

INTERNAL WUSHU ARTS NEWSLETTER

A.T.Dale - P.O. Box 77040 - Seattle WA 98133 - (206)283-0055

SYMMETRICAL FORMS

Pa Kua Chang, Hsing I Chuan and Chi Kung traditionally are always taught both right and left sides. Traditional Tai Chi however, isn't taught this way, it's usually only taught right sided. Master Tchoung is the only instructor I have encountered that emphasizes the 'double' form of Tai Chi. Double form is his family style based upon the traditional Yang family Tai Chi style. Since studying with Sifu over the years I've seen four other symmetrical forms emerge. The first is the Simplified Tai Chi taught in China to promote Tai Chi practice and health among the masses. This set is also known as the Tai Chi 24 form. Our forms extra movements are ones that are done only left sided in the traditional Yang forms with a few additions from Pa Kua and Hsing I. The Tai Chi Association of Taiwan has also created a symmetrical Yang form. Unfortunately, it's not based upon the traditional Yang form and is very complicated to memorize, it changes direction very often. Needless to say, not many people want to learn this one. Recently China now has reworked the traditional Yang family form into a symmetrical form that is the basic long form for professional athletes.

I've heard many instructors recommend practicing the mirror image of the traditional form, but they don't teach it. I know several instructors who don't teach it but practice it. Their reasons for not teaching it is they claim it's too difficult to teach, or the students don't stick around long enough to re-learn the form left sided. In fact, I've found students practicing the standard Yang form for a long period of time do have difficulty learning the double form.

Another reason mentioned for not teaching the left side is the belief that the sincere student will study the left side on their own in their sincere research of the art. Chen Yen-Ling reported in one of his copies of the Yang family manuscripts that the Yang family members were taught and practiced the mirror images but the 'outsiders' were not. This, along with Zhan Zhuang and certain Fa-jin drills, gave the family an edge in combat since they were more versatile than the students. Some of Yang Chen-Fu's advanced group reported that he recommended practicing the mirror image but didn't teach it. One of my teachers, Pang Tse-Yao would demonstrate the Yang family form mirror image but didn't teach it.

Another reason I've heard some instructors don't teach the mirror image because it's dangerous; it will reverse your chi flow. I received a letter from one of the senior students visiting an instructor in New York. The instructor warned him that if he practiced the left side he would die quickly. Kelly told him he'd been practicing for three years already, after that the instructor refused to talk with him.

Aside from the physical benefits of exercising and moving right and left sides equally, I believe the most important benefit is in our mind. Training the left and right sides of the brain equally. We always feel one side isn't as coordinated as the other. This gives us a feeling of weakness and vulnerability. When you're practicing the left side (if you're right handed) your concentration has to be sharpened and your body/muscle control has to be opened up. In teaching some of the weaponry left handed I've noticed some of the movements have more 'Tai Chi' quality in them, I believe this is because the mind doesn't have the muscles control it has over the favorite side. The inner connections are better on some movements because the mind is guiding the body instead of going on automatic. For right handed people, especially physically strong members, the weaponry is very difficult. The left side required more mind and body harmony thus localized strength can't be used.

On a practical level the weapon training seems out dated with the exception of the Tai Chi Cane. The weapons give you feedback as to how correct your movements are. Something you can't get in the solo forms. Another aspect of the weaponry is the upper body conditioning. The solo forms train the legs, the weaponry trains the upper body, a mild weight lifting workout. If you only practice one sided, that arm will be off balance with the other arm. Another aspect of left handed forms - they teach greater patients with ourselves!

Symmetrical forms help us develop more completely. The internal wushu spring from the Taoist philosophy of health, fitness and balance of mind and body. Adaptability is considered a virtue. The strength and flexibility of a willow with standing a storm that a pine couldn't take. What if you injured your good arm? It sure helps having greater control of the other side. The more options available, to us at any task the better the results can be and our health benefits.

MUSCLE - STRENGTH - POWER STRENGTH - LI - JIN

Words just can't translate the true meaning of some of the most important principles in the internal wushu. The gap between American and Chinese thinking is so great we can't expect a direct translation to be sufficient. In addition to this, in the martial arts world you have the descriptions and names of movements with hidden meanings, in codes and poems. In Japanese these poems and formulas are called Kudens. These phrases were used to convey the inner meaning of the forms to the true students so outsiders couldn't understand what was being said or taught. In Aiki jitsu one kuden translates as, "Be a good thief." When an instructor says this they want you to be softer

and lighter in your movements. Steal your partner's balance without them knowing. Yang Cheng-Fu would say, "Don't put your meat on my shelf" meaning you were using too much strength and heaviness.

In the classics we see a common phrase 'Don't use strength'. 'The internal arts don't use strength, they use Jin.' We also see words like 'Fa li' (releasing strength) or I - Chi - Li (mind, chi, strength) must be coordinated. On the one hand it tells you not to use strength, then on the other it says to coordinate strength.

Even in the English language we have many meanings for strength. Strong mind, strong smell, muscle strength, strength of character. . . When you read a translation saying not to use strength replace the worked strength with muscle. Don't muscle the movement. In class I call this 'localized strength', brute force. This type of strength refers to the strength an oxen would use. Very limited and clumsy. When the work Li appears as something to be used or coordinated in a movement then it refers to total body coordination. I'd call this snake like power, strong, flexible and united. These two descriptions are similar to the strength of a weight lifer compared to a gymnast. The gymnast in addition to having to be strong has to be agile and flexible.

Localized strength causes you to float and be stiff. It segments your body and severs any rootedness and power you have from the ground. If your shoulders or elbows are up you are floating and weak. Just try to push something this way. It's as if you have styrofoam within your muscles. LIGHT BUT NOT FLOATING is a common saying in the internal wushu. Movements should be smooth, soft and fluid but not airy. All power is issued from the feet. The legs generate the power, this is transmitted to the hip and waist, guided to the shoulders and elbows and released from the hands. This is the strength we're looking for: fa li or I - Chi - Li.

Once this coordination has become smooth and fluid we begin having access to fa jin power. Jin can be thought of as force and power. It is the result of every muscle in your body coordinated with every joint in your body, coordinated with your breathing, coordinated with your mind focus, coordinated with your energy. Everything working 100% harmoniously in any direction you choose. Absolutely no inner friction in your body or mind.

This in conjunction with timing and good judgment is what has given the old masters an apparent super strength lasting into old age. It's not muscle, it's physics.