

# 养生之道

## Yang Sheng

# Internal martial arts

by **Xiaoyao Xingzhe**

**A**LL ANIMALS ARE DESIGNED for movement and we are no exception. What is different, the Daoists say, is that we can apply our mind, our attention, to the activity. Instead of just jogging mindlessly, listening perhaps to our Walkman for distraction, we can deliberately focus our attention on the sensations of our body. This over time has the ability to fundamentally change the quality of that movement, and in the process, the quality of our mind(s) as well.

This is the basic premise of what has come to be known as the *nei jia quan*, the “internal martial arts” in China, of which there are several. Almost everyone knows something about *tai ji quan* (Tai Chi), some will be familiar with *ba gua quan* (Eight Trigrams Boxing), fewer will know about *xing yi quan* (Form and Mind Boxing), and 10 years ago almost no one in the West had even heard about *san huang pao chui* (Three Emperor Cannon Pounding).

All of these internal martial arts have certain basic principles in common, which they develop in different ways. Characteristic of all are a rounding of the limbs, slight tucking in of the tailbone, slight concavity of the chest, sinking of the shoulders and elbows coupled with a flexible “plucking up” of the back<sup>1</sup> and a well-balanced stance with the toes slightly gripping the ground. The sum of these produces a posture that cultivates a sensation of fullness in the lower abdomen. This sensation becomes more and more obvious over time – and if it does not, some aspect of the posture is incorrect. Teachers of these movement systems insist that it is the posture itself that fosters the

development of qi within the body, and that this internal qi should be clearly perceptible. “How long?” I asked. “Not long,” most say. “About five years or so.”

These postural requirements are, however, only the outside. All internal martial arts also require certain fundamental “postures” of the mind, as well. One mental “posture” is a careful development of the sense of touch and total awareness of the body, initially through pouring one’s attention into the physical being and feeling the things we all take for granted and ignore: the sensation of the clothing we are wearing, the exact distribution of weight across the soles of the feet, where we might be holding tension, the degree of relaxation in the big muscle groups, then the small muscle groups, and so on. Another “posture” is the awareness of breathing and its relationship with your movements, and its relationship with your state of mind. Teachers will often quote Zhuang Zi in this context: “Real people breathe from their heels!”

However, *yi* is the most crucial aspect: *intent*. When proprioceptive awareness is linked with awareness of breathing, and a certain gentle deliberateness is applied to a movement, it has *yi*. Any internal martial arts teacher worth their salt can see immediately when a movement is being performed “with *yi*” and when it is not. In fact a *xing yi* teacher told me that students of that particular art would be told to stand in a certain posture and would practice nothing else for months or even years “until they have *zhan chu Dongxi* – brought forth the Right Stuff from their standing posture”. This means intent has suffused their posture, and the teacher can see this evidence of their progress.

So the generic internal martial artist will have these characteristics: an awareness that is present



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and attentive to both the inner and outer environment, and the relationship of these two through breathing; a cultivated, lively and relaxed readiness of the muscles, resting on soles of the feet that have learned to feel their contact with the ground. There is an ability to translate that contact with the ground into a forceful movement that passes through and is guided by the waist, and involves the whole body, with a minimum of resistance from tension or misalignment of joints, combined with yi – a trained intention and mental focus.

How these qualities are developed, and the form the final movement will take, differ somewhat in each of the four styles of martial arts mentioned above. For example, in *tai ji quan* the method of learning has become familiar to us all: circular movements slowed to a crawl and performed very softly. This, the early masters felt, gave a better chance of realising that the ‘whole-body power’ (整劲 *zhěng jìn*) was not simply brute muscle force, but rather a trained phenomenon. For the vast majority of present-day tai chi practitioners, however, the softness and slowness have become an end in themselves, and this is indeed an excellent method for relaxation and development of coordination, and often facilitates the flow of qi around the body. But it was not the original point.

While the most common style seen in the West is Yang style *tai ji*, those who are mostly interested in *tai ji quan* as a martial art will want to become familiar with Chen style *tai ji*, which does indeed have the extremes (“*tai ji*”) of both fast and slow, hard and soft, movements. In Chen style there are two forms; the first is the slower form, similar to the Yang style (which most agree was originally developed from the Chen village style) except with obvious “twisting silk” movement of the arms and legs which makes it resemble a snake. The second, faster, form of Chen style is called *Pao Chui* – Cannon Fist – and was the gift (some agree) to the people of Chen village by the masters of *san huang pao chui* (Three Emperor Cannon Pounding).

*San huang pao chui* can definitely be traced back to 1845, but is probably much older than that. It is characterised by simple powerful movements (based, as are all of these internal martial arts, on the principles discussed at the beginning of this article). Its postures are settled and firm, and outer movements are guided by the internal circulation of qi and yi. However, unlike *tai ji* and *ba gua*, and similar to *xing yi quan*, *san huang pao chui* in practice employs an intentionally fierce focused power and attitude, with hands, body, eyes and feet highly coordinated to bring forth a total body strength (整劲 *zhěng jìn*). Unlike most internal martial arts, it employs external conditioning of striking surfaces, such as hand-strengthening by striking hard sand-bags and punching bags. Like all the other internal arts, *san huang pao*

*chui* makes available training in weapons such as sword, broadsword, staff and spear.

Spear in fact was the weapon of choice for one of the founders of *xing yi quan*, Ji Long-Feng, and the movements of *xing yi* are known for their direct piercing quality. They appear straight, especially in comparison to circular arts like *tai ji quan* or *ba gua*, but in fact in *xing yi quan* the movements are small arcs or circles that contribute a drilling type of power to the powerful strikes of this style.

*Xing yi quan* is characterised by its use of five basic forms, based on the five “elements”:

- metal** – chopping fist: *pi quan*
- wood** – crushing fist: *beng quan*
- water** – drilling fist: *zhuan quan*
- fire** – cannon fist: *pao quan*
- earth** – horizontal fist: *heng quan*

The five basic forms are really different ways to generate internal power, rather than actual combat techniques; they will be used flexibly as the situation demands. These basic forms are expanded with a number of animal forms: dragon, tiger, bear, horse and so on.

*Ba gua quan* does not base itself on the five elements so much as the eight trigrams of the *Yi Jing*, and whereas the movements of *xing yi* appear straight, *ba gua* is nothing but circles, and circles within circles. While the first practice in *xing yi* is standing still, the first practice in *ba gua* is walking a circle. Often one can see where *ba gua* practitioners frequent, as there will be circles worn in the grass from their practice. As befits an art inspired by the Book of Changes, *ba gua* specialises in rapid change, twisting and turning the body to utilise the eight “palm-changes” based on the eight trigrams, each embodying a characteristic energy symbolised in the trigram.

Internal martial arts are very conducive to laying the foundation for “spiritual” pursuits, but in most cases are not sufficiently well-rounded to be transformative in-and-of themselves, despite the earnest desire of some devotees. It must be confessed that my younger self had aspirations in that regard, but after meeting more than my share of acknowledged “masters” in the internal martial arts, my conclusion has unfortunately been that most had fallen prey to an all-to-common pitfall: instead of transforming the ego, they had strengthened and solidified it. Those practitioners who did not succumb to the temptation to identify with the label “Master”<sup>2</sup> were not (in my opinion) preserved from it merely by their internal martial arts practice, but rather by the balance of other factors in their lives, be these a constitutional maturity, reading of the classics, life experience, or exposure to exemplars of a true and operative tradition.



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## Endnotes

1. Easily experienced by sticking out your chin, pausing to feel that posture, then drawing your chin back in again so that you feel the back of your head lifting up. The latter is “plucking up the back” which allows a flexible straightening of the spine so that qi can move easily along it.
2. A term rarely used in northern China, where your peers could see at a glance your level of skill, it has crept in from Hong Kong as a result of competition for students. On the other hand, those who have the term ‘master’ applied to them do not always identify with it (ie, they do not say to themselves “I am the great Grand Master Xiao-Yao, the only one around here with know-how.”)