage my students to learn the t'ai chi and kung-fu forms mainly as a way to hone their sense of themselves in movement. It is unwise endlessly to repeat the external movements of a form without understanding those movements from the inside. Similarly, I do not focus my attention on the so-called practical applications of the various individual movements in the forms I teach. The true meaning of a given movement in a form is not its application, but rather the unlimited potential of the mind to provide muscular and skeletal support for that movement. In the end, a martial arts form is simply a teaching tool to help the student learn to integrate mind and body. Once the student has learned to do that, he or she may continue to practice the form for fun or discard it in favor of something more spontaneous.

Finally, in all my classes, I emphasize Zhan Zhuang ("standing meditation") practice. I insist that every student learn how to stand properly. Here, as elsewhere however, I do not teach a large number of formal postures. Instead, I urge the student to work hard within a single posture to build mental and physical endurance and to begin to understand how to support his movement by working at first in a static position. Only as the student learns to support himself while standing still will he be able to put real content into his movement.

Yang T'ai Chi

Yang class starts with an extended warm-up period. Students begin with gentle, relaxed movements to loosen their joints and gradually build up to more physically demanding exercises. In this part of the workout, I aim to help students increase their flexibility, develop their coordination, and build their physical endurance. More important, however, I want students right at the outset to begin to appreciate the difference between unthinkingly repeating a movement and truly understanding it.

After the warm-up exercises, the class performs the Yang style long form. Students are encouraged to apply what they have learned during the warm-up period to the movements of the long form. After the group finishes the form, the class breaks up into smaller groups. Newer students practice basic standing (Zhan Zhuang) and then work on learning short sections of the form, while more advanced students learn more about standing as well as how to practice push-hands, do sword form and sword fighting.

There is, as far as I can see, no magic to this sort of t'ai chi practice. By learning how to understand Yang style t'ai chi from the inside, students who stick with the class and practice intelligently quickly improve their coordination, greatly increase their mental and physical energy, and enhance their overall mental and physical health.

Chen T'ai Chi

The Chen class workout is geared toward the student who wants to learn more about the "martial" aspects of t'ai chi, but the fundamental emphasis of content over form is the same as in the Yang class. The class begins with exercises that loosen and strengthen the hip and shoulder joints as well as encourage the development of hand and foot coordination. Students then spend a significant part of class time working on punching skills. I endeavor to help the student understand how to use his or her whole body to support a punch. My aim is not to train fighters, but rather to help students develop power and learn to control it. Such power can certainly be used by the boxer, but also by anyone when practicing t'ai chi forms and in daily life more generally. Thus, learning how punch correctly contributes greatly to the student's overall mental and physical health. Again, there is nothing magical about developing power in this sense. Training builds upon the same common sense approach to mind and body I outlined above: movement with content has power; empty external movement has none.

After warm-up and punching practice, the class breaks up into two groups. Newer students practice the "old style" Chen form, while more advanced students practice the "new style" form. Each group goes through as much of the form as it has learned up to that point, and then studies shorter sections or learns new movements in the form. As in Yang class, however, I encourage students to use the form to learn about themselves, rather than slavishly to repeat the external movements in a futile hope that doing so will make them wise, powerful, or healthy. Finally, more advanced students then study various aspects of push-hands practice. I teach push-hands primarily as a way for students to test their ability to control their power. Less than nothing is learned if a student forgets the basic principles of training and push-hands becomes a contest of strength and a matter of ego. If the student practices with those principles in mind, then push-hands can be a useful tool to teach him how much power he has, precisely where that power is coming from, where it should be coming from, and how much he knows how to do with it.

Northern Praying Mantis Kung Fu

My kung-fu class provides, among other things, a vigorous aerobic workout. Class begins with a physically challenging warm-up of punching and kicking drills designed to build strength and flexibility. Students develop hand and foot coordination as they learn how to develop power in their punches and kicks. They also learn the basics of boxing footwork in order to deliver that power to their opponents during sparring drills.

The emphasis I place on sparring in these classes must be understood in the context of the basic principles of training. My aim is to help students learn to develop and control their power. Sparring provides a no-nonsense test of one's mental and physical condition as well as of one's understanding of the source, extent, and practical availability of the power one trains to develop.

After the warm-up exercises and sparring practice, the class breaks into different groups to practice the different Praying Mantis forms. As before, I encourage students not to become slaves of their forms, but to use them to train themselves intelligently. We also use long staff technique, staff and sword fighting, and weapons forms to this same end.

I-chuan

I-chuan class focuses entirely on the basic principles of training. Although there is no set form in the practice of I-chuan, training includes practice in Zhan Zhuang health- and combat stances, stationary test of power, mobile test of power, walking practice, test of sound, health dance, and push-hands. In this class, however, students sacrifice all practice of forms and techniques to the in-depth study of power. By learning to analyze even the simplest movement into its components, students train themselves to be constantly on the lookout for gaps in the continuity of support they provide themselves as they move. Because there are no forms or exercises to memorize in this class, the student is compelled to devote all his attention to the fundamental problem that faces him in the martial arts: how do I put content into my movements?

The class generally follows me in a variety of extremely simple bodily movements. Usually, the complexity of these movements is increased only in the sense that students are gradually asked to do them while walking. Being able to maintain one's support while walking in this sense is one of the most challenging aspects of this kind of training, and learning to do so places heavy mental and physical demands on the student. I urge all my students to be ruthlessly

and relentlessly honest with themselves and always to ask, where is my movement empty?

The kind of increased energy and mental and physical harmony I-chuan develops is of tremendous benefit to everyone in all walks of life.

Children's Classes: Praying Mantis Kung Fu and Chen T'ai Chi

My children's classes are safe and non-aggressive. In addition to developing their strength, flexibility, and coordination, children in these classes learn proper self-defense as well as martial arts forms they can practice either at home or, eventually, in competition.

As well as helping them develop physically, the children's Chen class helps young students learn to concentrate and focus their often scattered attention on themselves and their immediate experience in ways they and those around them will also find helpful outside of class. With its emphasis on punching and kicking drills as well as a class kung-fu form, the Praying Mantis class will appeal to budding martial artists. Like its adult counterpart, this class provides students a vigorous aerobic workout.

The goal of both classes is to help kids build their minds and bodies. As a result, they will develop concentration, self-control, and self-respect as well as having fun while challenging themselves mentally and physically. Martial arts practice is an excellent way for children to build up their physical health, foster self-confidence, and acquire good mental habits. Aggressive behavior in class or out, however, will not be tolerated.