The Making of a Butterfly

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS AS TAUGHT BY MASTER W.C. CHEN



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Becci, who put up with me sitting up nights while I pored over the manuscript, to my daughter, Rachel, who never doubted me, and to my son, Christopher (July 23, 1989–April 18, 1998), who will always be my hero.



What the caterpillar sees as the end of the world, the Master sees as a butterfly.

—Richard Bach, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*



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PREFACE

More than forty years have passed since I (figuratively) sat at the feet of Master W.C. Chen, a man of remarkable skill and knowledge who had studied the internal arts of *Xingyi-chuan* and *Baguazhang* under the tutelage of the revered Zhang Zhaodong. Zhang had been one of the foremost students of the legendary Cheng Tinghua who had trained extensively under the founder of *Baguazhang,* Dong Haichuan. Chen was a very astute pupil but because fate had destined him for a career in the covert world of intelligence gathering, he never attained the same notoriety as his senior classmate, Wang Shujin. Although both Chen and Wang fled the communist takeover of their homeland and took up residence in Taiwan, their paths diverged considerably. Wang remained in Taiwan where he taught many fine students. He also traveled to Japan where he became something of a living legend, remaining undefeated after happily accepting any and all challenges issued by practitioners and teachers of various martial arts. While Wang introduced the *neijia* [Chinese internal martial arts] to Japan, his junior classmate moved to the United States where he would teach only a handful of students.

At a time when the Chinese martial arts were rarely taught to *gwai-lo* [foreigners], Master Chen and his wife Mei opened their home and their hearts to me. I became the son they'd never had

and I have often remarked that I was raised by two sets of parents. Tragically, Master Chen passed away in 1971 and Mei returned to Taiwan where she remained until her death several years later.

Master Chen's approach to the martial arts was very traditional and demanding. Training was extremely rugged and often bordered on the brutal. We were made to understand that a life of martial arts is a life of extreme discipline, which is liberally sprinkled with dedication, perseverance, compassion, and love. However, training was not necessarily restricted to the practice of various techniques and the acquisition of fighting prowess; a thorough understanding of the mental and spiritual processes involved was also required for those who were determined to follow the path of the martial arts. Anyone wishing to travel this difficult road requires the guidance of a seasoned veteran; someone who has previously negotiated the same course and who can point out the many hazards and pitfalls along the way. Master Chen was such a guide, devoting himself selflessly to his students in the hopes that they would take the torch from his hand and carry it on to the next generation.

It is my hope that this book of lectures and anecdotes will serve as a kind of guide for martial arts enthusiasts of the current generation. Although my *sifu* [teacher] taught Chinese forms of pugilism, the lessons I learned from him and which are presented in this book can be readily applied to virtually any martial art. In this way, my teacher's words, wisdom, and compassion may be passed on to a new generation of martial arts devotees in the hope that they will preserve the wonderful and irreplaceable gift of the traditional martial arts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Richard Grossinger for giving me a chance.

And I'd like to give a special acknowledgment to Yvonne Cárdenas who, besides being my editor, has been my mentor in the publication of this book. She has been more than kind to a new and bumbling author and without her patience and keen expertise, this book would never have seen the light of day.

CHAPTER ONE

Knock, Knock

Success is not a place at which one arrives, but rather... the spirit with which one undertakes and continues the journey.

—Alex Noble, *Christian Science Monitor*

My father was a career officer in the Judge Advocate Corps of the U.S. Army and in 1961 he received orders to report for duty at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Consequently, our family moved from the beauty and calm of the desert valley of Sandia Base, New Mexico, to the rolling, bustling hills of McLean, Virginia, which is located just outside of the nation's capital. For some time I had heard my father warn my mother that he knew he would eventually be assigned to the Pentagon, a post which he contemplated with some considerable dread. McLean seemed a nice enough place to me, and I could not understand the reasons for his misgivings. It would be some years before I would be mature enough to appreciate the treacherous political undercurrents of his present assignment. One of my primary concerns was finding a martial arts club, which in those days could be a very daunting task.

I started my martial arts career when we lived on a military base located in the Panama Canal Zone. I participated in judo classes that were offered at the base gymnasium on Fort Amador but I soon discovered that my meager grappling skills were no match for the fists of older, larger boys who were determined to see how far they could pound my skinny frame into the ground. Fortunately, my father knew a junior officer who, being half-Chinese, was attending some kind of Chinese self-defense class being conducted outside of the military base. He made arrangements for me to accompany this young officer in the hopes that I might learn some "self-defense tricks" that would boost my confidence and provide me with some means of protecting myself from the neighborhood bullies.

I was introduced to Mr. M.L. Hou, a teacher of northern *Shaolin kung-fu*. He conducted training in the basement of his small Chinese grocery store, which was located in the tiny and now-defunct Chinese quarter of Panama City. This was how I came to discover the wonders of the Chinese martial arts.

Some years later when our family was transferred to Sandia Base, I located an NCO [non-commissioned officer] who was teaching *Shito-Ryu* karate to a small group of students. I saw that this Japanese fighting art was rather similar to the form of kung-fu that I had studied previously, and I fell in love with it. I trained very rigorously for three years before my family was transferred once again.

After we had settled into our new home in McLean, my father began searching for a martial arts club in which I could enroll. In today's society where martial arts are nothing special and one

shops for martial arts schools and teachers much as one might shop for fresh vegetables, it is difficult for young people to imagine what it was like over forty years ago. Teachers of martial arts such as karate were both revered and feared. Who knew what terrible powers they possessed? It was rumored that in order to win the coveted black belt, one had to actually kill a man with one's bare hands! No one dared incur the wrath of a *yudansha* [black belt holder] and risk being cut in half with a thunderbolt kick or punch.

My father finally found a small *dojo* [training hall] some distance from our home. However, one look inside told me that this wasn't the kind of place for which I was searching. The floor was absolutely filthy and the large mirrors on the wall were all cracked and held together with masking tape. Even the basement of a Chinese grocery was cleaner than this! We turned to leave but just as I reached for the door, a stocky Oriental fellow approached us and asked if we were interested in enrolling in karate classes. Not wanting to disappoint him, my father said that he simply wanted to purchase a karate "costume" for me. Looking a little confused, the instructor sold him a *karategi* and we subsequently beat a hasty retreat to the exit.

After several days of asking a few of my high school friends some rather oblique questions regarding martial arts clubs, I managed to locate a teacher of *Kyokushin* karate. Mr. Parsons conducted classes in the cafeteria of an elementary school that was situated only a few miles from my home. Because I was too young to drive, my parents agreed to shuttle me to and from class twice weekly. The other students in the class were all older than me

but I was the only one (besides the instructor) who sported an authentic karate uniform. Everyone else wore sweat suits or loose-fitting pants with T-shirts. I figured that they had to be a lot more comfortable than I was because the early karate uniforms were made of medium-weight twill which was, as nearly as I could tell, a close second to canvas. Repeated washings would eventually soften it so that it would become very soft and comfy but I didn't know that yet.

Kyokushin karate was developed by Masutatsu Oyama, a karate master who had actually killed bulls with his bare hands. Imagine that. Bulls! Our *sensei* [teacher] assured us that it was all true and we watched in utter amazement as he punched through several inches of pine boards and shattered bricks with his hand. So it was true. These black belts really did possess remarkable powers. We had all heard stories of men who could jump up and kick a man in the face, who could kill an opponent with just a single blow, and whose punching knuckles bore calluses the size of pigeon's eggs!

While we both respected and feared the black-belted karate instructor, we were ourselves held in awe by "outsiders." Naturally, we did nothing to dissuade them from their convictions that we, like our teacher, possessed all kinds of supernormal abilities. When people stopped by to observe the class, we would puff out our chests and soak up the attention. However, when *Sensei* was watching us, our machismo disintegrated and we turned into so many attentive, humble pupils.

If karate was regarded as a mysterious form of Oriental pugilism, kung-fu was legendary: a mystical and secret art that

was mentioned only in whispers. So when I casually asked if my classmates might know of anyone in the area who taught kung-fu, the response I received was pretty close to what one might expect as a result of the proverbial case of extreme flatulence in a house of worship. In any case, one of my classmates said that he had heard rumors regarding a Chinese gentleman who lived in McLean and who, if the rumors were to be believed, had been seen in his backyard practicing what was thought to be some sort of esoteric martial art. Having driven past this mysterious fellow's residence a few times himself, my classmate provided me with a general location and description of the house.

On my way home from school the following day (I really did walk about two miles to and from school—honestly), I took a detour and searched for the dwelling of the inscrutable Chinese boxer. The directions I'd been given made it sound as though it was fairly close to my own home and sure enough, I found it about a block away from the main thoroughfare in a small cul-de-sac that was roughly a mile from my own home. I stopped at the end of the short sidewalk that led to the front door of the ranch-style house. What if there was no Chinese guy living here at all? What would I say? The pale-blue house with the two-car garage took on a sort of foreboding but I swallowed my fears and with some trepidation, I walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell. Within a few seconds, a rather short, middle-aged Chinese lady with sparkling black eyes opened the door.

"Yes?" she asked.

Aha! This is the right house! Okay, here goes.

"Good afternoon," I replied, enunciating the words as best I

could. After all, everyone knows that foreigners understand English if you speak slowly and clearly. "I was told that a gentleman living here might teach martial arts."

The lady furrowed her brow and cocked her head slightly to one side. Clearly, she hadn't understood what I'd said.

Okay, we'll try this again....

"Kung-fu? Uh, *chuan-fa?*" I raised my eyebrows questioningly.

She seemed to think for a moment and then shook her head. "No, no one here does that. Thank you." And she smiled and shut the door.

Huh.

Well, I'd heard of this kind of thing before, being "tested" to see if you really wanted to learn. Well, I did!

Okay, tomorrow's another day and we'll give it another try.

The next day I was handed the same polite response. "No one here who does that. Thank you."

Huh. How come she always answers the door? Where's her husband? I'll give it a couple more tries.

For the next two weeks I visited the house each day after school and received the same canned response. I was starting to wonder if I was becoming a pest. What if she called the police and complained about me? I could imagine myself being trussed up and hauled off by the cops. My father would absolutely kill me.

Nah. She looks too nice to do something like that. I think.

And so, I approached the house yet again. I rang the now-familiar doorbell and wondered what I could say to this lady to let her know just how badly I wanted to learn? Maybe, just

maybe it was true; maybe there really wasn't a kung-fu teacher living here. I hadn't considered that possibility until now. Well, then.

The door opened rather suddenly and standing before me was a middle-aged Chinese gentleman wearing a sleeveless white T-shirt and black trousers. He had a broad chest and his arms looked like they'd been carved out of granite. He didn't have wrists, per se; his forearms were the same thickness all the way down to his hands, which featured fingers as thick as spikes.

Oh gosh, this is the guy. This has got to be the guy.

"Yes?" he said in very clear English.

I quickly introduced myself and then gushed out everything all at once: how I'd trained in *Shaolin* boxing when I'd lived in Panama, how I was now taking karate classes and how very much I wanted to learn kung-fu from him. It's a wonder I didn't hyperventilate and collapse on the spot. The man lowered his brow a bit and seemed to consider everything I'd said.

"So, you want to learn this...kung-fu?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Yes, sir!" I exclaimed. I assured him that I would be his best student and..."

"Come inside, please," he said as he gestured for me to enter the house.

I caught a glimpse of the dark-eyed lady in the distant kitchen peeking out at me.

"Why do you want to learn this kung-fu?" he asked. "To beat people up?"

Well, of course. Why else would anyone want to do it? But that's not what he wants to hear.

"No . . . no, sir . . . I just enjoy doing it and I know it will help me become a better person."

Boy, that's a crock. I wonder if he'll buy it.

The man with the Popeye forearms didn't take his eyes off me. He took in a breath and exhaled slowly.

Uh-oh. He knows! Oh, man.

"Please sit down," he said as he motioned for me to sit on the large sofa. "My name is Chen. Maybe I can help you. Your father and mother, do they know you are here?"

I explained that my parents knew how much I loved martial arts and I was sure it'd be fine with them if I began training with him.

Chen nodded slowly. "Put your books down," he said. "Come with me, please."

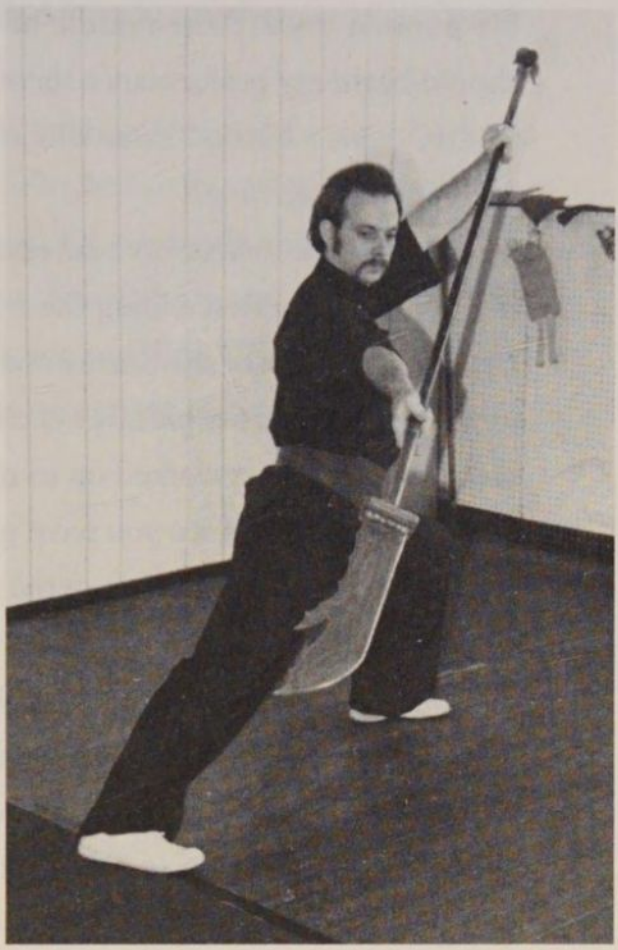
Oh, wow. This is it! He's really gonna teach me.

I was almost giddy as I followed Chen to the rear of the house where he opened a door that led to a set of wooden stairs. I could hear voices coming from the basement.

Hey, he's got other students here!

Chen led the way down the stairs and into the large, finished room. It was remarkable. The floor was tiled and the walls were paneled as per the style of 1960s suburbia, but along one wall was a wooden rack that held three staffs and a spear. On one end hung a straight sword and a beautiful broadsword. Good heavens! He even had a tiger fork and a *quando* [a heavy type of Chinese halberd]! A brass incense burner was placed atop a small shrine that was located against the opposite wall. I could detect the faint odor of Chinese incense. It was then that I noticed the

The quando, a very heavy type of Chinese halberd



five Chinese fellows who were glaring at me. They all wore T-shirts and sweat pants and looked to be in their mid-twenties. And very fit.

Uh-oh. I feel like the ugly duckling.

Chen put his hand on my shoulder and introduced me to the group. "This is Phillip Starr. He will watch and learn with us."

Yeah, if they don't eat me first.

"You have practiced this before?" Chen asked.

I nodded, wishing that I'd just kept my mouth shut.

"Good," he replied. "Please, show me what you have learned."

He pointed toward the middle of the room, indicating that I should begin my performance there.

Oh, man. I haven't done this stuff for a while...geez, and everybody's watching!

I carefully presented my best rendition of *Mang Fu Har Shan* [Ferocious Tiger Descending the Mountain], a form that I had learned years previously. Chen stood off to the side with his granite arms folded across his large chest and frowned. When I completed the set, Chen walked up to me.

"Yes," he said. "I see you have practiced *Sil-Lum* [*Sil-Lum* is the Cantonese pronunciation of the Mandarin, *Shaolin*]. It needs work. Today you will sit and watch. Please sit down here," Chen motioned for me to sit against the wall where he was standing.

I glanced up at my future classmates. It was clear that I wasn't welcome here. In the early 1960s kung-fu wasn't taught openly, and it was never taught to Occidentals. Some styles were taught only to Chinese males who were descended from certain families. Although a family's sons would be permitted to learn a certain "family style" from their fathers and grandfathers, daughters were rarely taught much more than a few basic self-defense techniques. After all, they would eventually marry and leave the family in which they had been raised. Because they would someday become members of other families, they were usually not privy to their family's special form of kung-fu.

The Chinese martial arts were, and still are, considered an important part of traditional Chinese culture but they were kept hidden from the public at-large for many years. Pioneers such as Arthur Lee, T.Y. "Timmy" Wong, Ark Wong, and Mr. Chen

would be among the first kung-fu teachers to break the mold and teach Westerners.

Chen barked out an order and his five pupils went back to practicing what they'd been doing before the *gwai-lo* walked into the room. Every now and then, I'd catch one of them glaring at me when Chen wasn't looking. *Sifu* Chen busied himself correcting their postures and techniques and didn't seem to notice anything unusual, but I did. This was going to be a bumpy ride.

CHAPTER TWO

The Life and Times of W.C. Chen

Diamonds are only chunks of coal that stuck to their jobs, you see.

—Minnie Richard Smith, *Poor Richard's Anthology of Thoughts on Success*

W.C. Chen was born in 1908 in the city of Longyang, which is located in Fujian Province of China. Unlike some of the classical martial arts figures who were frail and sickly in their youth or who grew up in dire poverty, Chen's health was excellent and he hailed from a rather well-to-do family. His father owned a small mill of some kind and saw to it that his son and two daughters were provided the best educations possible. While in his teens, Chen developed an interest in martial arts and his father hired a teacher of the famous *Hung Ga* style to instruct him.

Chen trained very rigorously until he moved to Beijing in 1926 to enter the university there. Although he was planning to major in one of the sciences, he discovered that he had a natural aptitude

for foreign languages and he began to study English in his spare time. Moreover, Beijing was a virtual haven for martial arts enthusiasts. Chen chanced upon a gentleman surnamed Tai who practiced a northern form of *Shaolin* boxing known as *Hochuan. Sifu* Tai warned the youngster that training was very severe and although Tai only accepted a few pupils at a time, he admitted young Chen into his small circle of worthies.

Tai's classes involved repetitious practice of fundamental movements and postures which featured a variety of powerful punching and kicking routines as well as a wide array of throwing and joint-twisting techniques. Broken bones and other such injuries were not uncommon in these iron-fisted classes that were held in a local park near Tai's home. Chen told me that *Hochuan* training could be rather brutal; its approach to combat was extremely aggressive and forceful. Named after the man who developed it, *Hochuan* never became popular outside of China.

It wasn't long before one of Chen's friends told him about a unique boxing art known as *Baguazhang* which was being taught locally by an older gentleman named Zhang Zhaodong. Zhang was regarded as a genuine hero, a pillar of righteousness who stood for truth, justice, and the Chinese way. Although he was close to seventy when Chen met him, he was still a formidable fighter. Chen said that Zhang, who had worked for years as a sort of bounty hunter and bodyguard, was rather large for a person of Chinese descent, and was very strong. Zhang was renowned for his skill in the internal art of *Xingyichuan*[1] before

[1]Based on five fundamental postures, *Xingyi* is famous for its explosive speed and devastating power.

being introduced to the legendary Cheng Tinghua who was one of the foremost pupils of the founder of *Baguazhang*, Dong Haichuan.

Although Cheng introduced him to Dong, most of Zhang's *Bagua* skill was acquired under the tutelage of Cheng. Cheng became interested in Zhang's *Xingyichuan* and the two men became close friends, so much so that Cheng never referred to Zhang as a "student."

An advocate of the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle, Zhang's method of *Bagua* was rather stark in comparison to the more elaborate forms developed by many of his classmates and, of course, it had a very distinct *Xingyi* flavor. Whereas his *Bagua* teacher had had a strong background in *shuai-jiao* [grappling] and favored the application of various throwing techniques, Zhang used them rather sparingly and preferred to overwhelm his opponent at the first opportunity.

Chen was made to train in *Xingyichuan* for some time before being permitted to learn *Bagua*. Zhang favored large, open postures, which allowed him to make full use of his size and strength. He was an absolute stickler for basics and insisted that every movement had to be just so. Although Chen was not very tall, he was solidly built. He had developed a broad chest that was straddled by two very thick arms. Zhang said that Chen's physique was perfect for *Xingyi* and he began the young man's training by emphasizing fundamental postures and methods of issuing intrinsic force *[fajin]*. The basic routines were practiced for a considerable length of time before learning any actual forms or engaging in fighting drills.

When Chen eventually began learning *Bagua,* he felt that he had found the boxing art for which he'd been searching. He practiced night and day and sometimes had trouble staying awake during his college classes. He practiced regularly with a senior classmate who he described as being "built like a bull and very, very strong." The fellow he was describing was Wang Shujin, who would later move to Taiwan and achieve legendary status after introducing the *neijia* to Japan.

When Chen graduated from college with a degree in chemistry, he remained in Beijing and worked for a paint manufacturer. The reason that he did not return home and work for his father was because he wanted to continue training with Zhang. It was during this time that he met a young lady named Mei and fell head-over-heels in love. They were married and rented a small apartment. Mei soon became pregnant but tragically, the child was stillborn and she never conceived again.

In 1935, tensions with Japan were very high and the threat of war was in the air. Chen decided that he would return home but his former *Hochuan* teacher, Tai, was stricken with a serious illness. He had no one to care for him and asked if Chen would remain in Beijing and minister to him. Chen reluctantly agreed and provided for his teacher as best he could. Unfortunately, Tai passed away a few months later. Thereupon, Chen and his new wife departed the bustling city of Beijing and moved back to Longyang.

When the Japanese bombed Shanghai in 1937, Chen enlisted in the army and was immediately awarded a commission and placed in the infantry. However, he had a knack for espionage

and was soon transferred to an intelligence-gathering unit. I was never able to determine exactly what he did during the war but I do know that he often operated behind enemy lines. The war left him with a permanent dislike of anything Japanese, a prejudice that I could understand but for which I also pitied him.

Following the end of hostilities between Japan and China in 1945, fighting broke out between the communists (who were being led by a young man named Mao Zedong) and the Republic, which was headed by a former warlord named Chiang Kai-shek. When Chiang's forces were defeated and many Chinese fled to Taiwan, Chen remained with his family in Longyang. His parents passed away soon after the establishment of the People's Republic. Chen was always rather reluctant to talk about this period of his life and I understood that these times were extremely tough for both Chen and his wife.

In 1952 the Chens made their way to Taiwan. I was never told exactly how they had escaped from the mainland but Chen set about immediately, working for military intelligence in the new Republic of China. His fluency in English made him a very valuable commodity. He had a strong desire to travel to the United States and in 1960 he was recruited by one of the U.S. intelligence services.

Arrangements were made for he and his wife to move to *Mei guo* ["Beautiful Country," the Chinese name for America]. I was never able to determine which intelligence agency he worked for and Chen spoke very little about his job; he referred to his position as being a simple "interpreter."

Although his work was very important to him, Chen's life

revolved around his practice of martial arts. Mei never complained about the long hours he spent with this young, impatient American who sought to emulate his teacher. All of Chen's other students were young adults and none of them looked favorably on having to share their *sifu* with me. For the most part they ignored me but this tactic actually worked against them because it forced Chen to spend more time with me, explaining various aspects of the arts he taught. I was encouraged to ask questions and in time, Chen and Mei came to regard me as the son they'd never had.

Being proud of his ability to speak a foreign language with great fluency, he often taught his classes in English. This was much appreciated since I spoke no Chinese at all! Chen had known several famous kung-fu teachers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China, and he would often talk about them as he explained his martial arts lineage. I took notes, trying to sound out the names of various people he'd met and the forms of kung-fu they taught. I frequently got the names of both confused and it would take considerable time before I was finally able to figure them out and separate the names of the boxing styles from those of the instructors.

Chen sought a way to merge the internal arts with the form of *Shaolin* boxing that he had learned. Sadly, he would never succeed. Chen passed away in 1971 from complications of a congenital kidney ailment, the existence of which was previously unknown to him. Mei returned to Taiwan. With the exception of one of his pupils, none of his students ever attempted to perpetuate his teachings. They scattered to the four winds, never to be seen or heard from again. It would be the "ugly duckling,"

Chen's only American student, who would carry on his dream by eventually blending the arts that he taught into a single, seamless package known as *Yilichuan*.

CHAPTER THREE

Concentrate!

In martial arts there is no magic.
You reap what you sow.

—W.C. Chen

I held my *bow and arrow stance* as deeply as I could and shot out another punch as *Sifu's* voice cracked out the count with the celerity of a bullwhip. The air in the basement was thick and stank of sweat. I don't know how many punches we'd performed; it was all just a blur now. According to our teacher, we hadn't done many "real" punches; we'd just been going through the motions.

I'm gonna puke! I'm really gonna puke if he makes me do just one more punch!

"Wu!" Chen snapped, and every student in the group fired another punch.

It's gonna smell like puke in here in a minute!

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Chen walk up behind one of my classmates. He placed the sole of one foot on the back of

his pupil's extended leg and pushed down on the back of the knee, causing it to collapse. The young man dropped to the floor with a yelp. *Sifu* watched as his student got to his feet as quickly as he could and assumed the proper stance again. Chen scowled and barked something at him in Chinese. The student nodded but kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

I was soaked with sweat. I could feel it running down my ribs and chest; it poured into my eyes and I tried to blink it away. My deeply flexed front leg was shaking with exhaustion. I knew I'd be next...*whap!* Chen's foot came down on the back of my rear knee but my leg didn't buckle. I kept my back foot pressing firmly against the floor.

"Good," he said as he passed by.

Thank God I didn't fall! If I go down, I won't be able to get back up!

"Liu!" Chen's voice whipped. Another punch.

"You call that a punch?" Chen looked at me.

I held my breath, not knowing what to say or even think.

"Punch, please!" he said in a loud voice.

I allowed my eyes to look over to the right to see if my classmates were watching or smiling as *Sifu* berated me. Their faces were as still as stone. I think they were in too much pain to even notice.

The thick hardwood support beams all had pads tied to them. Each pad was comprised of different materials and one of them was made from the legs of several pairs of jeans. They had been cut and folded tightly. Another pad was simply a telephone book that had been taped shut and covered with thick cloth. Chen



Yilichuan's "heaven-shape" boxing

walked up to one such pad and, without breaking stride, drove his fist into it. I swear, the house actually shook and I heard Mei squeal from the kitchen upstairs. I could imagine her staring at the basement door and scowling at her husband's enthusiasm for teaching.

"*That* is a punch," Chen said.

Geez! He did that just by walking up to it! What if he drove into it?

I glanced quickly at his hand to see if it was bleeding. Nope. Chen grunted, as if we were beginning to make him sick.

"Now front kick, please," he said sternly.

He's trying to kill us! I can't get my leg up to do a front kick! I'm stuck in this crummy stance!

"Yi!" Chen barked, and the air crackled with the sound of pant legs snapping as six front kicks whipped out in unison.

"No!" Chen snorted. "Kick must be fast!"

And so it went. The floor beneath our feet was puddled with sweat. After we'd spent an eternity (I'd guess it was an eternity of about ten minutes) of doing what must have been the world's worst front kicks, Chen told us to stop and motioned for us to sit down. Two of the guys all but fell straight down, catching themselves on their hands. Chen stood in front of us with his oak-tree arms folded, looking very stern.

"You must practice your punch until it becomes a natural part of you," Chen said. "Practice until you don't have to think about it, until it happens by itself. But first you must do thousands and thousands of punches. That is the only way."

I knew he was going to say that.

"When you are trying to save your life, you have no time to think about which punch or kick to use," Chen continued. "There is no time to think about how to do it. You must strike instantly, without thinking. When the opening appears, you are already there. You do not see the opening and then try to move in. They happen at the same time, the opening and your punch! This is not achieved through lazy training."

Lazy? LAZY?

"In class here, we train very hard but you must also practice at home," Chen went on. "Review what you have done in class. Concentrate on what you are doing. *Concentrate!* You can do a thousand punches but if you don't concentrate on them you will gain nothing except sore arms."

Well, I've got the sore arms, for sure.

"Pay attention to what you are doing!" Chen snapped. "Don't just count numbers . . . *yi, erh, san.* You must have self-discipline. It is the only real discipline. If I make you do a thousand punches but you don't pay attention, then you get nothing out of it. Practice to make each one perfect. Don't just make empty imitations."

I raised my hand to ask a question and the heads of classmates snapped around, their eyes staring with disbelief at the *gwai-lo's* lack of propriety. Chen looked at me and nodded.

"What about practicing at home, *Sifu?*" I asked. "Do we practice every day?"

Chen shook his head. "No. Every day is too much for your body. Give yourself one day of rest and when you practice, take it step by step. Don't skip around. Set a goal and move toward it. This is the only way to get better."

I nodded, relieved that I could rest at least one day of the week.

Chen continued his lecture. "In China, we do not do this as a hobby. We take it very seriously. In America you like to have hobbies, and you make your boxing a hobby. You do it for fun and when it is not fun anymore, you quit. You should think about why we practice it so seriously in China . . . we do it because we will need it someday to save our lives! It is not a hobby! We know that our lives depend on how hard and how often we practice."

Nope, it's not a hobby for this kid!

"The enemy is not always out there," Chen said, sweeping his hand around the room. "Sometimes he is in here," and he pointed toward his chest. "Disease. Your mind and body may be affected

and then you die. So your martial arts must protect you from this, too."

Chen relaxed a little and looked at my older classmates. "And business . . . it can help you in your work."

Huh. Maybe it'd help me in school.

"So it affects all parts of your life, you see. This is why you must be serious. Do you regard your life as a hobby?"

And with that, Chen dismissed us. I felt about two inches tall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Look Ma! No Hands!

Sweat is the cologne of accomplishment.

—Heywood Hale Brown, *On Rodeos,*
in a CBS-TV interview

The *horse-riding stance,* known as *mabu* in Chinese, is found in almost all forms of Chinese boxing as well as other disciplines such as karate. It derives its name from the position of the legs and feet, which roughly resemble the position one assumes when riding a horse. With the feet spread about two shoulder-widths apart, the toes are pointed straight forward. The knees are deeply bent and tensed outward with the buttocks held just slightly higher than the knees. The back is kept straight and the sacrum must be tucked slightly forward. Although it sounds simple enough, being able to stand in it for any length of time requires considerable practice and the willingness to endure terrific pain.

Many kung-fu styles require beginning students to hold this position for extended periods of time in an effort to help them

develop powerful legs and hips. Additionally, it is believed that continued practice of this static exercise will aid in the development of abdominal breathing while the intrinsic energy *[chi]* sinks to the lower belly *[dantien]*. This helps establish a very stable foundation, which is absolutely essential for the execution of powerful punching, striking, and kicking techniques. To help students further enhance their ability to solidly root themselves to the ground, standing in other stances such as the *bow and arrow stance,* the *empty stance,* and even the one-legged *crane stance* is also practiced with some frequency.

I don't know how long I'd been standing in the dreaded *horse-riding stance,* but my thighs felt as though they were on fire. I had given up trying to count off the seconds; all that mattered was what was happening right now. Past and future had vanished and it was all I could do to just stay on my feet in the present. Sweat poured down my face and into my eyes. I dared not look over at my classmates who were busily engaged in practicing various forms. I knew they were keeping an eye on me, seeing if I'd give up.

Well, I'm not giving up! I can do it! I absolutely will not give up!

Sifu Chen had been working with the other students and he glanced over at me.

"Keep your back straight," he said calmly. "Eyes must not look down at your feet. Look straight ahead. Breathe from your *dantien.*"

I gritted my teeth. My legs began to shake and I could feel my buttocks slowly sinking to the floor. All at once, my legs gave out

and I collapsed. Somehow, I managed to stand back up and, spreading my feet and drawing my fists to my hips, I squatted back down into the familiar stance. The pain returned instantly and my legs began shaking again.

I'm not going down again! No way.

Within a few seconds my legs gave way again and I dropped to the floor. I set my jaw and pushed myself up with my hands. As I began to stand up I noticed Chen standing beside me. He patted me on my back, which was soaked with sweat. "Enough," he said. "You did very well."

Did well? I fell down! Twice!

Chen smiled. "I think your legs will give up before your spirit does."

I began to gently stretch and massage my legs. "I'll do better next time, *Sifu,*" I said.

"I am sure you will," Chen replied. "You have not practiced holding your *ma* before this, have you?"

I shook my head slowly.

Chen nodded. "I thought so, but that's okay. You can learn it now!"

Peachy.

"When you first start to learn martial arts, the *ma* is the most important thing," Chen said. "If you don't develop a strong *ma* you will never have strong techniques. Your power comes up from the bottoms of your feet. If your balance is bad or if your legs are weak, the power cannot come up to your hands. It is said that the first seven years are spent building a strong *ma*. After that, you are ready to learn."

"Seven years?" I was incredulous.

Chen nodded and shrugged. "Yes, seven years—maybe a little less, maybe a little more. It depends on how much you practice, but it's not so long when you think about it. You have your whole life to practice and learn more."

Not if I have to keep practicing like this. I'll die young!

"You know," Chen continued, "when you practice your *ma* this way, your *chi* will sink down to your *dantien.* Then you will have real strength. At first, all you feel is pain but when your legs get stronger it's not so bad. Then you can concentrate on your breathing. You breathe down to your *dantien,* down to the bottoms of your feet. Your power will sink into the ground like the roots of a tree." Chen spread his feet and lowered himself into a *horse-riding stance.* He looked absolutely immovable.

"You see?" he said. "A tree is strong because the roots are under the ground, not on top of it. It draws nourishment from the earth. You must do the same thing. Your *root* will go under the ground and then you can draw *chi* up through the bottoms of your feet."

Chen glanced over at my classmates and called Wang and Lum over. He fired off something to them in Cantonese and they scurried off into a small storage room.

"I will show you what I mean," he said.

The two students returned quickly. Wang had a length of clothesline rope in his hands and Lum held an old, frayed leather belt. Chen nodded. Each of them knelt down and wrapped the makeshift bonds around each of his ankles. Standing on both sides of their teacher, they glanced up at him and when he nod-

ded again they began trying to pull his feet apart. Chen's face was the picture of absolute calm. Within a few seconds, his students were exerting considerable force but Chen's stance remained firm. Both assistants grimaced as they gave it all they had, but it was as though they were trying to move a tree. Chen's feet didn't budge, not even a little. When Chen nodded again, they halted their efforts and removed the provisional fetters from his ankles. Chen stood up and I caught myself standing with my mouth hanging wide open. I'd never seen anything like that before!

Chen smiled and said calmly, "It just takes practice."

I inhaled deeply and tried to calm myself. *If he can root like that, he can strike with the power of a freight train!*

"What if a student doesn't practice the *ma?*" I asked. "What then? Does he never develop power or what?"

Chen frowned. "I will not teach him! He cannot learn. He has no power, no balance, no—spirit. If he really wants to learn, he must build a strong spirit as well as strong legs. He must practice the *ma.*"

"I guess it'd weed out the ones who're in a hurry," I said.

"Yes, exactly," Chen grinned. "You know, if you want to know how strong a fighter is, look at his *ma;* look at how he stands. If he has no strength in his feet, he will have no strength anywhere else. Many people want to hurry and they practice so many punching and kicking techniques, but they have no real power—and no real spiritual strength, either.

"All their strength is up here," Chen said as he patted his upper chest. "Too much strength is up high and no strength down low. The top is heavy and the bottom is light. They are knocked down

easily. If you want to have a strong building, you must make a strong foundation, you see."

I nodded. My legs were beginning to return to normal.

"Good!" Chen patted me on the back again. "No more *ma* today. Now you practice *gung bu* [the bow and arrow stance]...."

Oh, no!

Chen grinned like the magical Cheshire cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. "Back straight, look straight ahead...."

CHAPTER FIVE

Polishing the Mirror

No brain is stronger than its weakest think.

—Thomas Masson, *Laughs*

Class had ended and my classmates had all departed. The basement of my *sifu's* home was finally quiet and I was preparing to take my leave, having tidied up the training area. Master Chen motioned for me to follow him upstairs. He led me into the kitchen where his wife Mei had prepared tea. He thanked her and told me to sit down at the small kitchen table. His kitchen had become a sort of classroom where he would teach me many of the subtleties of the martial arts. He took a sip of his tea.

"It's best not to drink something cold right after practice," he said. "Better to drink something warm."

I nodded and took a sip of my tea.

Yuck, I hate tea—especially when there's no sugar in it!

"A couple of the other students were rough on you tonight, huh?" he asked.

I answered in the affirmative, hoping that he wouldn't chastise them for having deliberately and repeatedly struck me with

excessive force. They were much more experienced than me and I found it more than a little difficult to evade their quick, powerful techniques. At a time when Westerners were very rarely accepted into the surreptitious world of Chinese martial arts, I was Master Chen's only non-Chinese student. I feared that if he reprimanded my seniors, they would only become more determined to drive me out of class.

"I expected this," Chen said calmly. "They want to frighten you away or make you angry so that you attack them and get in trouble. If you get angry and attack them with strength, they will easily beat you and no one will blame them."

I looked down at my tea. *So what do I do, just keep sucking it up?*

Chen smiled a knowing smile as if he could read my thoughts. "You must beat them at this game," he said.

I looked up and furrowed my brow. "How can I do that? They have a lot more experience than me and they're a whole lot stronger."

"You get angry too much," Chen replied. "When you are angry you cannot see clearly. You just strike out blindly. You have to stay calm. Keep your heart and mind calm. Even if you are hurt, you must stay calm. Do not think about the pain. Do not think about your opponent. Keep your breathing low, in your *dantien.*"

"I can't help it if I get mad," I answered.

"Yes, you can!" Chen said, raising his voice. "You must. It is not just to help you in class here, but [also] to help you in your whole life! When people get angry, they do stupid things. You must learn to think and see clearly before you act."

I looked squarely at my teacher. "So what do I do? I can't just tell myself not to get mad. How can I control my feelings?"

"Ask yourself why you are angry," Chen replied. "Is it because they don't want you here? Is it because they are more advanced than you? They take advantage of you, is that it? Why are you angry?"

Because they're jerks.

"If they don't like you, that's their problem," Chen said with a smile. "Don't make it yours. They want it so let them keep it. That feeling will also blind them. They cannot see clearly just as you cannot see clearly."

Chen paused and then raised his eyebrows. "You understand? You must not let your emotions confuse you. You must know yourself. You must also know your enemy. Let your enemy become angry. Let your enemy lose control and become blind. Then you can defeat him. You must polish your mind so it is like a clean mirror. If you get angry or frightened, it is like smearing mud on the mirror. Keep your mirror clean so it reflects a precise image."

I set my jaw and decided that he was right.

"And when you win, do not become too happy," Chen warned. "Being too happy can also blind you. You think you have defeated your enemy and you are happy but because you are so emotional, you don't see his friends in the shadows. You must learn to control your emotions by controlling your mind. Control your mind by controlling your breath. It's like blowing dust off a mirror."

CHAPTER SIX

Constant Practice

Eighty percent of your training happens outside of class.

—Mark Hachey, senior Yilichuan instructor,
addressing a group of students

Following a particularly grueling class one afternoon, Master Chen invited me to come upstairs and relax for a while before beginning my trek home. Mei smiled as she handed me a napkin, motioning for me to mop up the sweat that was dripping down my face. She placed two glasses of iced tea (one of her favorite American creations) on the small kitchen table and turned back to the counter where she was using a cleaver to slice up some vegetables.

Mei must not know that we're not supposed to drink something cold right after class.

It seemed as though Mei all but lived in the kitchen and there was always a wonderful aroma in the air. *Sifu* took a sip of his tea and motioned for me to do the same.

Huh. Well, I'd rather drink something cold than something warm!

For several minutes we discussed the problems I was having with my basic forms and other training routines. After making some small talk during which he compared the Chinese and American school systems, Chen leaned back in his chair and relaxed with a loud sigh before trying to explain some of his thoughts to his young American protégé.

One of Chen's convictions was that as long as one was awake, one should train. This was difficult for me to understand. How could I possibly train all the time?

"Training does not always mean doing punches and kicks," Chen explained. "You must practice those things every day, but you cannot do them all the time."

Glad to hear it! I was concerned about firing off a few punches every couple of minutes in my geography class. So, how am I supposed to practice all the time?

"There are many other ways to train your body, your mind, and your spirit," Chen assured me. "Even when you are at school or at work, you must practice. For instance, you can practice your technique when you open a door. Use your breath! Practice when you go up stairs. When you walk, grab the ground with your toes. There are so many things you can do. Use your imagination. Everything you do can help you improve your skill."

I quickly tried to figure out how I could practice while sitting at my desk in algebra class or while walking home from school. I'd always thought I had a pretty good imagination but this was going to be a real challenge. Chen sensed my confusion.

"Look at all the things we try to improve," he said. "Balance,

speed, strength, timing. You try to become better coordinated, more flexible, more agile. You practice to breathe the right way, train to feel danger coming near. Use your imagination to see how you can practice when you eat, when you walk or run, when you bathe, go to bed, open a door—all of these things can help you improve yourself."

I nodded, still trying to determine just how I could practice while sitting in my algebra class without getting caught. *And practice while I'm eating? And bathing? There's not too much I can do while I'm sitting in the tub.*

"Martial arts will not enter your life unless you help it," Chen said. "If you don't try to make it a part of your life, it will never help you. It is not magic. You have to try."

Just as I started to ask for some concrete examples, Chen cut in and wagged his finger at me. "You are not thinking in the martial arts way," he said.

Martial arts way? What's that?

"How many times a day do you open a door?" Chen asked. Without waiting for my response, he answered his own question. "Many times, huh?"

I nodded. *I don't normally count how many times.*

"So you know how to open a door, huh?" he asked.

Duh. Well, yeah!

"Show me. Go open that door," Chen said, pointing at the basement door.

I got to my feet, walked over to the door, turned the knob, and pulled it open. "Like that?"

Chen smiled his "gotcha!" smile and I knew I'd just walked

into a trap. "No," he said calmly. "Not like that. You opened the door with your hand and arm."

Well, it's darned tough to do with my feet!

"Open it with your whole body," Chen said. He patted his lower belly. "From here. The way you do it, you have no root. Try it."

Feeling a bit foolish, I did as my *sifu* had instructed. *Huh. That does feel different. Strange.*

"That's better," Chen said with a smile and a nod. He stood up and motioned for me to come back to the kitchen table. "Come back here, now. Enjoy your tea."

I walked back to the table and as soon as I was within his reach, Chen grabbed my wrist and yanked me forward. I all but flew through the air and tried to catch myself on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. It slid away from me and I stumbled down onto my knees. Mei glanced over her shoulder and eyed our antics with a look of mild disgust.

"Huh!" Chen smiled. "You open doors alright now, but you cannot walk so good."

I carefully stood up, expecting him to grab me again.

"Yes, yes!" Chen exclaimed. "Now you are careful. You stand up the right way. But, you must learn to walk the right way." He patted his lower abdomen again. "From *here,* not from your feet."

He motioned for me to sit down. I did so warily, expecting him to pounce on me like a sawed-off tiger.

"So now you have learned how to open a door, how to walk, how to get up... how to sit down," Chen smiled. "You have a long way to go but I think you understand now, huh?"

Yeah. Be careful when you're around some old Chinese guy.

"This is not something you do only in the basement here, or at home when you are by yourself." Chen said. "It is not a hobby. It is life!"

Geez, I feel like I'm getting bawled out here.

"Now you go home and practice," Chen said as he stood up.

I rose to my feet as Mei casually plopped my schoolbooks down on the table. I thanked her and picked them up, tucking them under one arm as I leaned on my chair. "Thank you for..."

My words hung in the air as Mei walked past and swept the chair out from under my hand with her foot. I fell to the floor with all the grace of a goony bird but I managed to hang onto my books. Mei stood at the counter with her back to me and put her hand over her small mouth as she giggled loudly. Chen didn't even try to hold himself back. He guffawed. He actually doubled over in laughter and I saw tears starting to form in his eyes.

"You...," he gasped for air. "You need to practice...," and peals of laughter rippled through the air again while I stood there, crimson-faced. "... Practice to stand," Chen gasped. He patted his tummy. "From here!" and he gasped again as though he'd just run a mile. "Laugh from here, too," and he fired out a few words in Chinese that caused Mei to drop her cleaver, place both hands on the counter, and laugh as hard as I've ever seen anyone laugh.

Chen walked over to her and put one arm around her shoulders. They looked like two little bowls of Chinese Jell-o as they stood together, shaking and laughing. I was very careful when I opened the front door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

True Courtesy

Good manners have much to do with the emotions. To make them ring true one must feel them, not merely exhibit them.

—Amy Vanderbilt, *New Complete Book of Etiquette*

In today's fast-paced society, courtesy is something that is seen with less and less frequency. In Asian cultures where people live in very close proximity to one another courtesy was, and still is, carefully cultivated. Master Chen was a stickler for proper courtesy and he explained his feelings on the subject to me one evening when I joined him and his wife for dinner. I was always very careful to mind my manners when I was in his home, and he noticed it.

I thanked him as he passed me a plate of spicy chicken and he asked, "What is courtesy? What do you think?"

Before I could respond, Chen answered his own question. "It is showing consideration for others. It is refined humility. A proud and arrogant person cannot be truly polite."

I nodded, waiting for him to pause so I could take a bite of my

food, but he wasn't finished. "In China we learn about courtesy when we are children. It comes from your heart. You do not do it just for show. You must really care about other people; then you will be polite in the right way."

He paused and I snapped up a bite of food with my chopsticks.

"Remember that real courtesy comes from real strength," he said. "Only someone who possesses great spiritual strength can be truly courteous, you see. Real strength is soft and gentle, never forceful or hard."

Whoa, that's deep. Real strength is soft.

"People who doubt themselves, who lack confidence and spiritual strength, cannot be truly courteous," Chen said firmly.

Chen took in a large mouthful of food and smiled as he told Mei that the meal was delicious. And it was. I often told Mei that she should open a restaurant. She would smile and blush, and offer me Chinese pastries, which I carefully savored before heading home after practice.

"You know, courtesy will make a big difference in how people treat you, even people who do not like you!" Chen said, pointing his chopsticks at me. "As you go through life you will find that you must often work with people who do not like you very much. If you act the same way toward them you will both suffer, so you should be courteous to them. You will be surprised at how they act after that."

I wonder if that'll work with some of the jerks who bug me at school.

"Never think that being polite is a sign of weakness," Chen

said as he shook his head. "It is really a sign of great strength. When people are rude, they expose their weaknesses. When we are polite, our enemies cannot see our weaknesses.

"Even though I am living in America, I still sometimes bow to people at work. It just seems natural to me but they don't return my bow. They think that I am just some strange Chinaman. Some people are very polite when I bow but others laugh or frown. When they do that they show me where they are weak, but they don't know where I am weak because they don't know where to look."

"I never thought of it that way, *Sifu*," I said. "Thank you."

Chen looked up with his mouth full of food and smiled. "You're welcome," he said, sending several grains of rice flying through the air. Mei giggled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Death of Kung-Fu

Those having torches will pass them on to others.

—Plato, *The Republic*

Over forty years ago, my teacher made a prediction about the martial arts. It was a prophecy that, unfortunately, has since come to pass. Although martial arts were not widely practiced in America in those days, *Sifu* Chen saw a time when they would be—when they would become very popular as well as profitable. This concerned him greatly because he believed that their profitability would eventually lead to their demise—not only in the United States, but in China as well. He revealed his thoughts to me one Saturday afternoon.

"Good, good!" Chen exclaimed as I finished the form known as *sanbaochuan* [three jewels].

I was stunned; it was the first time I had heard those words escape my teacher's lips with real enthusiasm.

"You have improved," he said, nodding his head approvingly.

"It still needs a lot of work," I muttered.

"Yes, of course," Chen smiled. "It always will, but for today, you have done well."

My heart soared. *Wow, maybe I'm finally getting somewhere.*

"You know," Chen started, "Real martial arts are very rare now. Most people don't want to train as hard as they should. They are distracted by so many other things."

"Even in China?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Chen replied wistfully. "It is part of the price we pay for our modern world. A long time ago, there were not so many distractions and it was easier to concentrate on practice. Now it is different."

"But can't we train like that nowadays?" I wondered aloud.

Chen looked at me and smiled knowingly. "If we really want to, yes. But how many students really want to?" Before I could answer, he placed his hand on my shoulder and laughed. "I know. You want to train like that, huh?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, maybe you will," Chen said. "I think you will be a teacher someday, so you will have to practice very hard. It will not be easy for you or for your students."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why is that?"

"The world is changing very quickly," Chen replied. "So much running here and there, too much running. Students don't have time to practice like they should, like they used to. Building good kung-fu takes time and patience. You cannot hurry it."

"I'll make my students train hard," I said.

Chen smiled a little smile. "They must practice because they want to practice. You must build a great desire in them."

He looked past me and into the small training hall that he had constructed in his basement. "If you and others like you fail, real kung-fu will die."

Die? How could such a thing happen?

"In my country the old teachers do not teach everything. They like to keep secrets," Chen explained. "But what they are doing is killing the martial arts, strangling them. Anyway, they would probably get in trouble with the government if they taught everything." He cast his eyes downward and slowly shook his head. "And the young people don't want to train hard anymore."

Chen raised his head but he wasn't looking at me; he was looking back into his past. His voice became distant. "I will never be able to go back to China," he said quietly. "So I must rely on my students here to carry on what I teach them." He turned and looked at me. "But in America everybody wants everything to be so fast."

Huh?

Chen nodded, as if agreeing with himself. "Yes, everything has to be fast. You want fast entertainment, so you have television. Just turn it on and off. You want instant food, so you have TV dinners." He scowled and stuck out his tongue. "It is not good for you to eat such things."

I had to agree with him.

"Someday people will want instant martial arts," he said. "And someone will invent them too. People who don't practice martial arts will think they are the real thing. They will look like martial arts and the teachers will make lots of money. It will be like your instant food. It's not really food, you know. It looks

like good food but it's not. To prepare a good meal takes time but people don't want to take the time to do it. They want everything to be fast or new and improved. Television, food, martial arts—all instant. This will happen in a few years. You watch."

Instant martial arts? Surely not. Nah.

CHAPTER NINE

Weapon Nature

Blood is easily wiped from the sword. It cannot, however, be put back from where it came.

—Japanese martial arts proverb

Our kung-fu class was conducted in the basement of the Chen home three evenings each week, but I was at the house nearly every day. The times when I had *Sifu* Chen to myself were golden opportunities for learning. He would not only make me practice very strenuously; he would sit with me and explain different facets of the arts that he had studied for several decades.

"If we fight with swords, you and me, which of us will probably win?" Chen asked one afternoon.

"Well, you would," I replied.

Duh!

"Why?"

"Because you know how to use a sword better than I do," I answered.

"Yes," Chen nodded. "Exactly. But what if my sword is dull and yours is very sharp?"

"You would still defeat me because you know how to use your weapon better than I do," I said.

"Yes, yes!" Chen smiled. "So, being able to use the weapon well is the most important thing." He paused for dramatic effect before continuing. "But it is even more important to have a sharp sword and be able to use it well. Your body is your weapon, you see."

Yep, I got that.

"Your whole body, not just your fist or foot or elbow," Chen said emphatically.

He walked over to the weapons rack and picked up a broadsword. Unsheathing it, he placed the scabbard back on the rack. I could hear the blade hiss as he cut through the air.

"This is a *do,*" he explained. "*Darn-do.*" He pointed to the cutting edge of the blade. "Cut with this curved edge here," he said. Placing the broadsword back on the rack, he held out his open hand. Pointing to the little-finger edge he said, "This is like the *darn-do.* Same edge. Curved." He then formed his fingers into a spear-hand and said, "This is like the tip of the sword." Then, forming a fist, he said, "Or this, this can also be the tip of the sword. A sword is much more than just a sharp edge or a pointed tip. The whole blade must be strong. If one part is weak, the sword will break. Poor quality. It is not a good weapon. It may be good for demonstrating, but not for fighting."

Okay, I'm still with you on this.

"Your whole body is the sword!" Chen exclaimed. "Your fist is the tip. The side of your palm is the edge, you see? But the edge and tip must be supported by the rest of the sword, from the handle all the way down."



The single broadsword (dao)

He picked up the broadsword and thrust it forward. Pointing to the hand with which he gripped the weapon, he said, "The sword does not begin here. You think it does, but you are wrong." Chen pointed to his feet and spoke quickly. "The sword really begins down there. That is how you must think of it."

Chen walked toward the back door of the basement's training hall. I followed him as he opened it and strolled out into his backyard. The sun was beginning to set and the maple tree that stood next to the house was throwing its shadow over us. The air was cool and a mild breeze caressed my face, which was damp with sweat. It felt wonderfully invigorating.

"Over here," Chen called from the far corner of the house.

He was standing next to a wooden post that had been partially buried in the ground. About four feet of the two-by-four protruded from the cement-filled hole and a small hand towel that had been folded several times and covered with a thick piece of leather was firmly tied to the end of the post with a length of cotton rope. The striking post was one of Chen's favorite training devices. Okinawan and Japanese forms of karate utilized the same simple apparatus, referring to it as a *makiwara*. I had heard of this contraption but I'd never seen one up close. I hadn't known that kung-fu practitioners trained with the striking post at all until Chen informed me that this basic training tool—or variations of it—was commonly employed by most Chinese forms of pugilism, including the internal boxing arts.

"This is where you strengthen and sharpen your sword," Chen said with a smile.

"You can practice techniques all day long but you will never know if your sword is really strong or sharp until you hit something. You will not know if you are making mistakes, either. This post will whisper the truth in your ears."

So saying, he stood in a strong *bow and arrow stance* and fired out a punch, striking the pad on the post with considerable force. He shot out several more thrusts and the post, which was slightly planed down at the striking end, flexed very slightly with each one. The solid whack of Chen's fist slamming into the pad was quite loud and I wondered if his neighbors had ever considered sneaking into his backyard at night and ripping the device out of the ground.

"Now you try," Chen said.

A knowing smile spread across his face as I spread my feet and settled into my stance. He knew exactly what was going to happen. *Bam!* I punched the post solidly and thought I'd probably shattered my knuckles.

A*hhh, geez!*

I clenched my teeth and prepared to hit it again, but Chen stepped up beside me and patted my extended arm.

"Youthful enthusiasm," he said. "Too much enthusiasm. Too much force. Try again, but not so hard."

I toned my punch down a couple of kliks, and although it still hurt a bit, it wasn't unbearable. Chen watched as I rhythmically slammed one punch after another into the pad. I thought the pad was supposed to cushion the force of my thrusts and protect my hands but it didn't seem to help much. He motioned for me to use my left hand and I changed my stance, placing my right foot forward and extending my right hand. I drew my left fist back to my hip and then let it fly as I fired out a punch. My knuckles slid across the "pad," leaving a couple of layers of flesh in their wake. Chen winced. So did I.

"Hurts, huh?" he said.

*No ****!*

After I'd delivered several left-handed punches, Chen told me to strike the post with the little-finger edge of my hand, the area known as the *sword-hand*. I did so and found it was much less painful than striking with my bony knuckles. I struck the post solidly several times, as if trying to even the score for my left hand.

"Good, good," Chen said as he motioned for me to stop. "You

must practice this every day. Winter, summer, rain, snow... every day. In two years you will have very strong weapons. In three years your whole body will be very strong and when you strike something, paahh!" He threw his hands apart. "But remember, you do not hit with your hand! Hit with your body. After you practice every day for a long time, your body becomes a weapon; a living weapon that can think and feel. This is a very dangerous weapon, but only if it is kept sharp, and you must practice constantly to master it. What good is a sharp sword if you cannot use it very well? It will not save your life. What good is a rusty or bent sword? Would you go into battle with such a weapon?"

As I shook my head, Chen smiled. "Of course not," he said. "What if you don't know when the battle will occur? What will you do with your sword?"

"I guess I would keep it sharp and oiled," I replied. *That's gotta be the right answer.*

"Yes," Chen said. "And learn to use it well. That is the most important thing."

CHAPTER TEN

Culture, Kung-Fu, and Baseball

Teachers who cannot or will not learn from their own students are in the wrong business.

—P. Starr, addressing a group of Yilichuan instructors

Every meal I ate at the Chen household was a new adventure. I say that because I often didn't know what I was eating and I never asked until I had tasted it. This particular evening's fare featured chopped broccoli, beef, and chunks of an unknown ingredient—a meat which was so savory that I began picking through the rest of the food on my plate just to hunt for more pieces of this mysterious delicacy. It was like nothing I'd ever tasted. I noticed Mei grinning, watching me out of the corner of her eye and I asked her about it.

"Squid," she smiled. "You like it?"

"Like it?" I replied. "This is great!"

That comment earned me another quick helping of squid and rice and one of Mei's broad smiles. *Sifu* Chen also grinned.

"You have never eaten Chinese food before this?" he asked.

I knew it! He'd have to ask a question when I've got my mouth full.

I chewed quickly and swallowed. "No, *Sifu*. I don't think my mother knows how to fix Chinese food."

Chen smiled and scooped up another forkful of food. He often ate with a fork and I had to ask.

"*Sifu*, why do you use a fork instead of chopsticks?"

With his mouth full Chen replied, "Get more food this way...." and bits of rice flew across the table.

I started giggling and Mei joined me.

After the meal had ended I insisted on helping Mei with the dishes. Although there were only three of us, there were plenty of dishes and small pots and pans that needed to be washed. As I stood beside her at the kitchen sink, my *sifu* leaned back in his chair and relaxed.

"Someday the communist government in China will allow foreigners to visit," he said. "You must go there and see my country."

"I'd love to go," I said.

"To really understand Chinese martial arts, you must understand Chinese people and their culture," Chen continued.

"But you don't have to understand American culture to...play baseball," I countered.

Mei handed me a washed plate and I used a small towel to wipe it dry.

Chen smiled broadly. "Baseball...yes, but baseball is a game. Not very old, either. How about...," he thought for a moment, "Your cowboys? If I want to learn how to be a cowboy, how to ride a horse and shoot a gun and all those things, I must under-

stand your culture, right? How can I really understand how to be a cowboy if I don't learn about their culture?"

I considered his question but before I could formulate a response, Chen continued. "Chinese civilization is very, very old," he said. "America is not even two hundred years old but Chinese civilization is thousands of years old. Martial arts were developed there and are really part of Chinese culture. You like Chinese food...."

I nodded my head enthusiastically. "Oh, yeah!" Mei giggled and handed me another dish.

"But you must also learn about Chinese language, about our way of writing, our art, our music, our philosophies, and even Chinese history. You cannot understand China if you don't understand these things and you cannot really understand our martial arts if you don't understand China."

Chen motioned for me to sit down and Mei nudged me with her elbow. "Go sit," she whispered. "I will get these dishes."

I pulled out my chair and sat down at the small kitchen table, which was where most of the meals were eaten. This place was starting to feel like home.

"In China, martial arts are very serious," Chen began. "Since the Revolution many things have changed but when I was younger, the martial arts teachers were very strict. In America, people will practice only two days a week and they tell their friends, 'I am learning kung-fu.' In China, if you only practice two days each week, your teacher would probably throw you out of class! He would say that you are not really serious; that you are not training enough.

"When we decide to learn martial arts back home, we know that it will be a life of pain, a life of discipline. I think people in America will quit if training is too painful. They don't expect it to hurt and they don't like the teacher to tell them what to do outside of class. They want to do it as a hobby or a game, like ... baseball! But you know that martial arts is not a game. It has to become the way you live."

I nodded. I had seen many of my karate compatriots drop out when the training became too tough.

"When I decided to come to America, I told my friends that I wanted to teach American people someday," Chen said. "They told me that Americans cannot learn because they can't take it. They said Americans will never really understand our martial arts, that they will never understand the spirit of the martial arts."

"Why, *Sifu*?" I asked. "Why would they say that?"

"They don't think Americans will be serious about training," Chen replied. "They don't think your spirit is strong enough to take it, and also because ... you are not Chinese!"

"But that's like saying that only Americans can really play baseball," I argued.

"Well, almost," Chen conceded. He took a sip of his tea and was silent for a moment. "I say that anyone can learn if they have the desire in here," he said as he pointed toward his chest. "If the have the desire they can learn, no matter what country they come from ... but it is important that they learn about Chinese culture so they understand the spirit of our martial arts; not just technique. Without this understanding of culture, it would be like...," he thought for a few seconds. "No squid. Just rice.

Nothing special. Without spirit, martial arts are like a doughnut—no center to hold things together. Spirit is the most important thing. Anyone can learn how to punch."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Ancient Texts

If techniques are words, then forms are the books that contain all relevant information about a given [martial arts] system.

—W.C. Chen

Master Chen often told me that the forms we practiced were actually books that contained all relevant information about a particular system. He was a stickler for forms training and I learned that I should never ask him to teach me a new one. *Ever!* He'd let me know when I was ready to learn a new set and until then, I would practice what I'd already been shown. I recall one day when one of my classmates asked about learning a new set. I held my breath. Chen grunted and spit out something in his native tongue. The young man replied with a crisp "yes," backed up, and began performing the last form we had been taught.

When he'd completed the set, I thought he'd done an admirable job. I was impressed. Chen grunted. "Terrible," he said in English (probably for my benefit). "You need more practice." He never said exactly what was so terrible about the form; only that it was.

I also learned that forms weren't all performed in the same manner. After I had been training in the internal system of *Xingyichuan* for some time, Chen introduced me to the fundamental form of *lienhuan wuxing* [linking the five shapes]. In this set, he seemed to emphasize principles more so than in the earlier *Sil-Lum* forms I had learned.

"Don't do this in the *Sil-Lum* way," he said as he flailed his arms around. "Not like fighting so many enemies."

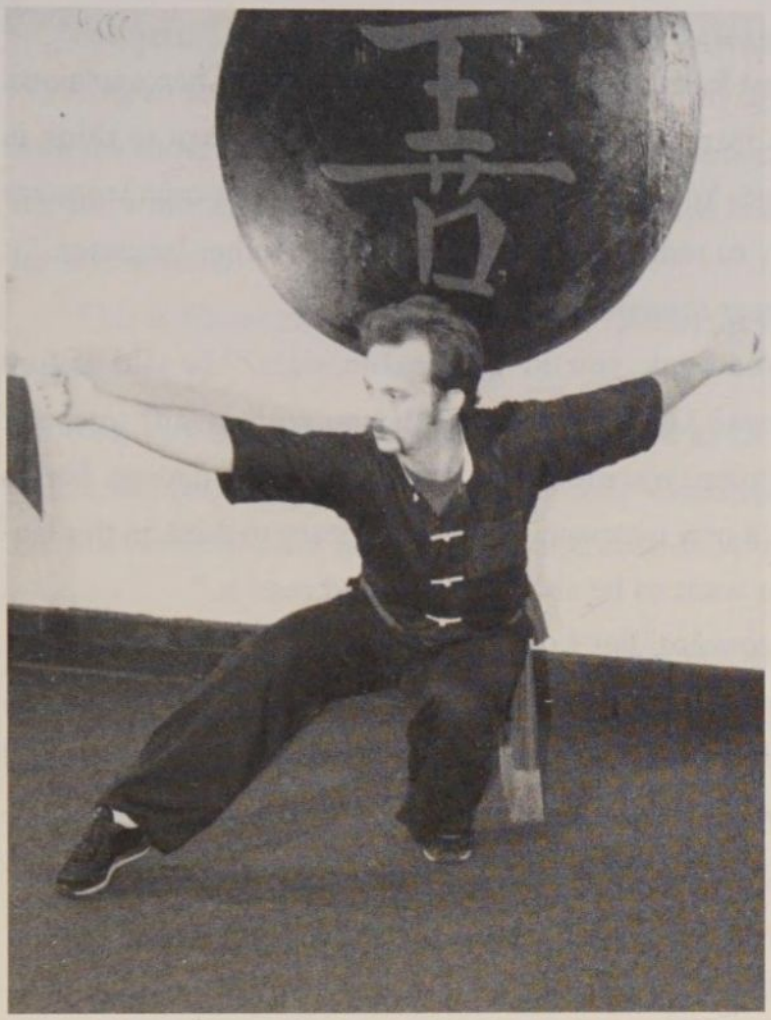
Okay, so just how am I supposed to do it?

Chen held up his fist. "The *Xingyi* exercise teaches you to use this," he said. Then, pointing to his lower abdomen, he continued, "And move from this." He wiped his hands down the length of his body. "Use all this," he said. "All this." Then he held up his fist again, "Not just this."

"You mean this form teaches more about principles?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Principles. Not just fighting a lot of enemies."

Fortunately for me, I liked forms and enjoyed practicing them. I lived in a house with a full half-acre backyard which sloped steeply before smoothing out into a few yards of even ground. A tree line marked the end of our yard and beyond it laid dense woods and a small stream. It was absolutely beautiful to behold, but a nightmare for a certain teenaged boy who was assigned the weekly task of mowing the lawn. I would practice my forms going up, down, and even sideways across that hill. This kind of training helped me develop good balance, strong legs, and it taught me to move correctly, from the point in my lower abdomen known as the *dantien*.



Posture from the style of Baixingchuan (a form developed by Master W.C. Chen from the original Hochuan style that he learned during his college years)

As far as Chen was concerned, principles were the most important things one could learn from a form. "You can fight with lots of different techniques," he said. "This punch, that punch ... so what? The important thing to learn are the principles," he said. "Each form teaches you to use certain principles the right way, how to line up different parts of your body, how to move in just the right way, how to use different tactics. They are like your school books; lots of information in them, but first ... you have to learn how to read."

Read?

"You must learn to read a different language," Chen explained. "When you learn a new language, you have to learn to think in that language. You do not think of a word in your own language and then try to remember how to say it in another language."

Huh. Never thought of that.

"When you think, you do it in English, right?" he said. Before I could answer, Chen continued. "If you really want to speak another language, you must learn to think in that language. Forms are like this, a new language. You have to learn to think in this language if you want to be able to speak and read it."

Quite a concept, but I think he's right.

"Each punch and kick is like a word," he said. "If you do this...," and he fired off a quick combination of two punches and a kick, "It is like making a sentence. You do not make a sentence with just any words. They have to be put in the right order so they fit together and make sense. Then you can say what you mean."

Well, yeah.

"And this," he said as he performed the first few movements of a familiar form, "Is a book."

Cool!

Chen giggled. "There is a man who works with me and he thinks he can speak Chinese," he explained. "He demonstrated it for me and said, 'I am glad your horse is breakfast today.'"

I laughed and Chen kept giggling. "He knows some words," he said. "But he doesn't speak correctly. Wrong tones, wrong words. Good thing he's not in China, huh?" He giggled again. "So, don't do your forms that way. Learn how to speak correctly."

"See here," he said as he launched himself forward and began walking in smooth, gliding steps around an invisible circle. It was the most graceful thing I'd ever seen. He seemed to be riding the wind as his waist, arms, and hands made beautiful circular movements.

"This is *Baguazhang,*" he explained. "Different from *Xingyi,* huh?"

"Yes, very different," I replied as I marveled at his movements.

He stopped as suddenly as he'd started. "Different book. You are not ready to read this book. You have to start with the easy ones."

Easy? Which ones are easy?

"When you first learned to read you did not begin with books for adults, did you?"

I shook my head.

"No, of course not. They would not have made any sense to you back then. And now, you read your school books?"

I nodded. "I read lots of books, *Sifu.* I like to read."

Chen nodded. "That's very good. But do you read the, uh...," Chen searched for the right word. "University...."

"College books?" I asked.

He pointed his finger at me. "Yes, yes. College books. You read those, too?"

"Well, no...."

"Why not?" he raised his eyebrows.

"I don't think I'd understand a lot of them," I answered. "Not yet. I have to get through high school first."

Chen clapped his hands together and smiled. "Just so! Yes!

They are too advanced. The ideas in them are too advanced for you right now. You need to build your foundation first. Tell me, what do you want to do when you finish school? Will you be a lawyer like your father?"

"I don't think so," I answered. "I really haven't thought about it much."

What's that got to do with learning forms?

"That's okay," he said. "But let us say that you want to be a lawyer. You will go to the university first and you will have to study all kinds of things that don't seem to have much to do with law."

Really? Like what?

"You will have to study English, mathematics . . . lots of things."

"Math? What's that got to do with being a lawyer?"

"These things teach you to think in a certain way," Chen said. "Mathematics is really a language."

The light in my head flashed on. *Yeah, okay! I got it!*

"Forms are the same way. The first ones you learn are like children's books. They make a foundation for the ones you will learn later. They teach you how to think and move in a certain way. You cannot learn advanced movements or understand them if you skip the basic forms or you don't learn how to read what they are telling you. If you cannot add or subtract, you cannot learn trigonometry."

and subtracting to algebra. You cannot skip algebra and go to trigonometry. You must learn in stages because you have to learn a certain way of thinking at each stage. This is not only true for mathematics; it is true in most subjects you will study... including martial arts."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Meaning of the Bow

May not a simple bow be compared to the Dao?
That which is high is made low, and that which is low
is raised up.

—Lao-Tze, *Dao de Jing*

In the Orient, bowing is a common form of greeting and showing respect. Although it was once used in the Occident, it has become very rare in today's modern society. Even so, the custom of bowing is still maintained within the traditional martial disciplines of Japan and Okinawa. For instance, it is customary to bow whenever you enter onto or leave the training floor of all traditional Japanese and Okinawan martial arts schools. The *sensei* [teacher] and students exchange bows at the beginning and end of class, and one also bows whenever the instructor enters or leaves the training hall. In many schools, students customarily bow before and after addressing the teacher or a senior classmate.

I remember a day many years ago when I was made aware of the real significance of the bow. My classmates and I trained in the

basement of our teacher's house and although many Chinese martial arts schools do not require that one bow to the training floor, I always did so. I had practiced Japanese karate for several years and bowing to the training hall had become an unconscious habit.

As I stepped down from the basement stairs onto the floor of the training hall, I quickly bowed and walked in. Actually, I just nodded my head as I was in something of a hurry to begin warming up for class. I hadn't made it ten feet before my *sifu*, Master Chen, motioned for me to walk over to him. I did so quickly and bowed as I stood before him.

"You did not bow when you entered the room," Chen said. Although none of his other students bowed when they stepped down from the basement stairs and onto the training floor, he knew that I always did and he thought it was a good idea. Overhearing their teacher's words, my classmates all turned to see what was happening. What was all this noise about bowing?

"Yes, I did, *Sifu,*" I answered. *He must have missed it.*

"That was not a bow," he said sternly. "Try again." He waved his hand back toward the bottom of the stairway.

Although I was a little confused, I walked back over to the spot where I had first stepped onto the tile floor and bowed deeply.

Chen frowned. "That's not a bow."

It's not?

He motioned for me to walk over to him and then swept his arm around the room. "When you bow you are showing respect for your school. You are honoring those who have gone before you and who have given us this art to practice. This is where you will train to develop yourself. This is where you will grow up."

Chen turned back to face me. "You must be reverent because this is where you will learn to save your life! You must always train seriously, as if your life depended on it... because it does! Therefore, you must also be serious when you bow."

"Yes, sir." *I never looked at it that way.*

"Your bow is a reflection of your attitude and spirit. A small, light bow is empty. It is not serious. If your bow is not serious your training will not be serious, either."

"I'm sorry, *Sifu,*" I said. "I'll be more careful from now on."

"And all of you," Chen said in a slightly louder voice as he turned toward his other students, "Must humble yourselves here." Five heads nodded in unison.

"You are here to learn and if you cannot be humble, you cannot learn. If you have a big (swelled) head, then you have an empty head and an empty heart. So, be serious, be humble."

Chen looked back at me. "You will teach this art to others someday," he said in a low voice. "You must be even more serious than they are. You must be more humble, too. A real teacher is this way because he knows the why, not just the how."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Test

A gem is not polished without rubbing, nor a man perfected without trials.

—Japanese proverb

When I trained under Master Chen, we had no belt-ranking structure of any kind. No colored sashes or certificates were issued, but examinations were conducted periodically to determine how skillfully a student could apply what he had been taught and if he was ready to progress to the next level of training. At least that's what we were told. I believe that one of the main reasons for these exams was to encourage us to train harder, to "light a fire" under us as well as to help us clearly identify our weaknesses.

On one particular examination, I was told that I would engage in sparring with several of my older classmates ... at the same time! Their instructions were to take me down, using whatever means they felt were necessary. I was to prevent them from doing this by executing well-controlled blows to certain vital areas.

Whenever I succeeded in delivering a successful technique, Master Chen would call out the name of the receiver and he would step out of the fight. I had previously engaged in this kind of training exercise, and I knew it wasn't going to be easy. My classmates, unhappy with having to tolerate an "outsider" in their midst, would undoubtedly use this opportunity to dissuade me from continuing my training.

Chen sat in a wooden chair off to one side of the training area and indicated that the match was to start. I lunged forward and immediately shot out a strong punch to the face of one of my adversaries who had foolishly stepped forward and tried to grab me. I pulled the blow just short of contact. With a look of complete surprise, he snapped his head back. His name was called, and he begrudgingly walked over beside Chen and sat down on the floor. He had been caught off-guard and his classmates were much more careful now. They began to slowly maneuver for position like a pack of wolves.

Uh-oh. These guys aren't very happy with me.

I kept on the move, trying to prevent anyone from getting behind me but my attention was momentarily focused on the opponent standing to my front. He was short but very muscular, a weightlifter who prided himself on his great strength. This guy could be a problem if he got in close. Suddenly, I felt someone grab my left shoulder from the rear. Before I could react, the weightlifter charged in from the front. I fired a quick front kick, catching him squarely in the midsection and stopping him dead in his tracks.

I stepped out to my left and turned quickly, grabbing my sec-

ond opponent's left wrist with my left hand. I struck his flank with a solid punch and Chen barked out his name.

Ha! Gotcha! Now, where's the...

I felt an iron vise clamp down onto my left arm. I turned and saw the weightlifter about to grab my leg. I tried to pull away from him and he tightened his grip and started to charge in. I snapped out a quick front kick and his movement stuttered as he pulled his midsection back. I stepped down and snapped a quick punch at his face.

Hey! I got him! Isn't Sifu gonna call him out?

Another opponent began to close in from my right flank. The weightlifter still had hold of my left wrist. Things were starting to go south pretty fast. Mr. Muscles threw a punch at my face with his left hand but I pivoted to my left and the blow missed, flying past my nose.

Geez! This guy isn't even trying to control his punches!

Something struck the right side of my jaw and the world became a blur. Someone grabbed my right arm and an arm slid around my right thigh. I felt myself being lifted up and realized that the muscle man was holding me above his head in the manner of a military press.

Oh, he's not gonna...

He brought me crashing to the floor and Chen barked out his name before he had a chance to drive in a finishing punch. The room was quiet as I slowly got to my feet and Chen indicated that the match was over.

I think I'm still alive. I'll just stand here a few seconds and...

The pain in my left leg electrified the rest of my body and I

nearly collapsed. I delicately pulled up the leg of my trousers and saw a lump on my shin, which was almost the size of my fist.

Oh, Geez! It's broken!

"Now, you do the *lienhuan* set," Chen said, referring to the basic "linking form" of *Xingyichuan.*

Maybe I can get through it before the pain gets too bad....

The leg was starting to get numb. I began the form carefully and executed the basic postures with as much celerity as my body would allow. I stumbled at one point when I had to perform a small hopping movement, but otherwise I thought the form was performed reasonably well. As I concluded the form Chen motioned for me to walk over to him. I limped over to where he was seated and he raised my pant leg. He pressed around the lump, sending exquisite jolts of pain through my leg. I gritted my teeth to avoid crying out.

"Muscle spasm," he said. "I thought so. Bad fall. I will put medicine on it."

I bowed and thanked him for attending to my leg. "You did well," he said. "But you failed this test."

My eyes bulged. I thought I'd done pretty well. "Why, *Sifu?*"

Chen smiled. "You stumbled in your set."

I gritted my teeth and nodded. Even my classmates were surprised that Chen had not seen fit to pass me to the next level of training. They looked at him quizzically, but he remained silent. We all knew that our teacher was a stickler for precision, especially when it came to executing forms but his critique this time seemed rather unreasonable.

I nodded and bowed but just as I began to sit down beside my

classmates, a thought occurred to me. "*Sifu,* why didn't you call out his name when I struck him?" I asked, pointing to the weightlifter.

"I wanted to see if you could take it," Chen said. "And you passed that test."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Commit or Quit

A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits.

—Richard Nixon

I was back in class the day after I had failed my examination. Chen smiled and walked over to me as I set my schoolbooks down on the sofa in his living room.

"You're back, huh?"

Well, yeah. How else am I ever going to learn? "Yes, sir," I answered. "I'm sorry that I did so poorly on the test yesterday."

Chen nodded. "You know, if you fail a test it is only a signpost telling you that you need to make some corrections and improvements. If you do not learn from the experience, you can never learn martial arts at all. Tests are for learning."

I learned never to let that jackass grab hold of me again and slam me into the floor!

"It's easy to point at someone else and say, 'I did better than he did,'" Chen continued. "But will that make you any better? No.

Does it help you correct your mistakes? No. Don't look at the problems of others. Look at yourself. You are here for yourself, not for anyone else."

I know that. Tell me something I don't know.

"If you let something so small; something like failing a test to cause you to give up, then your spirit is weak. You would not make it much further anyway. Never let something like this defeat you. You must make up your mind that you will succeed, no matter what. If you cannot do this, then you really cannot take it. You do not have a spirit strong enough to learn real martial arts."

"I can take it, *Sifu,*" I said.

"Yes, you can," Chen said thoughtfully. "When you started to practice here, I wondered if Americans could really learn martial arts. Now I know. Thank you for teaching me. I am very proud of you."

My heart soared. *Wow!* Until now, he'd never said anything like that to me. I fairly floated down the basement stairs where my classmates were already warming up. They nodded to me, acknowledging my presence. One of them actually waved.

They've accepted me? Am I part of this group now? I bowed toward them and began stretching ever so carefully, wincing at the pain in my leg and ribs. One of the older students whose surname was Lum walked up to me and extended his hand.

"Good job yesterday," he said as he shook my hand.

"Thank you," I said, feeling a lump rise up in my throat. "Thank you for helping with my test."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Chen watching us. Lum bowed and said something to me in Chinese before step-

ping back and continuing with his stretching routine. Chen walked over to me.

"He calls you his brother," Chen whispered.

Brother? The lump was back in my throat again.

As we continued to stretch, Chen spoke to all of us in a rather loud voice.

"Yesterday was a good experience," he announced. "All of you did well. I will tell you something now. If you really want to learn martial arts, you must commit . . . or quit. No in-between. Either do it all the way or don't do it at all. If you do not commit, you will quit when things become difficult," he said. Then, looking at me, he smiled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Don't Fight Your Opponent!

In motion, be like water; at rest, like a mirror.
Respond like the echo; be subtle, as though non-existent.

—Daoist proverb

Sifu Chen insisted that we take our sparring practice very seriously. Although he insisted that we adhere to certain safety precautions, the possibility of injury was always present and he monitored our training very carefully. As one couple engaged in sparring the rest of us would sit and watch, listening to our teacher's comments and advice. When it was my turn, *Sifu* called out my name and the name of my sparring partner.

I stood up, walked into the middle of the training floor and eyed my opponent. He was very strong and about ten years my senior. We bowed to each other and Chen gave us the command to begin. I quickly brought my hands up and stepped out into a fighting stance.

This guy is pretty fast, prefers kicking attacks.

I figured I'd throw a feint and draw out my opponent's typical kicking response. Then I'd close with him quickly and go to work with my hands. He wouldn't be able to use his feet at close range. Just as I prepared to move, I could hear my teacher calling out to me in a soft voice.

"Don't fight him. Don't fight him!"

What?

I looked toward my *sifu* to ask just what he meant but he shouted, "No! Don't look at me! Look at him!

I turned back toward my sparring partner who was just preparing to exploit my lack of concentration. He relaxed, realizing that I had caught him preparing to ambush me.

"Now, don't fight him," Chen said calmly.

How can I fight him without fighting?

I mentally shrugged and went ahead, giving it my best and enjoying the spirited exchange of attack and counterattack. After a few minutes, *Sifu* called for us to stop. Sweating and panting from the exertion, we bowed to each other. I'd caught a kick in the ribs on my right side and although my opponent had controlled it very well, I knew it would be rather tender by morning. Come to think of it, I'd caught several kicks.

That's okay. I nailed him a couple of times with solid punches.

As I prepared to sit down, Chen motioned for me to come over to him.

"You were fighting him," he said. "I told you not to fight him."

"But *Sifu*, how can I fight him without fighting?" I countered. "It doesn't make sense."

"I know," Chen chuckled. "Sit down here," he said, pointing to the floor beside the old wooden chair upon which he was seated.

"Have you ever heard of Sun Tze?" he asked.

I shook my head. *I don't get out much.*

"He wrote a book about military strategy which is very famous in China," Chen said. "It is called *The Art of War.* He said that if you do not know yourself or your enemy you will always be defeated."

That makes sense.

"If you know only yourself but not the enemy, then the odds are even," Chen continued. "But if you know both your opponent and yourself, you will win the battle."

"How can I know my enemy?" I asked.

Chen shook his head. "No, no. You must first know yourself. You must know your weak and strong points, what you can and cannot do. This means that you must be honest with yourself about yourself. You must know your technique and it must be sharpened to a fine edge. You must understand your breathing and timing."

I can do that.

"What people do not understand is that you cannot know your enemy until you know yourself. You have to know yourself first. Then you can know the enemy, know his timing and be able to feel it. You must know his distance, his breath. You must feel his intention; his *yi.* That is knowing your enemy."

"But how do I fight him without fighting?" I asked.

Chen looked into the distance. "Let him fight himself," he

said. He looked back at me. "You become a mirror for him, like his shadow. His movement is your movement."

Okay, it's like yin and yang.

"If you fight him, you are using your own speed and strength against him. If he is faster or stronger, he will defeat you. If you let him fight himself, it doesn't matter how strong or fast he is, he cannot strike you. This is a high level of martial arts skill."

"How can I learn to do that?" I wondered aloud.

"This level of skill is not achieved quickly," Chen said. "It takes a long time and lots of practice. Practicing *tui shou* [push-hands] will help you understand it, but you must also learn how to use it in the other exercises . . . like *sanda* [sparring]. You will get hit many times, but if you keep trying you will learn it. Only those with strong spirits will reach this level. Those who are weak will give up halfway. Those who are proud cannot learn it because they think they don't need it and they will not yield to an attack."

"So I should yield?"

"You offer the enemy a target. He will not attack unless he has a target, so you offer him a target. When he strikes, you trick him and move the target. He misses, you do not."

Chen leaned forward slightly. "Real martial arts are very subtle, like a whisper."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Form and Fighting; Fighting and Form

In one blow I smash the mirror of a thousand lifetimes.

—Japanese martial arts proverb

It was a sun-drenched Saturday and I had my teacher all to myself. We trained in his backyard, oblivious to the autumn leaves crunching beneath our feet but very much aware of the cool breeze that washed over our sweat-dampened faces. I was always a little intimidated when I considered that my teacher's neighbors might be (and probably were) watching us from the corners of their curtain-draped windows. Heedless to such concerns, Chen stood like an immovable granite statue and watched me closely. With his thick arms folded across his broad chest, he furrowed his brow in concentration as I moved through the form known as *dragon and tiger in conference.*

As I finished the set, Chen spoke. "When you do your set, do you imagine that you are really fighting someone?"

"Yes, *Sifu,*" I replied as I worked to catch my breath.



Baixingchuan boxing

"Do you really feel the blocks, the punches? Do you feel the presence of your enemy?"

"I try to," I panted.

"Good," Chen replied. "Then you are doing it the right way. If you do not *feel* and *see* these things, then your set is empty; it has no spirit, no life."

Well, at least I'm doing something right!

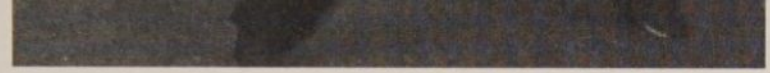
"Now, when you fight you must do it in the same way," he said. "Same kind of movement. Form and fighting are the same. If you do your set one way and fight in another way, this is not real kung-fu."

"How do you mean, *Sifu?*" I asked.

Chen motioned for me to put up my hands in a fighting posture. He tried to adopt a Western boxing stance and bounced around deftly on the balls of his feet. "Here," he said as he



Fundamental posture of "Cut Sideways" from Baixingchuan



stepped forward and threw a jab, a hook, and an uppercut. "If I fight this way, but I do my set like this...," and he suddenly snapped through several movements of a familiar *Xingyichuan* set, "Then they are not the same. I fight in one style and do my set in another. Different kinds of body movement, you see? Everything is different."

I nodded and, feeling a bit foolish, I put my hands down.

"So that is not real kung-fu," he said. "In real martial arts, you fight by using the same movements you practice in the sets. Same foot positions, same techniques, same steps, same breathing. Everything is the same."

"That will take a long time to learn," I said.

Chen frowned. "Of course it does. It is kung-fu. Remember what that means. It is a fine skill that is developed only after a long time. You cannot get it quickly."

Maybe I'll be able to do it right sometime before I wrinkle up and die of old age.

Chen snapped into a *bow and arrow stance* and fired out a punch. "This posture, it is not just for practicing your sets. It is made for fighting. But you have to do it just right...."

He hunched forward and lifted the heel of his back foot. "See? This is all wrong. It's easier to do it wrong than to do it correctly. That's why so many people do it wrong. It's easier, but you cannot get real power that way."

Chen straightened up and adopted a picture-perfect posture. "When you practice to fight, you must try to do it exactly like this. Exactly."

"But isn't the principle more important than the actual posture?" I asked.

"No, no," he exclaimed, making me flinch. "You must understand that the principles only work if the posture is exactly right. If the posture is wrong, then the principles don't work. In real kung-fu, you must practice to knock your enemy down in one movement. Don't just try to hit him, 'pah, pah,'" he said, as swung his fists around wildly. "Anyone can do that, but it is not kung-fu. Different styles use different sets because they fight in different ways. Some styles use different principles than other styles, you see. That's why their sets look so different. The sets are not exercises for keeping fit. They are meant to teach us how to fight, how to move in a certain style. If you don't learn to do that, then you are just dancing."

"I've never been very good at dancing," I joked.

Oops, he's not smiling.

Ignoring my weak attempt at humor, Chen continued his lecture. He was on a roll. "If you cannot really use the movements from your sets in fighting, what good are they? Why bother to practice them? I suppose that someday people will say that forms are no good for fighting, that they are just for keeping fit or showing off. Hmmph!"

Man, he's really getting himself worked up here.

"That will only show their lack of training," Chen said sternly. "Here, I will show you. Get into a fighting position."

I raised my hands and adopted my fighting stance. Chen brought his hands up to an on-guard position and advanced his left foot a half step.

"Okay," he said. "Now you fight me. Try to hit me—any way you want."

Uh-oh.

My heart began racing but I focused on my opponent. His eyes seemed to penetrate into my very soul. My body didn't want to move but I forced myself to shift slightly to my right.

So far so good.

I shifted a little further to the right, deciding to drive in with a powerful *beng chuan;* the basic punching technique used in the internal system of *Xingyichuan.* And then all at once, Chen was almost on top of me. His jab shot straight at my throat and as I tried to slap it away with my leading hand, he brought up his rear foot and fired his own *beng chuan* straight at my solar plexus! I stepped back, trying to retreat from the onslaught but his rear foot drove out in a powerful kick directed at my front knee. I realized that I was completely helpless and at his mercy.

Where did all that come from? How'd he know what I was going to do? I didn't even see him move!

Chen backed up and resumed his fighting stance. "Try again. You must really try."

I inhaled deeply and let the air out slowly. Bringing my hands back up, I prepared to give it another try. I shifted to the left this time, being very careful not to leave an opening for my opponent.

Yeah, like it'd make any difference!

"I will wait this time," Chen assured me.

Boy, that's generous of him.

I advanced quickly and feinted with a quick jab with my left fist before launching a powerful front kick with my right foot. Chen easily slipped the feint, moving to my left as he deflected the kick with his left arm. His left foot drove past me and both of my feet suddenly flew skyward; I was airborne! I felt Chen's strong left hand grab the front of my shirt while his right hand caught the small of my back to prevent me from hitting the ground with too much force. By the time I landed on my back he was on top of me, his right fist drawn back in preparation for the final blow.

Smiling, he stood up and motioned for me to do the same. I got to my feet slowly and began dusting myself off while I concentrated on getting my stomach out of my throat and back down into its correct position. My legs felt a little rubbery and I stumbled as I straightened the waistband of my trousers.

Holy cow, he did it again. I hardly saw him move!

"See?" he said.

I shook my head. "I didn't see a thing. It happened too fast."

Chen chuckled. "I just used the movements from the sets we practice; exactly the same movements. No hopping around like the men who fight [professional boxers] on television, nothing fancy. Martial arts are very strong and dangerous. We train to knock the enemy down in one or two strikes. There is no 'block this, block that,' no running away, no covering your face with your hands, no judges, no rules. It is not a game. When the enemy attacks maybe you will block it, maybe not. But you strike him right away and knock him down. He strikes, you strike—pah! You move in and the fight is over.

"This is not something you can learn to do quickly. You must master the sets and learn how to use what they teach you. When you fight, it is as if you are doing movements from a set. When you do a set, it must be as though you are fighting. When the two become one, you will have great skill. But I cannot help you learn to dance. I don't do it very well, either."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sitting Quietly, Doing Nothing

After ecstasy, the laundry.

—Zen statement

The practice of *chan* [known as *zen* in Japanese, it means "meditation"] was once a very important part of traditional martial arts training. When I first began training under the watchful eye of *Sifu* Chen, I knew very little about meditative techniques and I could not imagine why anyone would waste their time sitting quietly and doing absolutely nothing. Although my teacher spoke frequently about the importance of practicing *chan* and special *chigong* breathing exercises, I paid little attention to him, preferring instead to practice my techniques and forms. How could something like sitting quietly be of any benefit to my physical training in the martial arts?

It was a cold, snowy day in February 1963 that I visited my teacher to spend most of the evening with him and his wonderful wife Mei. I had been invited to have dinner with them and I felt deeply honored and absolutely terrified. I didn't want to

inadvertently overlook some minor point of courtesy or spill my tea all over the table. If such a thing were to occur I would be terribly embarrassed, and so it was with some trepidation that I walked up the short sidewalk leading to the familiar pale-blue, ranch-style house. I noticed that the snow had been shoveled off the sidewalk and I made a mental note to volunteer my services for such menial tasks.

I stamped the snow from my shoes and rang the doorbell. Mei answered the door wearing a thick brown sweater, a long green skirt, and a smile that immediately warmed my heart and melted my fears. I removed my shoes as I stepped inside the house and Mei said, "Take your shoes with you. He is outside in the backyard."

Outside? What could he possibly be doing in the backyard on a day like this?

I thanked her and scurried through the living room and down the hallway to the door that led to the basement. The lights in the basement played over the large room that served as our training hall. I stopped and inhaled its spirit. There was no formal class today and although the room was empty, it felt very much alive and glad to see me. The small shrine, with the incense burner and names of Master Chen's teachers written in beautiful Chinese characters, was set against the wall to my right. To my immediate left was the weapons rack, which sported staffs, a spear, a tiger fork [a three-pronged weapon which resembles a pitchfork], a *quando* [a type of Chinese halberd with a wide, curving blade], and several authentic swords. A large punching bag hung from the overhead support beam to my left rear.

This is home!

I padded over to the backdoor, which led out into the backyard and put on my shoes. I opened the door and stepped out into the cold air; it bit deeply into my face and took my breath away.

I hate winter. I really, intensely hate winter!

I couldn't imagine what my teacher would be doing outside on a day like this, but whatever it was, I'd happily help him, even if it killed me. Having grown up in Panama and New Mexico, I could never get used to the cold. I noticed Chen sitting on the snow-covered ground with his back resting against the large maple tree off to my right. It looked as though his eyes were closed and he wasn't moving.

This is one heck of a way to admire the beauty of a winter day!

Chen opened his eyes and turned his head toward me. "Please join me," he said, and then he turned back, motionless.

Join him? Oh, man, I don't dare refuse.

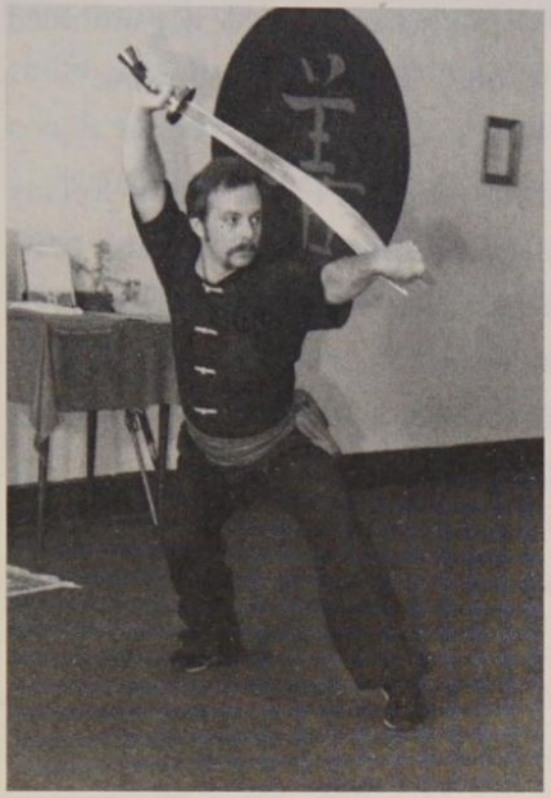
I forced a smile and sat down against the tree on Chen's left side. Crossing my legs, I placed my hands in my lap and closed my eyes.

Talk about freezing your butt off!

Remaining still was nigh on to impossible. I thought about how horribly cold it was and realized that I'd forgotten to zip my heavy coat shut.

Uh-oh. I don't dare move and zip up my coat. Good grief, he's not even wearing a coat!

Sure enough, Chen was wearing his usual pair of black trousers



Posture from the Yili Dao form

and a lightweight Chinese jacket. No hat. His breathing was undetectable and he seemed inured to the freezing temperature.

He's gotta be frozen solid!

Time didn't just creep slowly; it barely dragged itself through my mind. My legs were getting numb. I pressed one foot against the ground to verify it. *Yep, they're getting numb!* The slightest breeze would cut into my face and drift into every opening of my clothing. Wafting up through the cuffs of my sleeves and jeans, slipping through the front of my open coat and down inside my collar, it chilled me inside and out. I was certain that my back was frozen to the tree. I tried to shift my weight ever so imperceptibly so Chen wouldn't notice. How could you meditate and calm your mind when you were freezing to death?

I was shivering uncontrollably when Chen slowly unfolded his hands and said calmly, "Good. Time to go inside now."

Thank you, God!

I stood up with some difficulty because I could hardly feel my feet. Chen held onto my hands and pulled me up straight. I saw a large smile spread across his face as I zipped my coat shut. I followed him through the snow and back into the training hall. Once inside, I just stood and shivered, too cold to even bend over and remove my wet shoes. Chen exhaled audibly as if he was invigorated.

"You don't practice *chan* or *chigong* very much, do you?" he asked.

I sniffled and shook my head.

"Why not?"

I began removing my coat. "I don't see how it will help me," I answered.

I fully expected *Sifu* to berate me, but he waited for me to remove my shoes. He motioned for me to go upstairs where I was certain Mei had prepared hot tea. We walked into his kitchen and sat down at the small kitchen table. Mei smiled and shook her head as she placed two cups of hot tea of the table. I thanked her and wrapped my frozen hands around the cup, soaking up the warmth.

"Sitting quietly is just as important as your other training," Chen said. "You are young, so this is hard for you to understand. In practice, we exercise and discipline our bodies, but we also train our minds, right?"

"Yes, *Sifu,*" I said as I sipped down the warm tea. It radiated

heat through the whole inside of my body and I could feel the chill being chased from my bones. I figured it'd take at least a couple of days before I warmed up completely.

"Of course," Chen continued. "When you sit quietly, you do the same thing. It is not as obvious as in physical practice, but it is true. It will help you learn to control your body perfectly."

I raised my eyebrows. *Really?*

"When you learn to do that, you will feel neither heat nor cold," Chen smiled. "This skill is not achieved through physical training. Your mind controls your body, so you must learn how it works and how to use it. It requires a lot of discipline, sometimes more than training your body."

I guess so, considering that I nearly froze to death out there!

"*Yin* and *yang*," Chen said, referring to the well-known Daoist concept of opposites. "Training actively is *yang*. Sitting quietly is *yin*. To maintain harmony with the Dao [the Way], you must balance *yin* and *yang*."

Yeah, I know. I've heard all that before.

"But remember there is *yin* within *yang*, and *yang* within *yin*," Chen reminded me. "This is a great secret to training correctly."

I considered his statement, trying to see how all of this fit together.

"When you sit, you can come to know the truth of the Dao. It is not so clear when you are doing other things. Too many distractions. So much . . ." he searched for the right word, "Emotion. Too much thinking; too much 'what if?' Take time to clear these things from your mind so that you can see clearly."

He looked straight into my eyes and saw the confusion. "How can you be a strong fighter if you cannot see clearly?"

I can see my opponents just fine, thank you.

Chen continued his one-sided dialogue. "When you face your opponent your mind is too busy. You are afraid. You think, 'what if he does this, or what if he does that?' You worry about what you will do or if you will get hurt."

He held up one hand and snapped it open and shut several times like the mouth of a hand puppet. "Yip, yip, yip! Your mind keeps talking inside your head. It doesn't concentrate and you cannot see what is really happening. You are listening to yourself and you cannot hear anything else."

I took another sip of the warm tea, enjoying its relaxing warmth.

He's got a point there.

"When your mind is calm, your technique becomes natural. You don't think about it, it just happens. A calm mind is like a mirror and it shows you very clearly what your opponent is doing or what he is going to do. So you must practice sitting [meditation] in order to see clearly.

"In time, you will experience the Dao and understand things which you cannot normally understand. You can feel what other people think. You can feel their intentions and understand how all things are connected, how all things are part of the Dao. You understand?"

No. I nodded anyway.

Chen smiled. "No, you don't—not yet. Neither do I."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Mystery of Chi

No chi, no boxing.

—Zhang Zhaodong, addressing a group of students that included W.C. Chen

The Chinese word *chi* means "air, breath, vapor, energy." According to ancient Chinese cosmology, it is that subtle "stuff" from which all things are formed and which binds the universe together. However, this notion is not at all peculiar to the inhabitants of ancient China; many other ancient cultures had very similar or even identical theories regarding the existence of the life force. Egypt, India, Japan, Korea, Greece, Israel, and even the American Indians all had words for this concept.

It is believed that this energy circulates through all living organisms in a series of pathways not unlike those involved in the circulation of blood and lymph. As long as the energy moves through the system smoothly, one enjoys good health. However, if the energy becomes blocked in one or more pathways, discomfort and illness may result. This is the fundamental premise

of traditional acupuncture, which seeks to assist the body in removing blockages and reinstating proper energy flow.

Special exercises known as *chigong* were developed to strengthen the body's energy system. Intended primarily as forms of health maintenance, most of these routines involve gathering *chi* and circulating it through the internal pathways of the body's energy system. Martial arts devotees developed special forms of *chigong* that enhance their combat effectiveness by allowing them to emit *chi* through the application of their combative techniques. Known as *fajin,* this can multiply the efficiency of a given technique several times over, allowing the practitioner to strike with what may seem to be supernormal power. While many *chigong* exercises involve simple and relaxed movements that are coordinated with certain breathing techniques, others simply involve simply sitting or standing in a static position and breathing in a special way.

When I began studying traditional *Xingyichuan* under Master Chen, the word *chi* was mentioned several times. The concept of intrinsic energy was very difficult for me to grasp and although I practiced the basic *chigong* exercises most assiduously, I could not see that it was getting me anywhere. I certainly didn't feel stronger and the power of my movements didn't seem to change at all. I was practicing the basic *Xingyi* punching posture known as *pichuan* under Chen's watchful eye. I found that many of the basic movements of *Xingyi* were very similar to those of karate, which I had been studying for several years. I was well coordinated and had little trouble adjusting to the new movements. However, Chen wasn't at all pleased with my performance.

"No *chi,*" he said. "Without it, your movements are empty

and weak. You use too much muscular force. Your movements are too stiff."

I was exasperated. "How can you tell if I'm applying *chi?*"

"Just by looking at you," Chen answered dryly. "Your shoulders and chest are too stiff, so your *chi* is blocked there and cannot drop to your *dantien.* Your movements are blunt."

Chen walked over to me. "Do you practice your *chigong* every day?"

I told him that I did.

"Huh," he grunted. "Then you must practice more. You must lower your *chi* to your *dantien. Chi* is what gives us power. If you do not use it, you have only *li,* muscular power. Here, let me show you something."

I was always a little apprehensive when Chen mentioned "showing me something" because it almost invariably involved pain. Chen had me stand before him and extend one hand forward with the palm up, as if holding a saucer. He placed his right hand about two feet above my hand, with his palm facing downward.

"Now feel," he said, and began slowly lowering his palm toward mine.

Within a few seconds, I felt a distinct pressing sensation in my palm as well as heat. I told him about it.

"Yes," he said, smiling. *"Chi."*

Chen then told me to stand firmly with one foot advanced and tense my abdominal muscles. He placed his fist against my abdomen with the palm upward. He then told me to exhale strongly and as I did so, he screwed his fist over a quarter-turn. The effect was instantaneous; a terrible burning sensation exploded within my

entrails and I feared that I would wretch. I doubled over in pain, closed my eyes, and clamped my mouth shut. I tried to draw in a deep breath, but I could only gasp a small mouthful of air.

"See?" Chen said. "That's just a touch. A full punch is much stronger."

A full punch must leave body parts scattered all over the room!

"*Chi* is expressed through your body," Chen said. "You apply it through your techniques. If your movement, your technique is bad, you cannot express *chi*. This is why your movements must be just so. If you are stiff, the *chi* is cut off because the channels are constricted. You have to relax.

"Some people do the movements incorrectly and they cannot apply *chi*. Then they say 'it doesn't exist.' They are wrong. So pay attention to your movements and practice your *chigong* every day."

One of the main *chigong* exercises involved standing with the knees bent and holding the arms and hands in various positions while practicing special breathing techniques. This form of training was known as "stake holding" *[zhan zhuang]* and it was practiced before each class. I was expected to practice it regularly at home. Chen would also have me stand in the basic *beng chuan* posture while practicing special breathing exercises. He was constantly adjusting my posture, making sure that all of the external body parts were properly aligned. The spine, crown, coccyx, shoulders, elbows, and knees all had to be aligned just so.

"*Chi* is directed and controlled by your *yi*," Chen said as he adjusted my neck. "*Yi* means 'intention.' Where your *yi* goes, *chi* follows. Always remember that."

"So if I concentrate my mind on my fist, my *chi* will go there?" I asked. My legs ached from standing in one position for what seemed a very long time and I hoped that maybe some conversation would take my mind off of my discomfort.

"Yes," Chen answered. "But no further. When you strike your enemy, you must direct your *yi* through your target. When your movement is correct and your *yi* is directed through your enemy, *chi* can be applied. This is called *jin*. There are many types of *jin* because there are many ways of moving."

This is getting kind of complicated.

"When you move you must use some muscles to do it, right?"

I nodded quickly.

"That is *li*. *Li* means 'strength.' You have to use some *li* whenever you move. *Yi* and *li* must go together. That is, you move with the intention of hitting your enemy," Chen explained.

Okay. So far so good.

"So when *yi* and *li* move, what happens?" Chen raised his eyebrows, expecting a quick answer.

"*Chi* moves?" I said.

Chen's face brightened. "Yes, exactly. And when *yi, li,* and *chi* move together they produce *jin*."

Aha!

My zeal for daily *chigong* practice was renewed and I followed *Sifu's* directions very carefully. In time, I was finally able to emit *chi* through the various *Xingyi* postures and my skill increased considerably. However, I realized that just as I had experienced great difficulty in finally grasping the concept of *chi* and learning to apply it, so other Westerners would encounter the same problems. I

decided to create a *chigong* training program that was geared toward Westerners; a program that would demystify the subject and put it into terms and concepts that Occidentals could readily understand. However, that goal would be more than twenty years in the offing and I had much, much more to learn.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Yin and Yang should be clearly differentiated. At any place where there is insubstantiality, there must be substantiality. Every place has both insubstantiality and substantiality.

—*Tai-Chi Chuan Ching* (attributed to Chang San-Feng)

The concept of *yin* and *yang* and its accompanying double-fish diagram known as the *taiji* [tai chi] permeates Chinese culture; from traditional Chinese medicine to cooking, painting, and of course, the practice of martial arts. The theory of *yin* and *yang* is actually just a conceptual framework that the ancient people of China used in analyzing and categorizing the various phenomena of the known world. The basic premise of this idea is that everything in nature has two opposing aspects. Those aspects that feature properties such as heat, movement, light, the left side, upward or outward direction, and positive polarity pertain to *yang*. Things that feature the opposite properties of cold, stillness, darkness, the right side, downward or inward direction, and negative polarity are representative of *yin*.

However, the nature of this phenomenon is not absolute, but

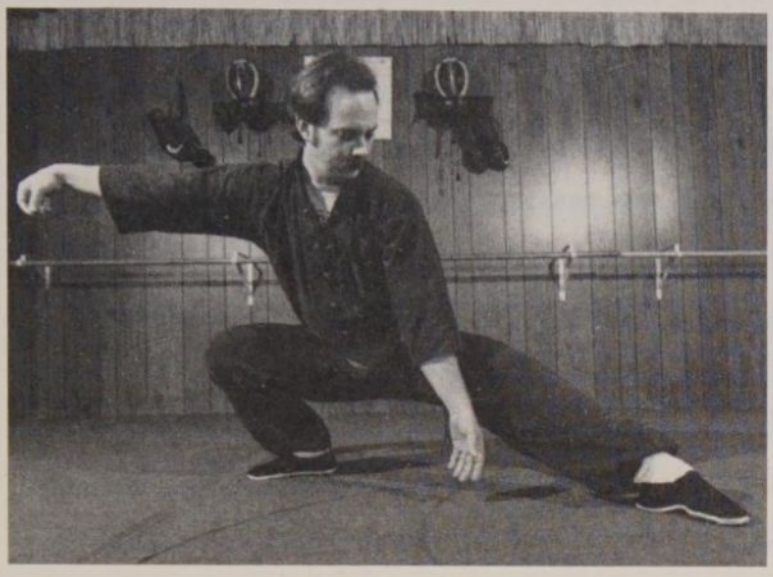


Taijichuan posture, "Fair Lady at Shuttles"

relative. Under certain conditions *yin* may turn into *yang*, and vice versa. Additionally, both *yin* and *yang* can be infinitely divided into *yin* and *yang* aspects; for instance, the left arm has both a right and a left side as well as a top and a bottom, and so forth. This is represented by the white dot in the *yin* aspect of the *taiji*, and the black dot in the *yang* aspect.

The traditional *neijia* [internal martial arts] that my teacher practiced and taught make extensive use of this concept. Traditional instructions and "songs" explaining the correct practice and applications of these enigmatic arts are replete with references to *yin* and *yang*. Although many Western devotees of the *neijia* believe that they fully understand the interplay and utilization of these principles within their respective disciplines, the truth is that their grasp of this abstract concept is often somewhat shallow or distorted.

It was a wintry Saturday morning when *Sifu* Chen explained and demonstrated to me the application of the theory of *yin* and



Taijichuan posture of "Snake Creeps Down"

yang to martial arts. We were practicing a form of *tui shou* [push-hands], a two-person training routine that is commonly practiced in *Taijichuan*. The exercise begins with both participants touching the backs of their left or right wrists together, and as one practitioner shifts his weight forward, the other shifts his weight to the rear. Although the object is to unbalance one's partner with a pushing or pulling movement, excessive muscular force is strictly prohibited. If the opponent pushes with too much force and/or becomes unbalanced to the front, one can pull him off balance. Conversely, if he leans backward or fails to turn his waist to dissolve his partner's pushing energy, he can be easily driven off balance. Moreover, one must learn to "listen" to the energy of one's training partner through one's sense of touch so that eventually, one can detect the opponent's intention before it becomes physically manifest. This is a huge oversimplification of the drill, but it should give you some idea of how it is practiced.

Naturally, Master Chen had no difficulty bouncing me around the room at will. We would be moving along smoothly, our movements perfectly coordinated as if we were dancing in place. Suddenly and without any apparent effort, Chen would launch me several feet. When my feet hit the ground, I tried to quickly regain my balance to avoid colliding with the wall and I could see my *sifu* smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"Too stiff," he said. "You are too stiff. Too *yang*."

"So I should try to be more yin?" I asked. "Softer?"

"No," Chen answered quickly. "Be neither."

Neither?

"How can I do that, *Sifu?*" I frowned. "I have to be one or the other."

"No, no," Chen said, vibrating his head back and forth. "You don't have to be one or the other." He paused momentarily. "You don't understand, do you?"

"I guess not," I said. "I thought I was supposed to become your other half...."

"Yes, you are," Chen answered. "But only part of you."

Huh?

"When I push you, that is *yang*. You should become yin, but only at the spot where I am pushing; not your whole body. It's the same if I punch or kick at you. I am *yang*, so you become *yin* at the spot I am attacking. Remember that nothing is completely *yin* or *yang;* within each of these is an element of the other, right? So when I say I am *yang* when I attack, I don't mean that I am completely *yang;* only the part of me that is attacking is *yang*, you see."

"I think I understand," I said.

"Whenever part of me becomes *yang*," Chen continued, "I am also *yin* somewhere. I have no defense there and it is empty. You must direct your response to that place."

I was trying to determine exactly how this would work as my teacher continued. "And remember that when *yang* goes to its extreme, it becomes *yin*. When the power of my attack is ended, I am empty there."

So saying, Chen snapped a quick punch at my face. Surprised by his sudden movement, I backed up slightly and blinked.

"You see?" Chen said. "At the instant the force of my power is used up, there is no more strength in it. You can move my fist with one finger because it is *yin!* It is *yang* when it attacks and you become *yin* at the spot I am aiming but when its power is used up and it becomes *yin*, you can become *yang* and move against it."

The basic idea was beginning to gel in my mind as Chen resumed his lecture. "Also, when I punch with my right hand my left side is *yin*. If you enter on my left side when I punch with my right hand, it is weak."

"So I shouldn't enter on your right side at all?" I asked.

Chen smiled. "Yes, if you wish," he said. "But when you do, you do not move directly against me. That would be *yang* against *yang*, using your strength against mine. In that case, whoever is stronger will win. If you move outside of my attack, you are emptying your front and making it *yin*. I cannot hit you because you are no longer there. Then you strike where I am weak, on my side or even in my back."

"Sounds like a lot to remember," I said. "How can I remember all of this?"

"It becomes natural," Chen said. "You practice until you don't have to think about it anymore."

I was still trying to sort all of this out when Chen simplified the entire theory. "If you push on water, what happens?"

"It gives way," I said.

"Does it get stiff and fall over? Does it resist you at all?" Chen asked.

"No."

"Ha!" Chen exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "You see? If you push water it yields, but only in the spot where you push it. All of the water does not yield, only one spot, and at the same time it surrounds your hand. It becomes *yin* where you are *yang*, and *yang* where you are *yin*. You see?"

The light in my head flashed on. "Yes, I understand it..., I think."

"So don't think about all of this *yin* and *yang* stuff," Chen frowned, waving one hand back and forth. "Just be like water. Hey, you thirsty? Come upstairs. We'll get something to drink."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Getting the Point

Your hands must have more than strength;
they must have eyes.

—W.C. Chen

The arts of *dian xue* [striking vital points] come in different flavors, as it were. Most vital points are categorized as nerve points, muscle points, blood points, bone points, organ points, or combinations thereof. Blows or seizing techniques directed to certain points can produce various effects ranging from excruciating pain to weakness, temporary paralysis, unconsciousness, respiratory paralysis, internal hemorrhage, malfunction of certain internal viscera, and even cardiac arrest. Some points are based upon the ancient theories of traditional Chinese medicine (such as acupuncture), while others are not.

Simply knowing the locations of these special points does not necessarily provide one with any special advantage; many points must be struck at certain angles while others can be adversely stimulated only through the application of special

types of striking power. Development of these forms of striking requires careful, regular, very tedious, and sometimes painful, training. Having been involved in the martial arts for several decades now, it has been my observation that those who have little or no knowledge or proficiency in certain aspects of *dian xue* are usually the first to jump up and deny its existence. The truth is that kung-fu teachers who possess real skill in this enigmatic art are very rare, and usually refuse to discuss the subject at all. Even more rare are those who will provide demonstrations of their ability. My primary kung-fu teacher, Master Chen, provided my classmates and me with demonstrations of his skill in the application of this unique art.

Chen had called for all of us to stand around him as he attempted to explain the art of *dian xue*. Our group consisted of only six of us plus *Sifu* Chen. We stood transfixed as he explained the fundamental theory of the art and the various types of points.

"If you learn how to hit but not where to hit, you only have half an art," Chen said, his eyes scanning the group. "You must use your strongest weapons against your enemy's weak points. Know which ones are exposed and strike them in the right way. This can end the fight in one blow."

So saying, he motioned for one of my classmates to step forward.

Ah, it's Mr. Muscles, the weightlifter! Couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

Chen told the young man to remove his T-shirt and he quickly complied, revealing a broad chest and well-defined abdominal muscles that reminded me of a brick wall. He was justifiably

proud of his physique and was renowned within our small group for demonstrating his superior strength at every opportunity. Translated, that means that he liked to hit other people with considerable force.

"Attack, please," Chen said.

The young fellow's eyes widened somewhat and *Sifu* repeated the request. Gathering his resolve, the student shot a quick right punch toward Chen's face. Chen pivoted to his left, easily parrying the blow with his left arm. His right fist darted out and his extended foreknuckle struck the student just below the left nipple. His defensive maneuver was so fast that it was difficult to observe with any real clarity. Chen's muscular partner squeaked in pain as he grasped his left breast. He collapsed down onto one knee, trying to breathe. I realized that my mouth was hanging open and I quickly clamped my lips together, wondering if my classmate was going to be all right.

Sifu wouldn't really hurt him . . . would he? Geez! What'd he do?

"He will be fine in a minute," Chen said. "I did not strike with any power."

That was a light strike? Holy cow!

While our classmate struggled to his feet, tenderly rubbing the spot that had been "adversely stimulated," Chen continued his lecture. "You see? One strike and the fight is over. I did not have to cause damage, just pain."

Looking at another student, Chen asked him to grab his wrist or collar. The young man hesitated but Chen insisted. Reluctantly, the student obliged and took hold of Chen's right wrist with his

right hand. Chen nodded his thanks and addressed the class as he pointed to a spot on his partner's wrist.

"You know this point," he said, as his opponent clenched his teeth in anticipation of being struck on the radial nerve. "But I don't think I have shown you this one," he said, and he swung his free hand underneath his student's upper arm to strike an exposed muscle point with his thumb knuckle.

Chen's partner yelped in pain and immediately released his grip. Chen grasped his hand and placed it on his collar, indicating that he wanted the poor wretch to take hold. The student obeyed, and seized Chen's shirt.

"That point is very painful," Chen said casually. "But this one," and his fist shot up to hit the inside of his partner's arm, striking between the bicep and triceps muscle," has different effects." Chen's opponent screamed in agony and released his grip, dropping to one knee.

"That point empties one side of his body. He cannot fight now."

No kidding.

"Your hands must have more than just strength. They must have 'eyes.' They must know where the points are and go to them instantly. You don't use your eyes to find the spots," Chen said, pointing to his face. "Your hands 'see' the point and know where to go. No matter if your enemy is big or small, your hands know where to strike."

Chen helped his student to his feet and began lightly massaging the area around the point that he had struck. The lecture continued.

"There are many points on the body which can be used this

way. Some just hurt, some take away your strength, some can knock you out, and some can kill. Some points are based on acupuncture," Chen said softly.

Sifu's countenance became very serious as he went on. "This art is being lost. Even when I was young, there were only a few masters of it. Many teachers claimed to have this knowledge, but only a few really did. You see, it is not enough to know where the points are located; you must learn how to strike them. You must know what techniques to use, what angles, what kind of power to use."

Vas ist der "kind of power"?

Chen looked at me as he released his partner's arm. "In America, you have 'boxers,' right?"

"Yes, *Sifu,*" I nodded. *Oh man, he's not gonna pick me, is he?*

"But they often hit some of these points and nothing happens, huh? That's because they don't hit with the right kind of power." Chen turned back to address the rest of the class. "To 'get' the different kinds of power, you have to go through special kinds of training. You have to do it every day. It is very difficult; you do not use strength just from your muscles." He looked at the weightlifter. "You have to learn to use *chi* [internal energy] and strike with it in different ways (this is generally referred to as different types of *jin*). You must learn to use your breath and your mind as well as your hands."

I was very curious about the acupuncture points and I asked *Sifu* how they could be used for self-defense. He lowered one eyebrow and looked at me although he was speaking to the entire class.

"Those points are very special," he said. "If you fight someone whose skill is higher than yours, they can be used to help you defeat him. But mostly they are used for," he searched for the right word, "assassination. The victim may not even know that he has been hit and he may not begin to get sick for a day or two. Then he gets worse and worse—until he dies."

Our group was silent. We looked at each other and at our *sifu*. How was such a thing even possible? It sounded like some kind of myth but Chen wasn't given to presenting myth as fact, and we knew it. He slowly nodded his head.

"It is a special skill called *dim mak*," he said. "Very few people can do it. Most of them will never teach anyone. When they die, their knowledge will go with them and that's probably the best thing."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Stop, Look, and Listen

You've got to be able to see into a man's heart by just looking at him.

—Sgt. Michael Biggs, U.S. Army Special Forces

My classmates and I were busily practicing basic self-defense techniques under the ever-watchful eye of *Sifu* Chen. As per his instructions, the aggressor would casually approach the unsuspecting victim and attack without warning. The assault might take the form of a quick punch, a grab, a push, or any one of a dozen different techniques. The victim had to react quickly and appropriately.

Chen called one of the students named Lum over and whispered something in his ear. Lum was paired with a student I had nicknamed "Jolly" because he always seemed to be smiling. Lum returned, facing Jolly in the role of aggressor.

He sauntered easily toward the smiling student who was obviously expecting some kind of surprise attack. Jolly's jaw tightened as Lum came toward him. He shifted his weight and when

Lum came within his reach, Jolly let fly a solid punch which stopped just short of Lum's jaw. Chen laughed loudly and we all looked over at him as he continued giggling, finally sitting down in his favorite wooden chair as he panted and struggled to gather himself.

Jolly gazed at his teacher, wondering if he'd done something wrong. Chen gradually calmed himself and wagged his finger at the confused pupil.

"Your wife must hate to take you shopping with her," Chen giggled. "You punch all the other customers," and he started up again in a fit of laughter.

The other two students and I had stopped practicing, wondering what this was all about. Chen took in a deep breath and wiped a tear of laughter from the corner of one eye.

"Do you punch people at work?" he asked with a chuckle.

"N-no," Lum answered.

Chen wiped away another tear and turned toward the rest of his class. "You must learn to know when an enemy is going to attack," he said. "You must be able to tell how strong he is and where he is weak."

"Just by looking at him?" Jolly asked.

"Looking, listening," Chen said. "You must consider all parts of him. If he attacks and you are not prepared, he will defeat you very easily—especially if he has a weapon."

"How can we be prepared, *Sifu?*" I said.

"Watch how he walks; how he moves," Chen replied. "You can learn a lot about someone just by watching that. You can tell if he is confident, afraid, too proud, and when he gets closer, you

can tell if he plans to attack. Is he moving too fast or too slow? If someone is planning to attack, he will move either too fast or too slow; he will not move at a normal pace. If he is moving fast he is very confident, but if he is moving slow he is studying you and deciding how to attack. He may be afraid.

"Look to see if he stands straight or slumps, if his head is held up looking right at you or dropped down. Look at his eyes. Are they looking right at you or not? Most people, if they don't know you, will not look directly at you for more than just a second."

All of us looked at each other and nodded.

Chen continued with his lecture. "If he speaks, listen to his voice. You can know what a person is like by listening to the voice. Maybe it's strong and confident, maybe it's weak; maybe he grits his teeth like he's angry. Say 'good morning' to him and then watch and listen.

"Look to see where his hands are. Are they in his pockets? Does it look like he has a weapon? Is he relaxed? The hands will tell you if he is relaxed or tense.

"Notice how he is dressed. Is he in business clothes? Maybe just a . . .," Chen paused momentarily, searching for the right word. "T-shirt and blue jeans? You know, someone in a business suit is not usually the kind of person who will attack you."

I was fascinated. I'd never considered these kinds of things, things that most people would never notice.

"If you are not so sure of him, step off to one side," Chen said. "Don't walk close to him. If you walk around him he will have to make a big movement to attack and you can see it more easily. You will have more time to react."

"You have to be aware all of the time," Chen reminded us. "Tomorrow when you go to work or school, study people and learn how to read them. Study the ones who you know are weak. See how they move, how they talk, how they look at people, how they speak. Then study the strong ones and look at the same things. You will learn to see the differences. This can save your life, so pay attention!"

I started right then and there, watching my own classmates and trying to discern certain qualities about them by scrutinizing the gait and speech of each one. I thought that it might be easier to begin by studying people I already knew rather than trying to study strangers. It wasn't long before I noticed distinct differences and I could see how each individual's personality was clearly expressed through his physical movements, his posture, and his voice. Clearly, this was an art within an art; a very subtle art which would require no less effort than learning the various physical techniques and forms of the martial arts and which, like the more readily perceptible defensive maneuvers, could truly mean the difference between life and death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sleepwalking

Don't think there are no crocodiles
just because the water is calm.

—Malayan proverb

I arrived at *Sifu's* home early, greeted Mei at the door, and happily bounced down the basement stairs to prepare for class. As I began my stretching routine, I noticed that my teacher was nowhere to be seen. This was unusual; he was invariably waiting in the training hall for his handful of students when they arrived for class. Over the next ten minutes or so, four more of my classmates arrived and joined me in warming up for class. We were talking about various aspects of training when *Sifu* Chen came down the wooden stairway. He paused at the bottom of the stairs and seemed to examine each of us before finally addressing the group.

"You are all asleep," he said.

Five pairs of eyes bore very confused looks. *Who?*

"Your minds and bodies are not prepared," Chen said. "You

are not aware of anything around you. If something happened, if you were attacked suddenly, you would be taken down instantly."

Attacked? Here?

Chen must have read my mind. "Of course, you will not be attacked here," he smiled. "Not without my permission. But I am sure that you are all asleep even when you are not here. When you go to work or school, when you go to town to buy things, you are not aware of anything around you. Maybe there are bandits who want to rob you."

Bandits?

"Maybe someone is not driving his car properly," Chen continued. "Maybe a bad dog is loose. There are many things that can happen. If you are caught sleeping, you will be hit before you can react."

One of the students named Wang spoke up. "So we should always be looking out for things which are dangerous?"

"No, no." Chen shook his head. "If you are always looking for danger, you will never see it. You look to the left, but it comes from the right."

"Then what are we supposed to do, *Sifu?*" Wang asked.

"Your mind must not stop on anything. If it stops at one spot, your attention is fixed there and you will not see anything else," Chen answered. "First you must walk and stand and sit correctly. When you stand up, the top of your head should be pulling straight up. This keeps your back and neck straight."

So what's that got to do with my mind?

"Your awareness is sharper when you stand and walk this

way. When you slump your mind slumps, too. Now please sit down," Chen said, pointing to the wooden chair in which he often sat and observed class.

Wang walked over to the chair, turned around, and sat.

"Ha!" Chen grinned. "Do it again slowly. Everyone watch."

Watch a guy sit down? What's that got to do with...

Wang stood up quickly as if he'd been reprimanded, then began sitting down again slowly.

"There!" Chen said suddenly. "See? You stick your..." he thought for a moment and patted his buttocks.

"Butt," I said, smiling.

"Yes!" Chen said. "Your butt sticks out and you lean forward. What would happen if I pulled the chair away?"

"I...would fall down," Wang muttered.

"Exactly," Chen exclaimed. "Because you are off balance. Never sit down that way."

Chen motioned for Wang to stand up. Wang did so and quickly rejoined our group, glad to be out of the hot seat. Chen turned around with his back to the chair.

"I show you," he said, and sat down. I noticed that as he sat, his back remained straight and his buttocks didn't protrude out behind.

"So if I am attacked when I sit, I can defend myself," Chen said. "My mind is aware and balanced, just like my body. When I stand up, I do not lean. I stand up straight."

So saying, he stood up quickly without leaning.

"You all sit down as if you are on the toilet," he said. "Please sit down and stand up in a balanced way."

"Controlling your body is the first step," he said. "But you must also control your mind. You must learn to see everything without letting your mind stop on anything. For instance, would you walk across the street while reading a book?" We all shook our heads.

"Why not?" Chen asked.

"We wouldn't be able to see if any traffic was coming," I answered.

"Exactly," Chen nodded. "And when you look to the left, you do not keep your eyes and mind focused there because something may be coming from the right. You are aware of everything when you cross the street but you do not let your mind stop on anything."

"But if we see a car coming, my mind stops on it," I said. "Is that wrong?"

"Yes," Chen replied. "Your body knows what to do without your mind having to concentrate and tell it what to do. Your mind perceives the danger and then you let your body do what is right. If your mind stops on the car coming toward you from the left and you think about what to do, you will not see the one

coming from the right, you see?"

I think so.

"So your mind must not stop on the one car," Chen said. "The mind should act like a mirror, reflecting images of everything put in front of it but having no image of its own. If a mirror had an image of its own, it would not reflect the images of other things very well."

Chen turned and walked into the small restroom adjoining

the training hall. He reappeared holding a glass that was filled to the brim with water.

"Now walk across the room, but don't spill any water," Chen said as he handed me the glass. "Watch it very closely so you don't spill anything."

Easy enough.

I slowly walked across the room, keeping my eyes fixed on the glass of water, which seemed to vibrate with every step. I concentrated on holding it absolutely still but the water seemed to have a mind of its own, creeping up over the edge of the glass and running down onto my hand. I tried to compensate for the movement of the glass and lost a little more water. Finally I reached the other side of the room. How could such a thing be so difficult? Chen stood with his thick arms folded across his chest.

"Look at the floor," he said.

I turned and looked at the floor behind me. There was a small trail of uneven spots where I had spilled water.

"Pretty clumsy for such a simple task," Chen said, motioning for me to rejoin the group.

I walked back across the floor and took my place in the circle of students surrounding him.

"You know, you didn't spill any water just now when you walked back," he said, smiling.

I looked back at the floor again.

Huh, he's right.

"That's because you weren't thinking about how to do it," Chen said. "You only had the intention of walking back over

here. You did not think about how to do it. Your body did everything for you."

I handed the glass to *Sifu* before I did anything else wrong.

"If you think that you shouldn't stop your mind on anything, then it is stopped on something. You must let it be as it was when you were born—seeing everything without stopping. This is the meaning of 'doing nothing but achieving everything.' Learn how this is applied to your martial arts."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Touch and Throw

From the greatest softness comes the greatest hardness.

—Wang Tsung-yueh, original introduction
to *Tai-Chi Chuan Ching*

Known by various and sundry names during different periods in its development, the art of grappling is likely the oldest of all martial arts. The earliest written records concerning Chinese martial arts refer to numerous forms of wrestling. Some of these styles of grappling such as *go-ti,* were rather violent. Participants wore helmets fitted which sported horns that had been removed from cattle carcasses, and the object was to grab and gore one's opponent! Over centuries of development, the art of *shuai-jiao* came into existence. Adopted and refined further by the military, *shuai-jiao* was practiced primarily in dirt pits and featured many different types of throwing techniques such as foot and leg sweeps, body throws, and hand throws. It is also included joint-locks and numerous forms of striking and kicking. Many martial arts historians believe that Japanese *jujutsu* is actually the grandson of this ancient Chinese grappling art.

Although *shuai-jiao* is a martial art itself, virtually all styles of kung-fu employ various throwing and takedown techniques. Chen was a strong advocate of the grappling art and insisted that his students become as skilled with the grappling techniques as they were with punching, striking, and kicking techniques.

Shortly after I began training under *Sifu* Chen, I found myself paired off with a much older partner for practice of fighting techniques in Chen's backyard. This was identical to the *ippon kumite* [one-step fight drills] that I had practiced in karate. My partner and I would begin by facing each other in fighting postures. I would advance with a prearranged attack and my partner would respond with an appropriate defensive maneuver of his choosing.

"Throw him after you strike," Chen announced to our group. "Don't just strike, strike, strike. Finish with a throw and a final strike."

But we don't have any mats!

My partner nodded his understanding of the command and indicated that he was prepared to receive my attack. I lunged forward and he easily deflected my punch and countered with two quick counterstrikes. The next thing I knew, I was airborne. He had swept my forward leg out from under me and I came down onto the lawn with a crash. Okay, it wasn't a crash. It felt like one. It probably just sounded like a dull splat. I hadn't been expecting the throw and hadn't properly broken my fall. And the ground was very dry. I got to my feet just as *Sifu* approached me.

"You said you trained in judo, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't learn how to fall?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, why didn't you do it right? You'll get hurt if you keep falling like that," Chen warned.

You're telling me! "Yes, sir," I replied. "But we don't have mats, *Sifu*."

"You need a mat to fall correctly?" he asked.

"Well, no."

Chen nodded and addressed the entire group. "In a real fight, people like to punch and grab. They try to wrestle with you. If you cannot fight in this way, you will lose. If someone grabs me and tries to wrestle and throw me down, I may lose my balance and fall."

He motioned for one of the students (a fellow whose surname was Lum) to step forward. "If Lum grabs me and wrestles, what can I do?"

So saying, he directed Lum to grab him in any way he liked and throw him to the ground. Having previously been on the receiving end of Chen's demonstrations, Lum was a little hesitant but he did as he was told. He grabbed *Sifu* by the collar and then moved to encircle him with his arms. Chen acted as though he was struggling to get free. The key word in that statement is "acted."

In a flash, Lum's feet were above his head and Chen brought him down easily. Lum tried to cushion his fall in the usual *shuai-jiao* fashion—holding his head in his hands, curling up, and trying to land on his side but it wasn't to be. Lum came down hard on his back. Chen drove a final thrust into him almost before he hit the ground.

Chen stood up, smiling. He loved to demonstrate throws. "See? He tries to wrestle with me, I take control, and throw him down. This is very important."

Seems to me that learning how to fall properly is very important!

"Try to strike the opponent before you throw. Strike once, twice, maybe three times. This will weaken him and he will not resist you. Then throw him down and make one more strike to finish him."

This is brutal.

"There are 'rules' for throwing that you must remember. First, always hit your enemy before you throw him. Second, never use your strength against his strength. Use his strength against him. If he pulls, you push. If he pushes, you pull. Never try to throw someone who is not off balance. If his stance is strong, you cannot throw him even if he is smaller than you."

Sounds a lot like jujutsu.

"If you are attacked by more than one person, don't worry about throws. You can't afford to wrestle with one person because the others will attack you," Chen went on. "If your opponent is very tall, you can use body throws. If he is short, use leg sweeps."

"In judo we grabbed the jacket," I said. "What if our opponent is wearing just a T-shirt? It will tear if we grab it."

"Judo is a sport," Chen answered. "*Shuai-jiao* is not a sport. We don't have to grab the jacket."

Chen's hand shot out and grabbed my left upper arm, causing me to gasp in pain, as his fingers seemed to penetrate clear to the bone.

"Grab meat and bone," he said, slowly releasing my arm.

Ooh, I'll remember that. Well, there's one more bruise to take home.

"Sometimes grab nerve points or twist joints to cause pain," Chen nodded. "Makes it easier to throw him down."

I nodded as I rubbed my arm.

"All boxing styles include throwing techniques," he said. "Some throws you cannot practice with your partner. They are not just for throwing him down. They will break bones, maybe kill him. Very dangerous."

Chen motioned for Lum to step forward again. Poor Lum.

"Lum attacks me," Chen said as he motioned for his partner to punch. Lum obliged and Chen easily deflected the blow, grabbed hold of Lum's wrist, and delivered a quick counterpunch.

"*Pah!* See? I hit him. Now he is hurt." Chen's punching arm slipped under Lum's punching arm. He snapped his forearm back, bringing it down into the crook of Lum's punching arm. This forced Lum's elbow to bend and Chen immediately seized Lum's throat. He now had Lum in a joint-twist as well as a throat-seizing technique. Lum looked like he was in excruciating pain, but Chen continued the lesson.

"See? I twist his elbow and grab his throat. If I throw him down, I can smash his head into the ground!"

You're not really gonna do that, are you?

Chen gently brought Lum down. "I let him come down easy," Chen explained, "But in a fight, I smash his head on the ground while I choke him. Even if he knows how to fall, it will not help him. He cannot fight me. We call this the 'tiger's mouth' throw."

I've got to remember this one.

"The teacher of my teacher was Cheng Tinghua. He was very, very good at *shuai-jiao*. His style of *Baguazhang* was full of these kinds of techniques," Chen said as Lum stood up and rubbed his throat. "My *Sil-Lum* teacher also used a lot of throwing techniques, so I learned a lot of *shuai-jiao* when I was young. In the [Chinese] army, they taught us some of these things, but it was not so good," Chen said, shaking his head. "Not like my teachers. They were very good. If you grabbed Mr. Cheng, he would send you flying! Touch and throw. My teacher was very big and strong and did not like the throwing techniques very much. When someone attacked him, he just smashed them, but he made us learn what he had learned from Mr. Cheng."

Touch and throw, huh?

"Now I make you learn what I learned," Chen continued. "But it will take some time before you really get it."

Chen's face beamed as he looked at all of us. "Now I will show you something different. One of you attack me and try to throw me down—any way you want."

The students glanced at each other. Who would it be?

Not this kid.

They seemed to settle on one student is particular, a young fellow named Wang. Wang sprang forward and reached for Chen's right arm. Chen pivoted to his left and the aggressor missed his grab.

"Please," Chen said calmly. "Try hard!"

Wang shot out his hands, trying to grab Chen's collar, but Chen pivoted again and Wang stumbled past him. Chen clucked.

"No, you must really try."

Wang's face reddened and he lunged forward, trying to grasp both of Chen's upper arms. Chen's countenance never changed. He made a small step backward with his left foot, then advanced leftward with his right foot and turned his body as he raised his arms to the front. Wang went sailing through the air and came crashing down perhaps eight or ten feet away. I really hadn't seen Chen do much of anything. I looked at my classmates and judging by the looks on their faces, they hadn't seen any sort of technique, either. Chen smiled. "Touch and throw," he said. "You can find these techniques in your forms if you study them carefully. Now practice, please."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Art of Deception

All warfare is based on deception.

—Sun Tzu, *Art of War*

Sifu Chen sat comfortably in his wooden chair off to one side of the main training area in his basement. Two pairs of his students were engaged in sparring and the air was thick with sweat. Grunts and the sounds of shuffling feet muffled the gentle music of the *quin* and *xiao,* which reverberated from the small record player located at the rear of the room. Chen dearly loved music and often played it during class. I sat off to one side, watching the give and take of technique; now attacking, now defending, now advancing, now retreating. I noticed that Chen was slowly shaking his head disapprovingly. He waved one hand at the group and told them to stop. Soaked with sweat and gasping for air, they were all happy to hear the command.

"You are all too obvious," Chen began. "It is easy to see what you intend to do. When you intend to attack I see it in your eyes, your breath, your spirit. If I can see it from over here, your opponent can see it even better. Come here and listen to me."

The four students approached Chen and sat down around his chair, wiping their sweat-covered faced on their sleeves.

"You must not just attack, attack, attack," Chen said. "You are hoping that one technique will break through and hit your opponent. That is not the way. One who possesses real skill will defeat you instantly. You must learn to lie."

I looked at my *sifu* while the students looked at each other.

Huh?

"Never let your enemy know what you intend to do. Never let yourself know what you intend to do."

Okay, now I'm really confused.

"You must deceive your opponent. Make him think you are open in one spot when you are not really open. It is a trap, you see?" Chen looked at me. "What you Americans call . . ." he searched for the right word.

"An ambush?" I asked.

Chen beamed. "Yes, yes! Ambush. Draw him in and then strike him down. Never just run at him. If his defense is strong, he will knock you down. Even if his defense is not strong, he can run away and you cannot catch him. He escapes and then tries another way, another attack. This can go on and on, like you were just doing. You chase each other around, but no one is winning."

"How do we draw the enemy in?" one student asked.

"You draw in his mind," Chen said in a low voice. "Draw his mind first because that has to move before his body can move. You make him think you are open in one spot, make him think you are tired or hurt or afraid. Make a false attack that he can



The double-edged sword (jien)

easily block. Make him think you are weak and draw him in. When he attacks, *pah!* You strike him down."

"This is deceiving your enemy," Chen said. "All strategy, no matter if it is used here in class, in the battlefield, or in your business, is based on the art of deception. It is making the opponent think you are in one place when you are really in another; making him think you intend to do one thing but you do another, you see?"

The students nodded. Some of them had been trying to use feints and I asked *Sifu* about it.

"Real deception in fighting is very subtle," he answered. "The higher the enemy's level of skill, the more subtle it must be. If it is too obvious, he knows what you are trying to do and he can take advantage of it."

Chen pointed at the group of students and said, "You are all too obvious. You do not deceive your opponent. You want to force him to move his body a certain way so that you can attack, right?"

I nodded my head in unison with my classmates. *Isn't that the object of using feints?*

"But that is only good for beginners," Chen said. "It doesn't work with fighters who have real skill. A good fighter feels your mind and that is where you must deceive him. Make him think that you are about to attack—then he will move. Maybe he will try to attack first. When he moves, he is vulnerable. When he attacks he is more vulnerable, and you can defeat him if you move at the right moment."

"*Sifu,*" one of the students addressed him, "You said that even we must not know what we will do. What do you mean?"

Chen leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "If you think about what you plan to do, your enemy may be able to feel your intentions. You must not have any plans. You must not think that 'I will do this' or 'I will do that.' When your mind thinks about things like this, it becomes stuck on them. Then the enemy's actions will not be clear. You will not be able to see into his mind.

"Your mind must be calm like smooth water. If you look into a pond, you will see a clear reflection. But if you throw pebbles into it, you cause ripples and the reflection is broken up. Thoughts act like pebbles."

"But if I don't know what I'm going to do, how can I be sure that I can defend myself?" I asked.

"If your mind and spirit are calm, you will clearly see what

the enemy is going to do," Chen answered. "If you have trained enough, your reactions will be correct, even if you do not think about them. Actually, they can be correct only if you do not think about them. If you think about them, they will probably be wrong and you will be beaten. Don't think about your opponent. Don't think about yourself and what you will do, don't think at all—not even about not thinking. If you think to yourself, 'I must not think about this or that,' then you are thinking, you see? Your mind is stuck on itself. That's no better than having it stuck on your own body and what you will do, or on the enemy.

"Let the enemy's movements decide what you will do and let your body do it without any interference from your mind. If your mind is clear, it will see clearly and your body will react correctly. Act without acting. This is the right way."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hurry Up and Wait

I was the only calm one in the house. You see,
I've been shot at by experts.

—Harry S. Truman, recalling WWI service after an assassination attempt in 1950, *Bess W. Truman*

Sifu Chen addressed his small group of students as he motioned for them to discontinue their sparring practice in his backyard. It was a beautiful summer day but none of us paid much attention to the lush green carpet upon which we practiced, or the old maple tree which stood on the east side of the house with its two largest limbs reaching straight up like a pair of sinewy arms supporting heaven. We were oblivious to the sound of the occasional automobile that passed by the front of the house and to the neighbors who glanced out their windows at us, wondering why we were trying to beat each other to death. I wondered if anyone had ever called the police to report a gang fight.

"You are too interested in attacking each other and striking the first blow," Chen said. "Keep your mind calm and don't think about how to attack, how to hit your opponent before he hits

you. Your minds and bodies are not working together. When the enemy attacks, your mind stays calm but your body moves. This is *yin* on the inside and *yang* on the outside. If you keep your body calm while you cause your mind to move to deceive the enemy into thinking you are about to attack, that is *yang* on the inside and *yin* on the outside.

"You must stay calm on the inside. There is no time for thinking, but there is time for staying calm. If you become upset when the enemy attacks, you will make a mistake and you will not see what he is doing. You must remain calm inside. This takes a lot of practice."

No kidding.

"Your mind must take in everything without holding onto anything," Chen said. "Your spirit must be calm. If you become distracted, even for just one second, you will be defeated."

"But how do we practice to do that, *Sifu?*" I asked. "It's pretty tough to stay calm in the middle of a fight."

Chen nodded. "Yes, it is—for most people, but you must all learn to remain calm on the inside even when you are moving very quickly on the outside. You should practice to sit quietly and meditate every day."

I looked down at my feet. I rarely practiced meditating. Chen glanced over at me, a knowing smile on his face.

"*Yin* and *yang* must be balanced in training," he said, speaking to the group. "You must train your mind as well as your body. Remember that your mind controls your body. If it is not trained well, what good is the training for your body? Your mind is your weapon. Everyone thinks of the sword or gun or fist as the

weapon, but this is wrong. The mind controls all of these things. It directs them, tells them what to do and when to act. If the mind is not trained, these other things are useless."

All of us considered his words for a moment.

"Now, when you meditate what must you do?" Chen asked.

This has got to be a trick question.

Wang piped up. "We have to sit straight?"

Chen nodded approvingly. "Yes, you must sit correctly, but why?"

"So we don't slump over," Wang replied.

"But what has that got to do with meditating?" Chen asked, looking at Wang.

Wang was clearly at a loss for words. His eyes and mouth were open but empty.

Yup, trick question.

"I will tell you," Chen said. "It is because when your body is slumped, your mind is slumped. When you are slumped over, you are being lazy and sloppy with your body and your mind follows that example. It becomes lazy and sloppy, too. You have to line up your head and neck and back . . . then you can sit for a long time comfortably. If you slump, you cannot sit for very long because it becomes very uncomfortable.

"It is the same when you face your enemy. All of your body parts, from the top of your head to the bottoms of your feet, must line up correctly. Then you can move easily, quickly, powerfully. Now, what else must you do when you meditate?"

We all glanced at each other. Finally, an older student named Lee took a chance.

"Breathing?" he asked. "We have to breathe the way you showed us?" Lee was referring to a unique form of breathing known as reverse breathing which the ancient Daoists had developed.

Chen clapped his hands lightly. "Yes. Your breathing affects your mind. If your breathing is too fast or too high, up here," he said, tapping his upper chest, "then you get tired too quickly. You have no power, no root. You become afraid. Your mind is scattered and your spirit is weak."

Chen patted his lower abdomen and said, "Breathe from here like I showed you. Then your mind will stay calm and your spirit will be full and strong. This is a wonderful secret."

Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward.

—Vernon Law, Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher

The sunset was beautiful; the sky was streaked with beautiful shades of purple and orange, as though a child had run a rough paintbrush across the sky. The sun seemed to grasp at these last few remnants of color as it slowly slipped down below the jagged horizon of split-level suburbia and gave way to the colorless blanket of night. My teacher and I were sitting on lawn chairs just outside the back door of his house, admiring the gratuitous spectacle of nature while his wife Mei put the finishing touches on the evening meal.

It had been a wondrous day for me. *Sifu* Chen had initiated me into the practice of a very strange art called *Baguazhang*. I had spent most of the class learning special stepping techniques, which were used to walk around the rim of a large imaginary circle, and it was difficult for me to understand how such an exercise could possibly be applied to fighting. My legs still felt somewhat

rubbery; I had thought that my previous training would have built up a large reservoir of strength in my legs but *Bagua* was showing me the errors of such unfounded beliefs.

I was reflecting on the various facets of my training, allowing my ponderings to pass effortlessly through my consciousness until one passing thought suddenly grabbed hold and refused to grant me any further solace.

"*Sifu,*" I began, trying to consider just how I could word my question without risking life and limb. "We practice our techniques against each other in different drills, but how can we be sure that they'll work in a real fight? When I practice with the other students they only use martial arts techniques against me, but if I get into a fight my opponent probably won't use those kinds of techniques. So how can I know that what I am practicing will really work?"

He's gonna make me stand up and then he's gonna kill me.

Chen chuckled and glanced at me before returning his gaze to the color-splashed canvas of the slowly darkening sky. "You are very young," he said. "You don't have much experience in fighting."

Chen's eyes and mind seemed to drift off to some distant time and place. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I have had maybe too much . . . experience," he said softly. "Maybe too much."

He blinked his eyes quickly a couple of times and seemed to come back to the present.

"All students wonder the same thing," he reassured me. "I have fought many times, so I have a lot of experience. The biggest

difference between training and real fighting is in here," he said, tapping on his chest. "And in your mind. In training, you know that it is just practice so you are not very much afraid. You know that your teacher will not let you get hurt too bad, but in a real fight it is different. Your teacher isn't there and you know that it isn't practice. It's real. Your heart pumps very fast and you become excited and may be frightened. You have to control these things and relax just like I tell you in practice. Use your breath to calm your mind and heart."

"But if someone attacks me, he won't use the same kinds of techniques that we use in class," I said.

"No," Chen smiled. "Probably not, but that makes it easier to defend yourself."

I raised my eyebrows, questioning his statement.

"Defending against a straight punch is much more difficult than a big [haymaker] punch," Chen said confidently. "Usually, your opponent will try to punch you and then wrestle you to the ground. You have to be able to defend against that kind of fast attack, but it really isn't too difficult if you train hard. Your biggest enemy is inside you!"

"You mean fear?" I asked.

Sifu Chen nodded. "Yes, exactly. It is your worst enemy. If you learn to control your fear, you will become a very strong fighter. This is why experienced fighters are the most dangerous. They have learned to control their fear, so they can use their techniques freely. They don't hold back.

"Most attacks happen when you are very close to your enemy. You can't get into a nice fighting stance or even put your hands

up to prepare for the fight. It happens very suddenly. The enemy will attack when he thinks you are not ready, when you do not expect it. He may push you first and then punch, or he may grab you and try to wrestle. You must practice to defend yourself even when you are standing or sitting close to your opponent, not always from a fighting posture."

I was trying to envision various self-defense situations as Chen continued. "You must be careful not to lose your balance," he said. "This is very important. If you lose your balance, you will be defeated very quickly. Learn to root yourself when you stand and when you sit. If you think your enemy may attack, step back with one foot you will not lose your balance if he pushes at you. Keep your breath low."

Chen stood up and motioned for me to do the same. As I got to my feet, Chen stepped up very close to me.

"When you are close, use your short weapons—your head, your shoulders, your elbows," he said, demonstrating a strike with each one. "Use your upper legs (thighs), your hips, your knees . . . your whole body is a weapon. Once you strike, you must overwhelm your enemy so he cannot recover. Don't let him make another attack. Control his arms so he cannot draw a weapon and once he is hurt, throw him down and finish him."

Chen relaxed and smiled. "You already know how to do these things. The main thing is to control your fear and act without hesitating. Now, Mei should have the food ready. You hungry?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Secrets

There is only one secret to becoming a Master... (practice)!

—Sherman Harrill, Eighth Dan Isshin-ryu, addressing seminar students in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1986

Tonight at the Chen house was a special night; *Sifu* was preparing the evening meal. I'd like to say that I admired his fine culinary abilities but the truth was far different. Chen dearly loved hot, spicy dishes and every once in a while he would get the urge to prepare a "special feast." Knowing that I wanted to learn as much as I could about China and its culture, he and his wife would often invite me to stay for dinner and to experience authentic Chinese fare. I had come to regard the Chen house as a second home and I fell in love with Mei's cooking. Unfortunately, my teacher's favorite dishes were far too spicy for my American palate and to this day I would swear that some of his dishes would take the enamel right off your teeth.

Chen regarded the "barbecue apron" as one of the funniest-looking American inventions he'd ever seen and he made it a point to wear one whenever he usurped Mei's position as chief

of the kitchen. Tonight was no different. As he busied himself cutting vegetables into small slices with his meat cleaver (I always wondered why he never used a paring knife), I asked a question which had been on my mind for some time. It seemed like a good time to ask, particularly as he was so relaxed and cheerful.

"*Sifu,*" I began, trying to decide exactly how to word my query, "I've heard that there are certain 'secret techniques' in kung-fu...."

Chen raised his eyebrows but didn't look up from his chopping. He knew what I was going to say, and I knew that he knew.

"And, uh," I stammered, "I just wondered...."

"If I would teach you these secret things," Chen finished the question for me with a smile.

Wiping his hands on his apron, he turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "There are really no secrets as you think of them," he said. "Just lots of practice."

He walked back to the counter and began tossing the sliced vegetables into a wok.

"Just the basics," he said without looking up. "Learning to master them is the biggest secret of all. You know, even in China everyone thinks there are great secrets; that one teacher knows this secret and that school knows that secret ... but people just pretend to have secrets so that everyone will want to learn from them."

"Huh." *I hadn't thought of that.*

"Yes," Chen continued as he added some of his special secret spice to the mix, "but the truth is that the basics themselves are the real secrets. People practice them for a little while and then

think, 'now I know this stuff, so I can learn the advanced and fancy things' but they are not really ready to learn more—and if they try it will come to nothing. You need a good foundation to build on. If you try to go too fast, you will get nowhere. Your foundation crumbles."

"But once the foundation is built, aren't there more advanced techniques?" I asked. "Aren't there techniques that are taught to only a few students?"

Chen giggled. "Yes, there are advanced things but they are not very secret. Most people never learn them because they never learn the basics well enough, and when they do learn them, they find out that it's just another way of using the basics."

Chen began adding slices of pork and more spices to the concoction in the wok. "My teacher, Master Zhang, is a good example," Chen said, referring to the venerable Master Zhang Zhaodong who was one of Cheng Tinghua's best-known *Baguazhang* students. "He used to, uh, what's the word, uh, protect people...."

"Like a bodyguard?" I asked.

"Yes, yes!" Chen responded. "Bodyguard. And he was always helping people, fighting against criminals. One time when he was very old, he got into a fight with some very bad men. *Pah, pah, pah!*" Chen shot his fists into the air several times. "He beat all of them. Everyone was saying, 'oh, he knows some real secret things. That's how he beat up all those guys.' But all he used were basic things. He did them so fast. He moved so perfectly that people did not really see what he did."

Chen hard hardly glanced up from his cooking and as he spoke,

he became more and more excited and his hands began moving faster and faster as he sliced meat at a dangerously fast pace. I could hear the pork sizzling as he tossed it into a large pan on the stove.

"The greatest secret is to learn exactly how to do the basics," he said. "Not just moving your hands and feet, really doing them. That's something that you cannot learn quickly and not everyone will learn it—most people don't want to keep doing the same thing every day. They give up and go look for someone else to teach them the 'secrets.' And you know, there are a lot of teachers who say that they will teach them these things—if they pay enough money." Chen grumped. "It's always money."

Curry. The whole house smells of curry.

Mei, who had been grooming her small flower garden in front of the house, opened the front door and waved one hand in front of her face. "Ooh," she exclaimed, and then shot out a question to *Sifu* in Chinese. I imagined it had to do with the strong odor. Chen laughed heartily and answered her in a calm manner, assuring her that everything was just fine.

"You see," Chen went on, "You know the secrets, but you don't know that you know them."

I raised my eyebrows. *Huh?*

"They are in the basics, in the sets [forms], even in the exercises. I [will] show you some of them but if I show you all of them, they won't mean as much," Chen said. "You need to look for them, find them yourself, and that only comes with a lot of practice."

I nodded and repeated the word "practice" to myself.

"Yes," Chen said. "And desire. You cannot be lazy. You cannot be too busy to practice. You cannot be afraid to sweat. You have to really want to learn and if you practice very hard, you will find the real secrets."

Mei placed a large bowl of rice on the table and smiled a knowing smile at me.

"Okay," Chen exclaimed. "Food is ready now. You hungry? This is my secret recipe!"

Oh, boy, I can hardly wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Forget It!

Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.

—B.F. Skinner

The signature training exercise of the art of *Baguazhang* is known as "walking the circle." The *Bagua* neophyte practices walking around the rim of a large circle but he isn't really walking in the customary manner. He must learn to walk in an entirely different manner—a special technique that requires extremely fine balance, timing, and great strength in the legs and waist. Lacking these qualities, he does everything wrong and quickly discovers that walking isn't nearly as easy as he'd always thought! Different styles and schools of *Bagua* utilize different forms of stepping, but none of them feel very natural to the beginner who quickly discovers the true meaning of having two left feet.

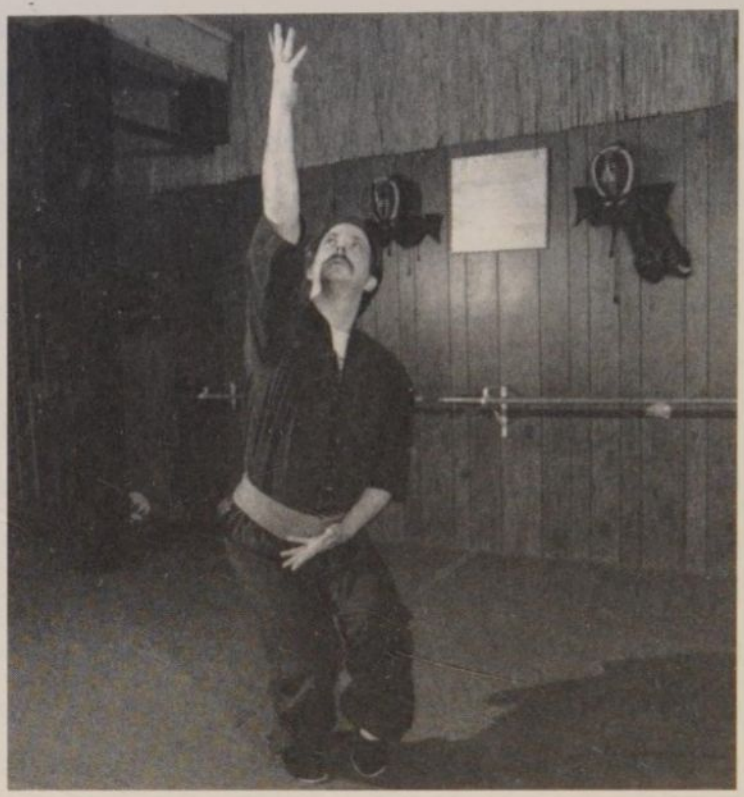
In the form of *Bagua* that I studied, the advancing leg is stretched out beyond the length of a normal step while balance is maintained on the rear leg. The sole of the advancing foot is placed on the ground all at once instead of coming down heel

first. When the rear foot is raised in preparation for the next step, one does not necessarily raise the heel first; the whole sole of the foot comes off the ground at once. One essentially walks flat-footed while keeping the knees bent and hips lowered. This is a terrible oversimplification of the technique, but it should serve to give an idea of the difficulties involved in learning to walk correctly.

The short forms of the art involve various turning and twisting movements that are practiced on the circle. These short forms are eventually linked together to create a single long set, which looks more like a bizarre form of Chinese calisthenics or dance than a lethal martial art. Unlike the straightforward fighting techniques used in most Oriental systems of pugilism, *Bagua* implements numerous evasive maneuvers and although it favors striking with the open hand it also utilizes the feet, legs, knees, elbows, shoulders, head, and even the buttocks as weapons.

Looking like a dragon weaving and winding its way through the clouds, the *Bagua* stylist seems to vanish and then reappear beside or even behind his opponent. When I first undertook the study of this enigmatic art, I could not imagine how an exercise such as walking the circle could possibly be applicable to real combat. *Sifu* Chen would watch me, nod his head, and mutter something to the effect that I should continue walking. Sometimes, I spent the entire class just walking the circle ... or trying to, and after some considerable time it began to feel more comfortable to me. I thought less and less about exactly how it was to be done; I just did it.

One afternoon as I was practicing the form known as *the dou-*



Baguazhang posture from the Double Change Palm

ble change palm, Chen strolled by and nodded his head in approval. My heart soared! It was a rare occasion when he actually nodded his head instead of picking apart my many errors.

"Keep practicing," he said, "And if you do it right, someday you will be able to forget it."

What? Forget it? After all this work? No way!

"Forget it?" I asked as I stopped suddenly. "But if I'm going to forget it, why do I have to practice it in the first place? How can I forget it if I practice it so much? I'll never forget it!"

Chen clucked. "If you don't forget it, you will never master it."

"How can I master something that I've forgotten?" I asked.

"If you will run upstairs and get me a glass of cold tea, I will tell you," Chen replied.

I assured him that I'd be right back and, bowing to the training hall, I scurried up the basement stairs and into the kitchen to fetch a glass of iced tea. When I returned, *Sifu* thanked me and took a long sip. He motioned for me to follow him out the back door and into his beautifully manicured backyard. Once outside, he stood motionless and looked at the neighboring houses.

"Did you have any trouble getting the tea?" he asked as he turned to look at me.

"No, why?"

"When you were only two years old, you would have," he said.

Where on earth is this going?

"When you were very young, you had trouble walking and going up stairs," Chen assured me. "All children do. And why is that? It is because they have not yet mastered how to walk. But you have been doing it for a long time now, hmm? You can do it without even thinking. You have actually forgotten how to do it."

"No," I countered. "If I'd forgotten how to walk, I couldn't walk."

Chen shook his head. "You're wrong. If you go around thinking about how to walk, how to take each step, you cannot do it so well. You have to practice walking so much that you don't think about it anymore. It's a natural part of you. You want to go from here to there," he said, pointing to the horizon. "So you just do it. You don't think about how, you just start walking."

"So I have to train until I don't have to think about how to punch anymore?" I asked.

"Exactly," Chen said. "All of it, the techniques, the sets [forms] . . . they become a part of you."

"But how can I master the forms if I forget them?"

"You don't forget them," Chen answered. "Your body remembers them, but you don't have to try to remember them with your mind. If I say 'do this set,' you will do it without thinking about it. It just happens, like walking."

"That would take a long, long time," I muttered.

"Don't think about how long it takes," Chen said sternly. "You can practice for twenty years and still not get it. You have to practice correctly. Yes, it will take some time, but don't worry about that. Just keep practicing and practicing . . . until you forget."

"But how can I teach others if I forget how to do all of this?" I asked.

"You will remember when you teach. You could teach people to walk, couldn't you? Of course you could, but when you walk out of the room, you forget about it. Same thing with martial arts."

I was mulling over what Chen had said when he interrupted me. "Now, go get some tea. Let's sit out here and learn how to forget."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Healing and Hurting

If you have learned to hurt but not how to heal,
you have only half an art.

—W.C. Chen

I arrived early at the Chen household this particular Saturday morning. Spring had arrived in full bloom; the trees were filling out in huge puffs of green, lawns were lush and sported a variety of bushes and flowers that dotted the landscapes like so many multicolored explosions. I was thankful that the white blanket of winter was a thing of the past. Having been raised in the warmer climes of Panama and New Mexico, I loathed winter but accepted it as a necessary evil, a part of the cycle of changes in *yin* and *yang* that govern nature. I rang the doorbell of the Chen house and Mei answered the door, smiling as always. I could not imagine her ever frowning or becoming angry; she seemed perpetually happy and her dark eyes sparkled from a zest for life that most people will never know.

She led me into the kitchen and invited me to sit at the small kitchen table. She was always fussing over me—whether I was

eating enough (I decided that if she'd ever had a child, it would have barely been able to waddle around the house), if I needed a heavier jacket because I had to watch out for my health, asking if I was getting all of my homework finished each night, and a hundred other things. Actually, I tended to neglect a lot of my homework but I wasn't about to tell her that; she'd probably force me to sit at the kitchen table and get it finished before letting me go to class.

Sifu Chen came walking into the kitchen carrying a dark brown leather bag that resembled a knapsack. He greeted me warmly and began unbuckling the straps that held the large pouch shut. Reaching inside, he extracted what looked like a black pencil box. As he opened the top, I saw a variety of thin, silvery needles. Each needle had a white handle that seemed to be formed of thin wire. The actual needles were extremely fine, just slightly thicker than a hair.

"Acupuncture needles," Chen said. "I must treat Mei this morning."

"But she looks fine, *Sifu,*" I said. I didn't want to see Mei suffer the terrible pain of having these instruments of torture thrust into her delicate flesh.

"She looks healthy," Chen replied. "But she will be sick within two or three days if I don't treat her today."

I looked over at Mei who was walking toward us. She sat down and placed a package of cotton balls and a bottle of rubbing alcohol on the table in front of her husband. She then rolled up the sleeves of her blouse until they were above her elbows and laid both of her forearms on the table.

"It's fine," she assured me. "This is very common treatment in China. It doesn't hurt."

Chen stood up and opened a cabinet above the sink. Inside were jars of different sizes and they appeared to contain various plants. He removed what looked like dried, crushed leaves from one jar and placed them on a paper towel. He began opening other jars and added to the concoction on the counter, building up a small mound of mulch.

"Chinese medicine," he said. "I will make a tea for her. You want some, too?"

Mei smiled. "Yes, I think he does."

Great. I'll probably barf it up all over the table, too!

Chen had put some water in a small pot on the stove. He smiled. "It's very good for you. And tasty!"

I'll bet! Sounds like a TV commercial for breakfast cereal.

He sat back down at the table and placed the first three fingers of his right hand on the radial pulse of Mei's left wrist.

"Have to be very quiet now," Mei whispered.

What's this? She obviously has a pulse. If she didn't, she'd be lying on the floor!

But Chen apparently wanted to make absolutely certain that his wife did indeed have a pulse because he kept feeling the same pulse for at least five or ten minutes. Then he checked the pulse on the other wrist.

Well, if she has a pulse on one side, she'll darn well have one on the other side!

Not to be hurried, Chen felt the pulse of her right wrist for several minutes. Then he felt her left pulse again for several

minutes before switching back to her right pulse. Apparently satisfied that her heart was really beating, he asked her to stick out her tongue. She obliged and Chen carefully examined her entire tongue, even the sides of it.

What's this? A sore throat?

Chen grunted, walked over to the stove where the water was beginning to boil and turned off the heat. He poured the water into a large bowl before dropping the dried leaves and twigs into it. After poking around in his strange-smelling brew, he returned to the table. Removing a needle from the box, he held it in his right hand and placed his forefinger on Mei's left forearm. Using his thumb and forefinger to press lightly on the flesh, he quickly inserted the needle and began gently rotating it between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. I was transfixed. The needle must have penetrated at least half an inch but Mei never flinched.

Mei grinned at me. "It's fine. No pain. You want to try?"

My eyes bulged. *No way.*

"Give me your arm," Chen commanded.

I looked at him defiantly.

"I show you," he said. "Please, give me your arm."

Reluctantly, I extended by left arm toward him.

Well, if it messes up my left arm for a couple of days, at least I'll be able to use my right.

Chen performed the same technique on my arm. I felt the tip of the needle pressing down onto my skin, and then—nothing. No pain at all. I watched in fascination as he inserted the needle to a depth of almost half an inch.

"Huh. That's weird. It didn't really hurt."

"No," Chen said. "Usually, the needles do not hurt. Some points are painful, but most of them are not."

He quickly removed the needle and wiped the point where it had been inserted with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball. Mei flashed me a big smile and *Sifu* turned back to her and began inserting needles into points on her arms, her lower legs, and even on her face. She never flinched or complained of any discomfort at all. When *Sifu* had finished inserting needles, he stood and walked over to the counter where the herbal tea was steeping. He poured two cups of the mixture, being careful not to let too many shards of the herbs slip into the cups. He returned to the table and placed one cup in front of Mei and then bent over and kissed her on the forehead. She blushed instantly.

Sifu then placed the other cup of medicinal tea in front of me. "It should be cool enough to drink now," he said.

The stuff smelled . . . interesting. I took a sip.

Not bad at all.

"This medicine is a good tonic for your whole body," Chen explained. "Not like your medicine in America. It's not a drug. It's made from natural plants and other things."

"Were you a doctor, *Sifu?*" I asked.

Chen laughed. "No, no. You see, learning a healing art used to be a part of martial arts training back when I was young."

"And that's how you learned this stuff?"

"Yes," Chen replied. "My *Sil-Lum* teacher taught me most of

"Healing and hurting are two sides of the same coin," Chen continued, taking a sip of Mei's tea. "If you learn martial arts, you must also learn how to heal. Otherwise, you have only half an art."

Mei took a large drink of her medicinal brew and looked at me. "People appreciate healing more than hurting," she said softly. "In your life you will have more opportunities to help heal people than hurt them."

Chen nodded approvingly at his wife's proverbial wisdom. "True," he said. "In traditional Chinese medicine, there are different kinds of healing techniques. There is acupuncture," he said, nodding toward the needles in Mei's arm. "And learning to make medicines from plants and other things."

What "other things"?

"There is bone setting, what we call *tuina* [massage therapy], and *chigong*," Chen said. "In the villages in China, the local martial arts teacher had to know how to heal his students if they got hurt or sick. The people knew that he could help them, too. They would go to him when they were sick or injured. He became like a doctor in the village, you see. Some of the healing techniques and medicines were taught only to certain family members or within a certain martial arts school, and many of them are still very secret. Even now, in larger cities the people know that a martial arts teacher has learned how to heal with the 'old ways.' Many times, when people get sick they will find a martial arts teacher and ask for help."

"And you still teach kung-fu the old way?" I asked. "You'll teach us how to heal?"

Chen smiled. "I will teach you what I know, what I have found that works. Then someday you will help people when they get sick or hurt. Teach your students the same things. This way the art will remain whole ... and the world will be a better place."

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Art of Pain

If it hurts, you will remember it.

—W.C. Chen

The art of *Chin Na* dates back at least as far as the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and includes a variety of techniques ranging from joint locks and twists to chokes, holds, and special methods of seizing certain vital points. The word *chin* means "to lock" and *na* translates roughly as "seize." Virtually all forms of kung-fu utilize a number of *chin na* techniques which can be effectively applied to render an opponent incapable of further aggression. Indeed, some techniques can be used to maim or even kill an opponent.

Many *Chin Na* techniques closely resemble or are identical to various techniques used in Japanese *jujutsu* and even modern *aikido*. This is not due to simple coincidence; various and sundry *Chin Na* techniques were learned by ancient Japanese warriors who subsequently incorporated them into their forms of unarmed combat.

Sifu Chen addressed his class of six wide-eyed pupils, of which I was one. "*Chin Na* is very difficult to use unless you strike the enemy first," he said. "Weaken him, produce some pain, then use your technique. Even so, it is difficult and requires a high level of skill. To successfully apply *Chin Na* in a real fight, your skill must be at least three times greater than that of your enemy."

"Why is it necessary to learn it, *Sifu?*" I asked. "Why would we . . ."

"*Chin Na* is used to control your enemy," Chen cut me off. "Sometimes you can use it to help throw him down. It is used to stop him from making any more attacks. Once the technique is in place, he is helpless. He cannot defend himself." Chen pointed at me and motioned for me to approach him.

Me and my big mouth.

"You attack me . . . any way you want," he said.

I debated about whether to launch a strike or simply try to grab him. I decided to grab the front of his shirt with my left hand and punch with my right. As soon as my punch started to move Chen pivoted to his left and thrust his left arm against the inside of my right arm, smothering the punch. At the same time, he struck my left flank with the extended knuckle of his right fist. I gasped in pain. Chen immediately seized my left hand with his left hand, turning it so that the ulnar side of my hand was upward. His right fingers hooked into the crook of my left arm, pulling the elbow outward and bending it. I screamed as a searing, white-hot bolt of electricity shot through my entire arm and I literally dove to the floor in a vain attempt to escape the pain.

"You see?" he said as he released his vise-like grip. "You cannot fight, huh?"

I shook my head as I gently rubbed my insulted wrist. *I think I saw God!*

"You will remember this technique. Pain helps you remember. It is a wonderful teacher," he chuckled, and then turned to another student. "Okay, your turn. You attack, please."The young man grabbed Chen's collar with both hands. Chen's left hand shot out and he inserted his thumb into his opponent's left armpit. Using his fingers as a sort of claw, he dropped his elbow and tightened his grip. The student screamed in agony, instantly releasing his grip and dropping to his knees. Chen released his grip but the hapless victim stayed down, gingerly rubbing his left pectoral muscle.

"He was helpless," Chen explained. "Remember that *Chin Na* is not just joint-twisting. It is also seizing certain points. Very painful. You can tear muscles and even rip tendons from the bone. When my enemy falls down, I can finish him easily."

No kidding!

So began my introduction to the various techniques of *Chin Na*. *Sifu* Chen was highly skilled in their application and alluded to having had to apply them several times when he had worked in the intelligence field in Taiwan. Unfortunately, he declined to provide any details of these encounters. He was always very tight-lipped when it came to discussing anything having to do with his work. I felt sorry for the poor unfortunates who had been on the business end of his techniques.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Teacher

Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.

—Jacques Barzun

My teacher was convinced that teaching was the noblest profession. He believed that it was a vocation to be undertaken only with the utmost responsibility and sincerity and just as the baton of knowledge and tradition had been handed down to him by his teachers, he felt duty-bound to pass it on to his own students.

It was after a lengthy and very strenuous training session that *Sifu* approached me and put his arm around my shoulders. Because it was a Saturday, none of my classmates were present. Otherwise, *Sifu* would never have dared show such an overt gesture of affection for me—not because it would have necessarily embarrassed him, but because it would have undoubtedly made the other students more than a little jealous of me.

"You know," Chen began, "Someday you will be a teacher. Do you know what that means?"

"I think so," I answered.

Chen was ready to answer his own question, regardless of my response. "No," he said. "I don't think you really understand. A teacher does more than just give out information. He is a guide and someone you try to copy. He brings about change in the hearts of his students."

Chen plopped down on the basement stairs and motioned for me to join him. I sat down carefully, stifling a moan.

"Students imitate their teachers," Chen said, "So the teacher must act as he would have his students act. If you want to know the worth of a teacher, look at his students. They demonstrate what he is really like on the inside."

Huh. My algebra teacher's professor must have been a real ass.

"And a teacher is a guide," Chen continued. "He must guide his students along the paths of martial arts and life. The way of martial arts is not easy. The teacher must be able to help his students over the rough spots. His students depend on him and they trust him. He must never betray that trust. He must teach them as best he can.

"You see, the student's life is in the hands of his teacher. If the teacher doesn't teach correctly, the student may hurt himself. He may think that he is strong when he is really not very strong at all."

"But what if the student doesn't learn?" I asked. "What if the teacher is good but the student doesn't try?"

Chen nodded. "That is always a possibility but if that is the case, the student will know that he has failed, not the teacher.

Most of all, a teacher causes a student to change . . . in his heart," Chen tapped his chest.

"A catalyst?" I wondered aloud.

"He teaches students how to learn," Chen said. "Sometimes this is done without the student even knowing about it. This is the best kind of teacher.

"Teaching is one of the most honorable professions. Without it, where would the human race be?"

They'd never know anything about algebra and that'd probably be a good thing.

"Teaching is a great responsibility," Chen said. "A teacher must do his best and always teach the truth. He must be true to himself and to his students. He must really care about his students. What could be worse than a teacher who doesn't care?"

Chen smiled and I considered his words, especially about caring for students. He was a demanding taskmaster, but my classmates and I knew that it was only because he really cared.

"You can teach only those who are really serious," Chen said. "Those who will not try cannot be helped. Sometimes they want you to do everything for them, but you cannot. They have to do the work. If you give someone a bit of advice and they don't take it, what good have you done? This person does not really want your advice; he wants you to solve his problems for him and you cannot do that. He is not listening to you. Maybe he doesn't believe you when you tell him the truth, so you cannot help him. You have to wait until he is ready."

Chen stood up and waited for me to do the same before he began slowly walking up the stairs. "What you teach others will

affect them for the rest of their lives," he said. "This is why teachers must take their jobs very seriously. Someday you will teach. I think you will be a good teacher because you have a good teacher."

Sifu stopped, placed one arm around my shoulders and smiled broadly. "And if you really want to learn, teach."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Uniform

How anybody dresses is indicative of his self-concept. If students are dirty and ragged, it indicates they are not interested in tidying up their intellects, either.

—S.I. Hayakawa, former president of San Francisco State College, *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*

In Chinese martial arts, there is no such thing as a standardized practice uniform. Since ancient times, practitioners of the myriad forms of kung-fu have simply trained in their street clothes. The only exception to this rule is that of *shuai-jiao* [Chinese grappling and great-grandfather of *jujutsu*], which requires its devotees to wear heavy cotton jackets because the violent tugging and jostling would quickly shred ordinary lightweight clothing. The modern *karategi* [karate uniform] was originally adopted from the training attire worn by judo enthusiasts. Adherents of *aikido*, *kendo*, and a host of other Japanese martial arts also utilize special training uniforms but the Chinese martial arts have steadfastly resisted any and all efforts to implement such forms of standardization.

When I studied under Master Chen, my classmates were clad in sweatpants, T-shirts, and soft-soled shoes. I dressed similarly, wearing the trousers of my *karategi* in lieu of sweats. Following class one evening, I asked my teacher why Chinese martial arts did not utilize any sort of standardized uniform.

"Since ancient times," Chen began, "People practiced martial arts outside. There were very few places where people would practice inside a building. If the weather was cold or hot they still practiced outside, so they just wore their everyday clothes."

I walked into the small utility room where the brooms were stored, selected one, and began sweeping. "I guess that explains why we wear shoes, too," I muttered.

"Yes," Chen replied. "In China they wear shoes because they practice outside and the ground might be rough or wet."

I paused and looked over at my teacher. "But don't their clothes get torn when they practice?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be better if they wore some kind of uniform that was more durable?"

Chen nodded. "Probably. Maybe someday they will have some kind of uniform but Chinese people are very slow to change. I know that in the karate you practice they wear different colored belts, and this is one of the reasons they all wear the same uniform. In China, there are no colored belts like that, no white belts or black belts, so they have never felt the need for a uniform."

"Do you think they'll ever use a belt-ranking system like karate?" I asked. "Then it'd be easier to tell who's who."

"No need," Chen replied. "Remember that many styles of kung-fu were taught only to family members. There was no need

to wear colored belts because everyone knew who everyone else was."

Huh. I hadn't thought of that.

Chen stopped momentarily and furrowed his brow as he thought aloud. "Maybe if kung-fu becomes very popular someday... like karate, it would be a good idea to have colored belts and uniforms."

I continued sweeping the floor as I spoke. "Yes, because it will spread out beyond the family," I said. "And anyway, I think it's a good idea to give the students something to work for."

Chen listened carefully and considered what I said. He nodded his head as I continued. "I think wearing a special uniform actually affects the student's attitude toward training," I said. "I mean, if we're just wearing street clothes we don't feel special but if we're wearing a uniform of some kind, we do. There's a kind of 'now I'm really doing it' sort of feeling."

Chen indicated his understanding with a grunt.

"And anyway," I said, "Even Chinese street clothes have buttons and zippers, things which can cause injuries in practice. Besides, no one wants to get their nice clothes all torn up."

Chen frowned as he replied. "What you say is true but you have to remember that in China, people usually practice outside. There is no place to change clothes. If it is cold, they wear coats. It is different in Japan where they train in special buildings. Even here in America, you practice inside buildings ... like this basement, you see? So you don't have to worry so much about the weather and you can change clothes easily. Maybe someday if our [Chinese] martial arts become popular, people will practice in

special schools. If that ever happens, then they should wear a practice uniform of some kind."

Many years have passed since the day I sat beside my teacher and discussed the idea of uniforms and belt ranks. Leaders in the Chinese martial arts community (especially in the U.S.) have tossed various ideas back and forth for decades, and at the time of this writing there is still no standardized kung-fu uniform or ranking structure. Maybe someday.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Commence!

What a teacher doesn't say . . . is a telling part of what a student hears.

—Maurice Natanson, professor of philosophy,
Yale University

I had stayed after class so that my *sifu* could critique my *Xingyichuan* form. The basement of his home that served as our training hall was empty except for the two of us. With his arms folded across his chest, Master Chen sat on his "throne," an old wooden chair from which he would often observe class. I walked into the middle of the floor and stood with my feet together while I concentrated on relaxing my entire body. I inhaled deeply and as I exhaled I imagined all of the tensions of the day pouring out of my body through the soles of my feet.

When I felt adequately relaxed, I began the form with a short series of preparatory movements that Chen called *commencement*. I turned forty-five degrees to the right and raised my arms to the sides with the palms turned upward. Folding my elbows and turning my palms down, I brought my hands level with my

eyebrows and pressed them down in front of my lower abdomen as I bent my knees and exhaled. Lightly rolling my hands into fists, I brought them to the familiar palm-up positions just above my hips.

Just as I began to execute the first actual posture of the form, Chen shook his head and called out to me, "Stop! Begin again."

Did I make a mistake? If I did, I sure didn't notice it. Oh, well.

I began again, being especially mindful of my movements but just as I completed the *commencement,* Chen stopped me. "No," he said sternly. "Do it again."

I darned well know I didn't forget anything. Okay, maybe it's my breathing.

I stood quietly and relaxed for a few seconds before starting anew. This time, I didn't even finish the opening of the set before Chen told me to stop. I was confused and frustrated. Chen motioned for me to approach him.

"The beginning of your set is wrong," he said. "The movements are okay, but your mind and heart are all wrong."

My mind and heart? What on earth?

"You are thinking about what comes after the beginning, of what movement comes next. Your *yi* [mind, intention] is all wrong. You must focus on what you are doing in each moment. Don't let your mind jump ahead of you!"

"I don't want to make any mistakes, *Sifu,*" I replied. "So I kind of check myself before each movement."

Chen frowned. "I know. Stop doing that. It scatters your *chi* [intrinsic energy] and makes your movements unstable."

Chen stood up and walked out onto the training floor. Stand-

ing straight but without rigidity, he demonstrated the beginning of the form, the first posture known as *quiet standing* or *wuji.*

"This is actually the first movement of the set," Chen explained as he stood motionless. "It is the posture of life, movement without movement. The real movement is inside. You body is quiet and relaxed. Your mind is aware but not thinking. If you begin to think of what you should be thinking or doing, you move your *yi* and your *chi* scatters."

"So I just stand there," I muttered. "I don't really do anything."

Chen nodded. "Yes, exactly! You just are, you see? You just exist."

I guess so. This'd be tough to do if I didn't exist.

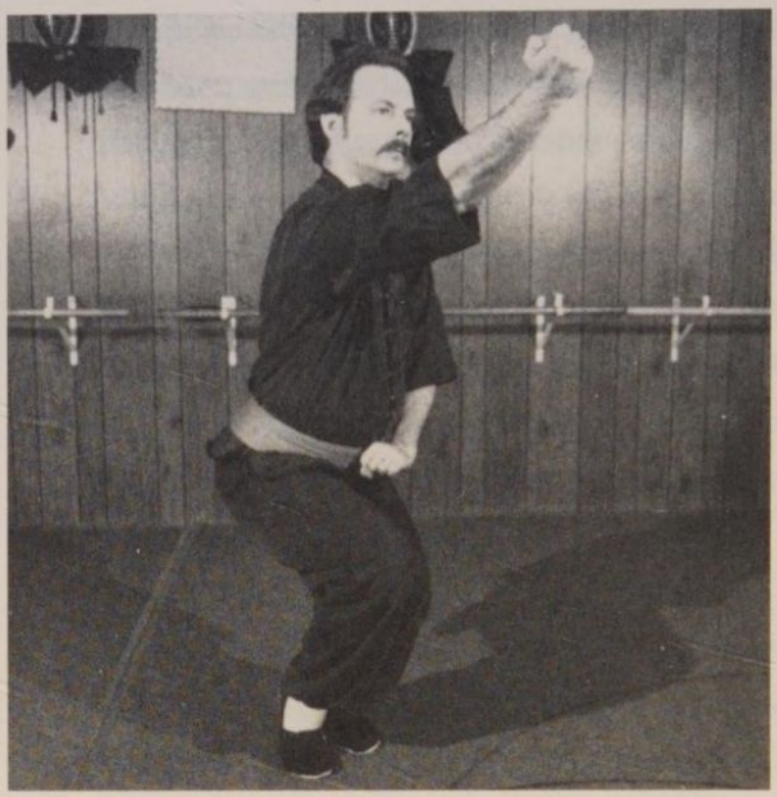
"When you gather your *chi* to your *dantien* [the area of the lower abdomen]," Chen said, "You begin to move. Inhale and draw it in, then exhale and bring it down [to the lower belly]. Fill yourself. Don't worry about what movement comes next; just gather your *chi* and root your legs to the ground so that you stand like a tree."

Stand like a tree.

"And a tree is strong because of its roots," Chen said. "It drinks from its roots and that gives it strength. You also drink from your root, but your root draws in *chi* instead of water."

Huh. I never looked at it that way.

Chen demonstrated the movements of *commencement* and ended by bending his knees and drawing his fists quickly to his hips. Looking straight ahead, his eyes opened fully like those of a tiger just before it attacks its prey. His body seemed relaxed, but I wouldn't have wanted to be standing in front of those eyes!



Xingyichuan posture of "Zhuanchuan" from the Swallow Shape Form

Although I was standing off to one side and he wasn't looking at me, I could feel his eyes, his spirit. Surely his countenance would drain the strength of any aggressor who dared consider attacking him. And then all at once, he relaxed and smiled at me.

"And that is the ending of the *commencement,*" Chen explained. "You are aware of the enemy and ready to move, to fight. It takes some practice to really feel it. Your heart and *chi* must extend through your eyes and into your enemy. If he is frightened, then the fight is over. He is already defeated."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Discipline

The surest test of discipline is its absence.

—Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, recalling her days as a New Jersey schoolteacher, *The Story of My Childhood*

By the time the last of my classmates arrived for class, I was pretty well stretched out . . . or so I thought. I usually arrived at my teacher's home at least fifteen minutes early so that I'd have plenty of time to warm up prior to training. After a few more minutes of stretching, I stood up and noticed that I was the only student who was not engaged in conversation. The other five members of my class were all standing around, casually chatting. None of us had noticed that *Sifu* Chen was quietly observing us from a far corner of his basement where he typically stretched out before class. As I began to slowly walk through a basic form, Chen sauntered over and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Stretch," he said. "You need to stretch more."

"Yes, sir," I answered as I began leaning left and right, loosening my waist.

One side of Chen's mouth drew back in what looked like a snarl. "You call that stretching?" he quipped.

Well, yeah.

The room was suddenly silent and my classmates looked over at their teacher.

"Why are you not getting ready for class?" Chen asked the group. "You should be stretching, warming up."

The group generally agreed that they were warmed up and that they'd already stretched out. I could see a spark light up behind Chen's eyes.

Uh-oh. Wrong answer.

Chen stepped forward with one foot and arched his ankle back so that only the back of his heel was touching the floor. Keeping his knee straight, he bent over and grasped his foot with both hands as he brought his chin to his toes.

Holy cow! I didn't know human beings could even do that.

Chen stood up and glared at all of us. "Can you do that?" he asked.

Nobody said a word. Chen lifted his right foot and grasped it with his right hand. Pulling back and upward with his hand, he straightened his leg to the side and lifted his foot almost directly above his shoulder.

"How about this?" he said.

The room remained silent and Chen lowered his leg and foot. We all knew we were about to get a good chewing out.

"My teacher would not show you anything until you could touch your elbow to your toes," Chen said quietly. "You are lucky that I am not so strict."

It was clear that we were all ashamed. No one could look *Sifu* in the eyes. We stood quietly, not knowing what to say or do.

"I used to arrive for class at least one hour early," Chen said. "I would stretch for one hour every day before class because I wanted to learn!"

An hour? That'd kill any ordinary person!

"Class started at 6:00 a.m.," Chen continued.

So you were there at FIVE IN THE MORNING?

"If we forgot a movement in one of our sets, our teacher would not show it to us again," Chen said. "He expected us to practice on our own. If we forgot something, we would have to learn it from one of our older classmates. If we could not keep up with the class, we would be told to leave. If we got hurt, we were expected to be in class the next day. The training was very hard."

I looked over at my older classmates. They kept their eyes lowered. The sound of Mei puttering around upstairs was the only audible sound.

"Today, people don't like to train so hard," Chen said calmly. "Everyone has other things to do. There are so many distractions—televisions, trying to make more money, trying to buy nice cars . . . too many distractions. No one has time for training anymore but they always have lots of excuses. They have time for movies, for golf, for watching television . . . but no time for training, huh?"

I wish Mei would come down here and bring him some tea or something. He's gonna kill us all in class tonight!

Chen wagged his finger at us. "If you want to learn real martial arts, you have to train hard. You have to train every day, even

when you don't have class here. You can't just come here and train three days each week. You have to practice every day! You must push yourself. You cannot say, 'I am too tired today, so I won't practice.' You must discipline yourself. If you are tired, you must make yourself practice anyway! Without discipline, you cannot learn martial arts.

"You get sore in practice, huh? Your legs hurt, your arms hurt. You want to rest, sit down, and have something to drink but you know that you must not do these things; not just because I would stop you, but because it would break your discipline."

We all nodded silently.

"But you must have more discipline," Chen said sternly. "You must keep your discipline all the time, not just in class. Without it, you will never go very far, not in martial arts, not in life. A life of martial arts is a life of discipline and you must practice to discipline yourselves. Don't expect me or anyone else to do it for you! Your life is your responsibility. Now, let's begin practice."

I shuddered. This was going to be a long class.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Meaning of Courage

Courage is resistance to fear,
mastery of fear—not absence of fear.

—Mark Twain

Following a moderate training session, it was time for freestyle sparring. I dreaded this part of class; my classmates weren't particularly endeared to the idea of having a young American in class and whenever they got the chance, they'd "accidentally" land a blow a bit too forcefully. They hoped that I'd eventually throw up my hands and quit but I was determined to stay, regardless of how much it hurt. They were all older and much stronger than me and whenever I squared off against one of them in sparring practice, I knew I wasn't going to walk away unscathed.

Sifu Chen had divided the six of us into three pairs. My partner would be Jim Lum, a wiry fellow who'd been training with Chen for about three years. We stood about six feet apart, facing each other. Lum's eyes revealed nothing. His face was absolutely blank. I figured that was a bad sign because if he

intended to engage in a friendly and instructive bout, he'd smile, wouldn't he?

"Please," Chen said calmly. "Get ready."

I brought my hands up and adopted the familiar fighting preparation posture that Chen had taught me many months earlier. Lum coolly brought his hands up and watched me. I shifted around carefully, trying to make sure that there were no openings in my stance. I jockeyed for position but Lum's physical and mental attitude left no openings into which I could attack.

Suddenly, my opponent inadvertently lowered his leading arm. It wasn't much but it might be enough for me to drive in with an upper-level attack. I began to shift forward but something stopped me. I just couldn't bring myself to even try to attack. My gut was in a knot and my heart raced. My body wanted to move in, to launch a powerful thrust or a quick backfist strike at Lum's head, but something in my mind held me back. Lum casually wiped his hand on his pant leg and then raised it back up to the on-guard position. Chen walked over and motioned for Lum to relax before turning to me.

"Why didn't you attack?" he asked.

"I just couldn't," I replied. "I . . ."

"You were afraid, weren't you?" Chen said.

Well, yeah.

"You must learn to overcome your fear," Chen declared. "It is the most dangerous enemy there is. Even if you have a very strong punch, it is worthless if you are afraid to use it."

Ashamed of myself, I lowered my eyes. *I was afraid! I chickened out.*

Chen told me that he'd discuss this issue with me later and suggested that I sit and watch the other students for a while. For the remainder of class, I felt as though I had let my teacher down. He'd spent so much time working with me, helping me improve my techniques, correcting my forms ... but for what? If I didn't have the guts to apply that knowledge, he'd just wasted his time.

When class was over and my classmates had departed, Chen invited me to sit down and have a cup of tea before I headed home. I sat at the kitchen table while Chen heated some water on the stove. Mei, who had been sitting on the couch in the living room watching television, noticed that something was wrong and walked into the kitchen. She immediately walked over to the stove and nudged *Sifu* away, indicating with a shake of her head that she would take care of the tea and that he should sit down with me. Chen pulled his chair away from the table and sat down.

"You look very bad," Chen said softly.

"I feel very bad, *Sifu*," I answered. "I just feel like I've let you down, like you've just wasted your time with me. I'm ashamed that I was afraid. I shouldn't have felt like that. I should've done something...."

Chen smiled. "There is nothing wrong with being afraid," he said.

"Even a broken nose wouldn't feel this bad," I replied.

A large grin spread over Chen's face. "No, it would feel much worse. You have so much nose to break; it would be a lot of pain!"

Mei giggled and then caught herself and put one hand over her mouth. I couldn't help chuckling myself. Chen stifled a laugh and took a few seconds to calm himself before going on.

"Everyone feels afraid sometimes," Chen said. "I have been very afraid many times!"

I raised my eyebrows.

"When there is danger, feeling afraid is really a good thing," Chen assured me. "If you are never afraid, you will probably not live very long. You will do something foolish."

Huh. I never thought of that. Well, I guess I'll live to be a hundred.

"During the war," Chen continued, "I was afraid almost all the time. Your father, he fought in the war?"

"He fought in the Philippines," I said.

Chen nodded. "He is a very brave man."

"He won the Bronze Star and the Silver Star, I think," I said quietly. "And a couple of Purple Hearts. He was wounded twice."

Chen's eyes sparkled. "So he is very brave. But you know, he was also very afraid. I know how that is."

I raised my eyebrows questioningly.

"He was afraid just like I was," Chen said. "All soldiers in battle are afraid, ... but a good soldier goes ahead anyway. He does what he knows he has to do. That is real courage."

Mei placed two cups of warm tea on the table and I waited for my teacher to take a sip before I lifted my cup. Mei pulled out a chair and sat down beside me, smiling.

"You were afraid when you first came to our house," she said. "But you came anyway. Many young people would not do that, you know. That was a brave thing."

She's just trying to make me feel better.

"I was just determined to learn," I said.

"Yes," Chen chimed in. "And so you did something which you were afraid to do, you see? And you practice very hard, even when it hurts. You know that it will hurt, but you do it anyway."

Well, yeah.

"When you face an opponent in a fight, you know that he will try to hurt you," Chen said. "So you are afraid and that's okay. But you must concentrate on defeating him, don't worry about yourself. If you think about yourself, you are already beaten. You do what must be done, no matter what happens to you. If you walk through the jungle and see a tiger, you are afraid . . . but so is the tiger! Tigers are very afraid of people, you know. But if you attack him, he will kill you! You see?"

Okay . . . now I'm starting to understand.

"When you practice fighting with the other students, you must be like a tiger," Chen said. "Then they will be afraid of you. They will know that they cannot just beat you up and walk away. They will know that you will strike back . . . even if you are afraid and then they will stop trying to frighten you all the time."

Mei patted my hand. "Maybe we will call you 'little tiger.'"

"Yeah," I replied. "The little tiger with a big nose!"

Mei squealed with laughter and Chen nodded and chuckled. "Now finish your tea, big nose."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Custom Fit

A hunter who chases two rabbits will come home empty-handed.

—Japanese proverb

To acquire and maintain a given level of skill within any particular athletic activity one must regularly practice certain exercises which strengthen and condition different parts of the body and mind. Some exercises develop special kinds of strength while others are intended to increase flexibility, speed, reflexes, balance, and so on. This is especially true of the various martial arts. Many years ago I was provided with a very memorable lesson in this regard.

My classmates were practicing a very unique and rare form of Chinese boxing known as *Baguazhang* [eight trigrams palm]. The fundamental exercise of this enigmatic form of pugilism involves walking around the rim of a large circle. This is not to say that one "walks the circle" much as one would normally walk down the street. On the contrary, this form of "walking" involves special stances and forms of footwork that are anything

but natural. Although it appears to be easy enough to do, walking the circle is extremely difficult and requires the development of special forms of strength and flexibility.

Although I was supposed to be practicing my fundamental *Xingyichuan* postures in one corner of the basement, I was watching the *Bagua* class out of the corner of my eye. *Sifu* Chen had instructed my classmates to begin walking the circle and after they had warmed up for a couple of minutes, he told them to practice the *chicken-leg walk*. He demonstrated the technique for them. As he advanced one foot along the perimeter of the circle, he would bring his rear foot up beside his supporting knee. He would then slowly extend the rear leg with the toes pointed down. His supporting leg was well bent and his waist was turned so that he faced the center of the circle.

Standing like a statue, Chen instructed the group. "Stand like this and balance on one foot. Stretch out one leg but don't wobble. Keep your breathing low and relax! If you get stiff you will lose your balance. . . ."

He remained standing on one foot while he discussed some of the finer points of the exercise. He resembled a small tree; absolutely rooted to the floor and completely stable. He didn't wobble even slightly. When he'd finished his short lecture, he stood up and told the group to begin practicing the exercise. He stood off to one side with his hands on his hips, carefully scrutinizing their movements. They were to balance themselves on one leg while extending the other leg out in front of them until Chen clapped his hands, signaling them to take another step and stand on the opposite leg. This doesn't sound especially difficult

to do but consider that the supporting leg had to remain well bent with the waist turned inwards toward the center of the circle. Within a few seconds, the quadriceps muscle of the supporting leg begins to burn with a white-hot pain and the hips begin to cramp. After a half-minute or so, the neophyte *Bagua* practitioner is in absolute agony and after sixty seconds or so he will believe that he can see the very gates of hell.

Chen glanced over and caught me stealing a glance at the group. I snapped my head back around and concentrated on practicing my basic postures.

Oops!

I noticed that my classmate who I had nicknamed "Mr. Muscles" seemed to be experiencing a great deal of difficulty . . . and pain. A weightlifter, he prided himself on his great strength and enviable physique. However, his strength didn't seem to be of much help with this particular exercise. He grimaced in pain and sweat gushed down his face, soaking his T-shirt as he strained to maintain his balance.

"James, are you okay?" Chen asked as he adjusted his student's waist.

The young man nodded. "Yes, *Sifu*," he lied. "I'm fine."

Chen grunted and continued to meander through the group, making small corrections in the postures of his pupils. James finally collapsed to the floor. Chen looked over at him casually. James stood up and resumed the one-legged stance, but he wasn't able to hold it for more than a few seconds. He dropped again. Chen walked over to him and helped his student stand up, instructing him to try it again. James had no sooner extended

one leg than he went down a third time and his face flushed with frustration and embarrassment. Chen motioned for the group to gather round him. He looked over at me and cocked his head to indicate that I should join the party. I walked over and stood beside Jolly, trying not to stare at James who was busily massaging one leg.

Chen addressed the group. "If you want to be good in martial arts, you must practice every day. Your body must be developed for the style that you are learning, you see?"

Chen looked at me. "Pete," he said, calling me by my nickname, "you play a guitar?"

"Yes," I answered. I wasn't very good, but I could play a few melodies. I prayed silently that he wasn't going to whip out a guitar and ask me to play anything....

He looked at another student named Wang. "And you play piano, don't you?"

Wang nodded. "Yes, *Sifu.*"

"Do the piano and guitar sound alike?" he asked.

"No," we all replied. "Not at all."

Okay, so where are we going with this?

"Why? They both have strings, don't they?" Chen argued.

"Well, they're tuned differently," I answered. "And they use different strings made out of different material, and they're different lengths...."

"Ah!" Chen said. "Tuned different. So they sound different, you see? A piano can never sound like a guitar, no matter how hard you try. A *pipa* [a peculiar Chinese musical instrument] can never sound like a guitar either. It is a matter of tuning. Your

body acts the same way. If you want to learn to play a guitar, you must learn how to tune it correctly. You do not try to tune it like a *pipa*. If you did, the sound would be terrible and the strings might break."

Chen looked down at his fallen student. "James, you are trying to become a guitar," he said. "But you tune your body to be a piano."

James looked up at his teacher, his eyebrows raised questioningly.

"You must decide which one you want to be," Chen said. "You cannot be both at the same time."

Chen looked up at all of us. "Even if you are strong like James," he began, "lifting big weights and all those things, ... that is not exactly the kind of strength you need for some martial arts. If you tune your muscles to do one kind of exercise, they will have trouble doing something different. If I practice running long distances, I may not be able to play football very well. If I want to be good at football I should practice football exercises, not running races."

"But *Sifu*," I said, "football players have to be able to run very fast and they practice running a lot."

Chen shook his head. "Not the same. If you practice to run long distances, do you learn how to throw a ball? No. Do you build very strong arms and chest? No. Football players never have to run a mile without stopping. They must be able to run very fast for short distances."

I nodded my understanding.

"So, what if you want to be good at *Xingyi?*" Chen asked.

"Should you do the exercises used for football? Of course not! Why? Because you would tune your body for football instead of *Xingyi*. I cannot run as fast as a football player, but a football player cannot stand in the *ma* [horse-riding stance] for more than a few seconds. I can kick and punch faster than he can, too. He can throw a football much farther than I can but I strengthen my weapons on the striking post outside. We are both strong but our bodies are tuned differently. I don't need to be able to throw a football and he doesn't need to be able to knock someone down in one punch."

James stood up slowly and gently shook his legs. "*Sifu,*" he said, "can't we train for two things at the same time?"

The edges of Chen's mouth turned down slightly as he answered the question we'd all wanted to ask. "It's very difficult. Your body can become confused. When you begin a movement it's not sure if it should make a football movement or a martial arts movement, you see? Wouldn't this be a problem?"

Yeah, it sure would!

Chen continued with his explanation. "If you want to become very good at the martial arts, then you should devote yourself entirely to them for a long time. This is why there are no football players who have reached a high level of martial arts skill. You have to decide which one you want to do. Both of them require a lot of practice, a lot of dedication. It's like having a wife. You must devote yourself to only one wife."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Voice of Thunder

The voice is a thing of life.

—Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings: Gorin no Sho*

When performing the various striking, kicking, and throwing techniques of most martial disciplines, the breath is usually expelled forcefully and is oftentimes accompanied by an audible shout. In the Japanese and Okinawan martial arts this shout is referred to as *kiai,* which means roughly "spirit, or energy, meeting." At certain points in the performance of some of the traditional karate *kata* [forms], a strong *kiai* is emitted and it is actually considered an important part of the set. In fact, if a student should inadvertently omit the required shout he is judged to be in error in the performance of his *kata.*

Students of these martial arts are told that that the *kiai* will assist them in powerfully contracting their abdominal muscles, thereby increasing the destructive force of their punching, striking, and kicking techniques. An unexpected and explosive shout may also frighten or even momentarily stun the opponent and cause him to lose his will to fight.

In Chinese martial arts the technique of shouting is known as *chi-he* [energy shout], but it is rarely practiced anymore. There was a time when it was considered an art unto itself, a secret craft known only to a few. No doubt, this is one of the main reasons why it has almost disappeared entirely. My teacher regarded the shout as an important part of one's kung-fu arsenal. He considered it a valuable technique, which, like fundamental punching and kicking techniques, should be practiced regularly and with the utmost seriousness. Its effectiveness was powerfully demonstrated to my classmates and me one evening during class.

Sifu Chen had divided his class of six pupils into three pairs, instructing us to practice freestyle sparring. I was partnered with a young man surnamed Wang and we had just begun to square off with each other when we noticed *Sifu* squaring off with another student named Lee. James Lee was a powerfully built young fellow who was exceptionally strong. He was justifiably proud of his physique and strength and was known to be a very aggressive fighter. James's sparring partner was a fellow I'd nicknamed Jolly. Clearly intimidated by James's superior strength and aggressive manner, Jolly was all but running backward.

Sifu Chen, who had been monitoring the situation, stepped in and motioned Jolly off to one side. He was obviously planning to give him some pointers and the room fell silent as Chen faced James in a fighting posture. James's eyes opened wide as he squared off against his teacher. Whatever was about to happen, I figured James had labored long and hard to earn it.

Wang and I forgot about our own practice as we stood transfixed, and watched *Sifu* and James shift about, searching for

openings in each other's posture or attitude. James knew that he didn't stand a prayer of penetrating the defensive posture of his teacher but we knew he'd give it all he had. The two combatants were completely focused on each other and it seemed as though time itself had come to a stop. The room was completely silent except for the shuffling of their feet. The third pair of students had, like Wang and me, stopped practicing so as to concentrate on the action.

Suddenly, Chen opened his mouth and emitted an explosive roar that caused both my partner and me to jump backward slightly. The unexpected detonation of his shout clearly stunned James who reacted as though he'd just touched a high-voltage wire. He jumped and then stood stock still as our *sifu* charged in with a powerful punch. James didn't even attempt to block Chen's thrust; his eyes were slightly glazed and the color had all but left his face. *Sifu* Chen walked up and patted James on one shoulder as if to awaken him. The basement door at the top of the stairs opened up and Mei called down to ask if everything was all right. Chen assured her that everyone was still alive and he chuckled to himself.

It actually took James several seconds to fully recover from the shocking effects of our *sifu's* shout. It was as if he knew what had happened but had been helpless to do anything about it. Chen put his arm around James's shoulders and called the rest of us over. We quickly surrounded him, anxious to hear whatever he had to say.

"*Chi-he* is a very powerful weapon," Chen said.

No kidding! It stunned me and I wasn't even in front of it.

"But it is not something you can learn to do in just a few minutes," he continued. "It takes a lot of practice. You must know how to breathe in the right way, how to shout from your *dantien* [the area of the lower abdomen] instead of your throat. If you do it right, your enemy will stop. He will not be able to move or defend himself. He is helpless."

James nodded his head in agreement. I wondered if he was even capable of speaking. His body and mind still seemed to be suffering the paralyzing effect of the technique.

Chen elaborated further. "It is said that there used to be men who could knock you out with just a shout; some could even kill small animals with it. It is a real weapon, just like your fist or foot, but nobody really knows how to develop it anymore. My *Sil-Lum* teacher, Mr. Tai, was very good at it, very powerful. He would shout and you could not move at all."

"But isn't that what you just did?" I chimed in.

Chen frowned and shook his head. "His skill was much greater than mine. He knew some of the old secrets but he never told us where he had learned them."

Ooh, secrets? Do tell!

"Noise is a form of power, you see?" Chen said. "Different noises can do different things. You all know how a certain noise can cause glass to break?"

We all nodded.

"Yes," Chen said. "Just as one kind of noise will break glass, other kinds will do other things. In some kinds of *neigong* [exercises to maintain the health of the internal environment] you are taught to make certain noises to keep certain internal organs healthy."

Really? Different pitches can affect the organs?

"So, different kinds of noise can also injure certain organs," Chen assured us. "It is said that some kinds of noise can shock the heart but I don't really know. I do know that Tai once knocked me down with his shout. Very frightening. I could not defend myself. How can I defend against a noise?"

Wang piped up. "Will we learn this technique, *Sifu?*"

Chen nodded. "But I think it would be better if we all go somewhere away from the city to practice. It will upset my neighbors. They might call the police. They'll think something terrible is happening in here."

We all giggled, imagining police officers knocking on the front door and asking Mei if someone was being eviscerated in the basement.

"I can only teach you what I know. The real art is very rare, even in China. It has always been a great secret and the men who knew it didn't want to teach very many people. Like *dim mak* [the art of striking certain vital points], it is dying and will probably be gone in a few years."

"Well," James said calmly, "You did learn how to affect certain organs with your shout. It strongly affected my bowels! I damned near . . . uh . . . soiled myself!" Howling with laughter, we were all worthless for the remainder of the evening's class.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Pushing the Envelope

You've got to do your own growing, no matter how tall your grandfather was.

—Irish proverb

Seated in a wooden chair off to one side of the training area, *Sifu* Chen studied the action as two of my classmates engaged in a round of sparring. Chen always watched us closely when we practiced this advanced training exercise and he was quick to correct any mistakes he perceived in our techniques or fighting tactics. The only protective gear we wore consisted of a mouthpiece and a groin cup; the thick hand and foot pads used by many current martial arts schools simply did not exist in those days and I doubt that Chen would have permitted us to wear them anyway. He certainly would not have allowed us to wear any sort of body armor; he believed that we needed to be able to take punches as well as dole them out and although he constantly warned us not to strike each other with excessive force, sparring practice almost always resulted in one or two split lips and plenty of bruises.

Chen seemed to scrutinize my fighting techniques and tactics very carefully, more so than my classmates'. One of the reasons for this extra attention was due to my experience in karate. During sparring practice I would often unconsciously employ a number of karate techniques, some of which are very different from their kung-fu counterparts. Although this would sometimes anger my classmates who felt that I was breaking with tradition, Chen found it interesting and even exciting.

One evening as I prepared to walk home, Chen motioned for me to sit down with him at the kitchen table. Mei brought over two cups of tea as *Sifu* began to speak. "You seem to do well in sparring practice," he smiled. "You use some techniques that are different from what I teach."

Uh-oh.

"I'm sorry, *Sifu,*" I replied. "They just kind of 'happen.' I'll try not to use them anymore."

Chen shook his head vigorously. "No, no. It is good that you use them so well. The other students have trouble defending against them!"

"I can use every advantage I can get," I replied.

Chen smiled and nodded in agreement. He took a sip of his tea and continued. "You are learning to blend your karate techniques with what I teach you and that's good. It will make you a strong fighter. In China, the best fighters mixed techniques from different styles. Their opponents never knew what to expect."

"But isn't that going against tradition?" I asked. "I mean if you learn one style you should fight with that style, right?"

"No," Chen answered. "It doesn't have to be that way. You

learn to use these different techniques according to your style, you see. Each person develops his own style depending on his understanding of what he has learned and it changes as he learns more. Do not be satisfied with what I teach you. You must use it as a foundation and learn how to learn; find new ways of using what you learn from me. Find your own way. If you don't do that, you will not grow."

"But then I won't be practicing the art that you taught me," I countered. "It'll be like inventing something else."

Chen smiled and shook his head. "No, you will still be practicing the art I taught you. You just have to find your own way of doing it. You are not a machine that makes perfect copies. You cannot do everything exactly as I do it because you are not me. Our bodies are different. We think and feel differently. You will have your own way of doing what I teach you, but you have to search for it. If you don't try to find it, you'll never get it.

"This is the problem in many of the martial arts in China today. Everyone wants to do everything exactly the same way, like machines. They say it is because of tradition, but real tradition must be alive, not stiff and dead. Their boxing may look like it is alive, but it's just the outer form of it. Inside, it is dead."

I sipped my tea and tried to grasp what my *sifu* was trying to convey to me. I had always done my best to imitate his movements as precisely as possible and now he was telling me that I must find my own way of doing everything.

Chen finished his tea as he prepared to end the evening's lesson. "The most important things you learn from me are the principles, not just the techniques. If you learn the principles you can

develop your own way. You can go beyond the techniques you learn from me and maybe find new principles. Martial arts should help you to grow. It must not prevent growth. Things which do not grow will die ... including tradition."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Fame and Fortune

Sports is the toy department of human life.

—Howard Cosell

Karate/kung-fu tournaments did not really catch on in the United States until the late 1960s. When I first began training with Master Chen, they simply did not exist outside of Japan or China. However, I suspected that such events would someday become very popular in America and I was anxious to pit my meager skills against the abilities of other martial arts enthusiasts.

One Sunday afternoon my *sifu* and I sat on the sofa in his living room and watched the end of the North-South football game on television. Chen had been rooting for the North, but they had lost the game. The idea of competition popped into my head and I asked him what he thought about martial arts contests.

"Well," Chen started, "it's alright as long as you see it for what it is. If you win it doesn't mean that you are great, and if you lose it doesn't mean that you are no good. It usually just means that one person could perform better on that day than the

other person. I win today because I feel good and maybe you're not up to it. Tomorrow you might win because your spirit is strong and mine is not. It's a game. Nobody is killed. It's different in a real fight."

"Because of the rules?" I asked.

"Yes," Chen replied. "In a contest you do not want to really hurt or kill your opponent, so you do not use the same techniques or the same kind of power that you would use in a real fight. Some techniques which are not allowed in a contest are very valuable in real self-defense."

"So, if I lost in a tournament that doesn't mean that I would have lost in a real fight?" I wondered.

"To some degree, you are right," Chen said. "A contest is a game and whoever plays the game better will win. Even so, it should not be taken too lightly. In China we used to have big contests and many fighters would come. They wanted to test themselves against the best fighters from other schools."

I had heard of such events. They were often conducted on large, raised wooden platforms. The rules tended to be pretty loose and many fighters suffered serious injuries.

"Did you ever compete in those tournaments?" I asked.

Chen raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yes ... before the communists came. I also did it in Taiwan."

"How did you do? Did you win?"

Chen chuckled. "Winning is only important for a person who thinks a lot of himself. The main thing is to test yourself. But ... yes, I won. I trained very hard and I won, and people thought I was so wonderful."

I smiled. *Cool!*

"But after a while, people forget who won what," Chen said. "Some fighters thought they would become very famous if they won. Some even thought they would make lots of money this way, but they didn't. When they finally lost, they were beaten completely. Some of them gave up practicing martial arts. This showed that they were not training for the right reasons.

"Testing yourself is the main thing. Find out where you need improvement and strengthen your spirit, but always remember that a contest is a game. It isn't real. In life, there are no rules, only survival. In a real fight, you don't get a medal if you win. You just get to go home."

CHAPTER FORTY

Dotting I's and Crossing T's

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers ...

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall"

I'll bet I studied something in elementary school that most of you didn't—with the possible exception of the older, balding, and/or gray-haired group out there. And what might that be?

Penmanship.

Really.

Nowadays, what passes for penmanship is simply teaching the youngsters how to hold a pencil or pen and write legibly, more or less ... but it was very different fifty years ago. We actually had inkwells built into the upper right-hand corners of our desks. We used pens with removable tips and they had to be dipped into the bottle of ink, which sat in the inkwell. It was just about one klik up from using the old feather pens of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I clearly remember those boring classes. We were given lined paper upon which were printed thick, solid lines interspersed



Left to right: Phillip Starr, Hidetaka Nishiyama, Chris Smaby

with thinner dotted lines. Uppercase [capital] letters had to reach the top and bottom of the solid lines while lowercase letters were to touch only the dotted lines. We'd practice drawing loops, circles, and wavy lines and although I thought I had it down pat, my teacher was never satisfied. It seemed that no matter how hard I would try, she would complain that my work was terribly sloppy. She would even check to ensure that we were holding our pens correctly; they had to be grasped just so and maintained at the proper angle at all times. She demonstrated what she meant and her circles and loops approached perfection. Since she was nearly old enough to have known Michelangelo personally, I figured she'd studied the craft under his tutelage. I did my best to imitate her beautiful looping whirls, using my paper blotter to soak up the excess ink as I completed each line of loops and waves.

Eventually, we got around to writing individual letters. They had to be correct and pleasing to the eye. We practiced doing this as a regular part of our class ... for two years. If you turned in an assignment and the teacher thought your handwriting wasn't up to snuff, you'd get the opportunity to do it all over again. It didn't matter if the content was correct; if the writing looked even slightly sloppy, the paper was unacceptable.

I didn't really appreciate the many hours I spent practicing making circles and loops until I inherited my grandmother's high school autograph book. Some of the autographs are dated as far back as 1867 and the poems that her classmates penned in the small book are truly beautiful. However, it is the handwriting itself that is really magnificent. Each one is a miniature work of art. You just don't see writing like that anymore. I suppose people thought that learning to write in such a beautiful hand required too much extra effort and the art of handwriting vanished.

The same idea applies to the learning and practice of martial arts. We used to do our best to imitate our teacher's movements although he insisted that we would eventually find our own way of doing things. Because we could not imagine such a thing, we persisted in mimicking him. The concept of imitation as a means toward finding one's own way was brought home to me one Saturday morning when I appeared early at the Chen household.

I spent most Saturdays in the home of my *sifu*. He and his wife had informally adopted me as their own son and I actually came to regard them as a second set of parents. I arrived earlier than usual and as I entered the house, Mei informed me that *Sifu* Chen had gone out to buy a few groceries. She invited me to sit at the

kitchen table and have a glass of orange juice while I waited. I thanked her and as I sat down I noticed that she had been writing a letter. Naturally, it was written in Chinese and she noticed my fascination with the beautiful characters she'd penned.

"You like to learn how to write Chinese?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied.

With a big smile, Mei hurried off into another room. Within a minute or less she had returned, carrying two brushes, a few sheets of typing paper, and a couple of other objects with which I was unfamiliar. She set the items on the table and picked up a black rectangular object.

"This is the ink," she said.

That's ink?

She took the other object, a flat piece of ceramic, which sloped gently to form a small indentation on one end, and walked over to the sink. Wetting the ceramic very slightly, she returned and began rubbing the block of ink against the small flat ink stone. Within seconds, liquid ink began to form.

"This is how to make the ink," she said as she sat down beside me.

Wouldn't it be easier just to buy a bottle of ink?

Picking up the brush, she drew a single horizontal line on a sheet of paper. It was beautiful. It wasn't just a plain straight line; it had a sort of gliding quality to it. I could see where the brush had first touched the paper and where it had been lifted away.

"This means 'one,' okay? Now you try."

I picked up my brush and Mei immediately corrected my grip. I had held it as I would a pen or pencil but she informed me that

such a grip was unsuitable. The brush had to be held vertically with the first three fingers resting on one side of the shaft while the thumb was placed on the opposite side. As I began to make the stroke for "one," she stopped me.

"No, no. Move the whole arm," she said.

She held my wrist so that I could not flex it back and forth as I normally did when writing in my native language. Instead, the characters were brushed by moving the entire arm as one unit. This felt very awkward to me, but I did my best. I brushed out the character for "one" several times. Mei stopped me and held up the paper.

"Good. Now be more careful. Watch. . . ." she said.

Holding my hand, she showed me how the tip of the brush must initially touch the paper just so. The stroke was made with the arm and then lifted from the paper in a specific manner. I admired the character I'd brushed, even though it was her hand guiding mine that had done it. We worked like this for several minutes and I heard the front door open. *Sifu* Chen walked into the kitchen and plopped a filled grocery bag down on the counter. He smiled as he walked over to the table. "So, Mei is teaching you to write Chinese, huh?"

I smiled. "Yeah. This is great." I held up the paper upon which I'd brushed "one" several times. "What do you think?"

Chen smiled and nodded. "Good, good . . . needs some work."

He looked at Mei and she smiled as he leaned over to gently kiss her on the cheek.

"He's very good," Mei said as she squeezed my shoulder. "Just needs some practice."

Wow, she said I was GOOD!

Chen sat down beside me. "Did Mei tell you that she won contests in Taiwan for her writing?"

"No," I said. My eyes were opened wide. *They actually have contests for this stuff?*

"Yes," Chen nodded. "She is famous, you know."

Mei tittered and waved away her husband's compliments. "He is jealous," she said.

"No, no," Chen replied with a big smile. "I am proud."

Mei blushed and she fairly beamed as she smiled at me. "Now try again," she said.

I was extra careful this time. I took my time as I brushed out the single horizontal stroke of the character. Mei examined it and then used her brush to make two horizontal strokes, one above the other. The top line was somewhat shorter than the bottom line and I assumed that this was the character for "two." I asked Mei if this was true and she answered with a quick nod.

"You do it," she said.

I carefully and slowly brushed out the two strokes. They didn't look at all like the characters Mei had written.

How'd she do that? Her strokes are so . . . beautiful and natural!

Mei grunted. "You are worrying too much," she said. "Don't think. Just do it."

I dipped my brush in the ink again and gave it another try. My second try didn't appear to be much better than the first. The lines were wavy, harsh, and abrupt. Chen patted me on the shoulder.

"You are still 'thinking' about how to do it, but that's okay. Keep practicing. Try to make your writing look like Mei's."

"I am," I answered. "It just doesn't seem to be working. . . ."

"Just like martial arts," Mei chimed in. "You copy your teacher. When you can make a perfect copy, you can find your own way."

Just like martial arts.

Mei's dark eyes sparkled as she smiled and continued. "It takes time and lots of practice. This is the meaning of kung-fu. It is like making tea. You cannot hurry."

Chen pulled out a chair and sat down. "And you do not write with only your hand and brush."

What the heck else am I supposed to use?

"It comes from here," Chen said as he patted his belly. "And here, and here," he tapped his chest and his head. "From your *dantien*, your heart, and your mind. When we look at someone's writing we can see his strength, his . . . spirit. It will show if he is weak or strong, nervous or relaxed, afraid or brave. It shows what kind of person he is inside."

"I guess I'm weak and scared," I muttered.

Mei reached over and took my paper, setting it down in front of her. As she brushed out several characters she said, "Everyone starts the same way. It is the practice that changes you. Until you change inside, you will not get much better."

I looked at the characters she'd written. Each one was a work of art in itself. I shook my head, wondering if I'd ever be able to write like that. She'd done it so quickly and effortlessly, so . . . naturally.

"Maybe I'd be better off just typing," I joked.

"No, no," Mei snapped quickly. "Anyone can do that but it will not change you inside. It is the practice that changes you. It is the trying that matters. You see, this is really an art. It takes a lot of practice but now people don't like to practice so much. They will find easier ways to do it and when that happens, the art will be lost. That will be very sad."

I nodded my head.

Just like martial arts . . . yes, it will. Very sad.

I drew the paper back in front of me. "Okay, let's try this again. . . ."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Four Weapons, Four Teachers

A common person may become a "master";
a true master never becomes a master.

—Kensho Furuya, *Kodo: Ancient Ways*

Traditional Chinese martial arts involve training with various weapons as well as with the empty hands, although weaponry is not introduced until the student has acquired a substantial level of skill with the bare handed techniques and exercises. There are four primary weapons; the staff, spear, sword, and broadsword, and these weapons are learned gradually over a considerable length of time. Master Chen insisted that we train with these weapons as though we would someday use them in battle. He insisted on perfect technique and to help us better understand the combative uses of the weapon, he made us practice two-person fighting drills. The very few martial arts supply companies that existed back then did not offer wooden Chinese-style swords for sale, so one of my classmates actually produced wooden practice swords for us. Skilled in woodworking, he made wooden broadswords as well as straight, double-edged swords.

When we practiced forms, Chen would usually require us to use his personal steel swords which were razor-sharp and much heavier than their wooden counterparts. It was during a practice session involving the performance of a broadsword form that I learned the true value of weaponry in the Chinese martial arts. I loved the broadsword and whizzed through the form with what I thought was considerable skill.

"No, no!" Chen shouted as he waved his hand at me. "You will break your blade. You hit with the flat part. When you cut, you must hit exactly with the edge. Don't be so sloppy!"

My glorious battle suddenly yanked from my consciousness, I stopped suddenly and looked at my teacher.

"You are careless with your technique," he complained. "It is not like hitting flies, you know."

I heard one of my classmates giggle.

"But *Sifu,*" I protested, "nobody uses swords anymore. Why do we still practice with them?"

"Just because we do not carry them does not mean they have no value," Chen said. "For one thing, it is a part of our heritage, our tradition. We train to keep it alive."

"I understand that," I said, looking at the finely honed edge of the broadsword I was holding. It was truly a work of art, a piece of China's past which had survived into the twentieth century primarily because of tradition. But of what practical use was such an ancient weapon in the modern age of bullets, bombs, and ballistic missiles?

"Each weapon teaches you special things," Chen said, pointing his finger at the broadsword. He stood up, walked over to

me, and held out his hands. I gave him the weapon and he looked lovingly at its smooth finish and fine cutting edge.

"The boxing and weapons are the same," he said gently. They go together. Our weapons are based upon our boxing. If you cannot box, you cannot use the weapons with any real skill."

Chen stepped back and whipped the weapon around in a horizontal cut, snapping the spine of the blade against his left side. The blade sang as it sliced through the air in front of me.

"The best boxer is skilled with weapons. That's why he is the best boxer. If he does not know weapons, his skill is not complete."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Each of the four main weapons teaches certain principles about fighting with the bare hands," Chen said. "If you want to really learn how to fight with your hands, you must master the weapons."

That's absolutely bizarre.

"That's why these weapons have always been so important in training. People think that everyone used them in the old days," Chen said, curling up one side of his mouth. "But that's not true. Yes, some people did use them but most people did not. After all, they were expensive, and you can't walk through the city with a sword or spear."

I can understand that!

"*But,*" Chen said as he thrust the broadsword forward as if admiring its balance, "they were used to teach the fine, delicate movements of boxing." He looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

"When you fight with weapons it happens very fast," he said.



A posture from the Baixingchuan sword form

"You cannot make a mistake. If you make a mistake, you are dead very quickly!

Well then, I guess I wouldn't last more than a couple of seconds.

Chen walked over to the weapons rack, picked up the empty

broadsword scabbard, and resheathed the weapon. He selected two wooden swords and walked back over to me. He grinned and handed me one of the practice swords.

"I will show you," he said, and swung his sword down at my head.

I quickly raised my sword up and blocked his blow solidly.

"That is good," Chen smiled. "You move quickly but your technique is wrong."

How could it be wrong? It kept me from getting hit!

"That way of blocking is very bad for your sword," he said. "You used the edge to block. If it was a real sword, what would happen?"

"I guess it would probably chip the cutting edge," I answered. "But it kept me from getting cut."

"It might break your blade, too," Chen warned.

He stepped back and cut down at my head again and I instinctively repeated the upward blocking movement. In a flash, his free hand swept up from under my arm. He seized my wrist, pulled my arm over to my right, and delivered a quick slash across my abdomen. Unable to use my weapon, I was helpless.

"It will get you killed," Chen said with a big smile. He chuckled. "You see, you must not block like that with a sword. Sword is not made for blocking. It is made for cutting. I will show you ... cut at me, please."

I stepped back into an on-guard stance. *I won't cut downward. He's expecting that. I'll surprise him.*

I quickly advanced my front foot and whipped my sword around, cutting from the outside inward. *Sifu* pivoted easily on his front foot and snapped his sword up, resting the edge against my throat.

"You see? No need to block. Just cut. Try again."

I stepped back, returning to my on-guard position. Chen just stood comfortably and watched in a rather detached manner. Suddenly, I lunged forward, cutting down at his head. In a flash he stepped to my rear quarter with his right foot and brought the cutting edge of his blade underneath my right arm. Pivoting backward, he directed a final slash toward the back of my neck.

How did he do that?

"See?" Chen said excitedly, "No block. Just cut, cut."

Well, I can't say that I saw it.

Chen stood up and relaxed. "This is how the sword is really used. If you study it carefully you will see that it is how the hand is used, too. Training with weapons teaches you the very fine points of fighting without weapons. Each one teaches different ideas, each one is like a different teacher. Listen to what they tell you."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The Most Valuable Gift

Do not think that what is hard for thee to master is impossible for man; but if a thing is possible and proper to man, deem it attainable by thee.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Our beliefs shape who and what we are and what we are able to achieve. Having spent most of my life practicing the martial arts, I can attest to their efficiency in developing a high level of self-confidence, perseverance, and an iron will. These are qualities that are essential for success in any endeavor, no matter how large or small it may be. Master Chen emphasized the importance of these things to me one Saturday morning when I arrived at his home with several inch-thick pine boards.

The boards were twelve inches wide by twelve inches long and I had tucked several of them under each arm as I walked to the Chen residence. My karate teacher had demonstrated his prowess in the art of *tameshiwari* [breaking boards and other objects with the bare hands and feet] the previous evening and I wondered if

Sifu Chen could teach me more about it. Mei looked quizzically at the lumber as she opened the front door and I entered my second home.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Just some boards," I answered. "For *Sifu*."

Her brows lowered as she wondered just what I was up to. I walked down the basement stairway, bowed to the training hall, and placed the boards on the floor. Master Chen had been practicing a *Baguazhang* exercise and he stopped abruptly, smiling broadly, and he walked over to me. He immediately noticed the pile of wood.

"What are those?" he asked.

"Well, my karate teacher showed us how he can break boards with his hands, and I wondered if you could help me learn how to do it," I replied.

Chen considered my request. "I've never been attacked by a board," he said thoughtfully. "Hmmm. Well, I think we can try it if you are worried about a tree jumping out at you someday," he smiled.

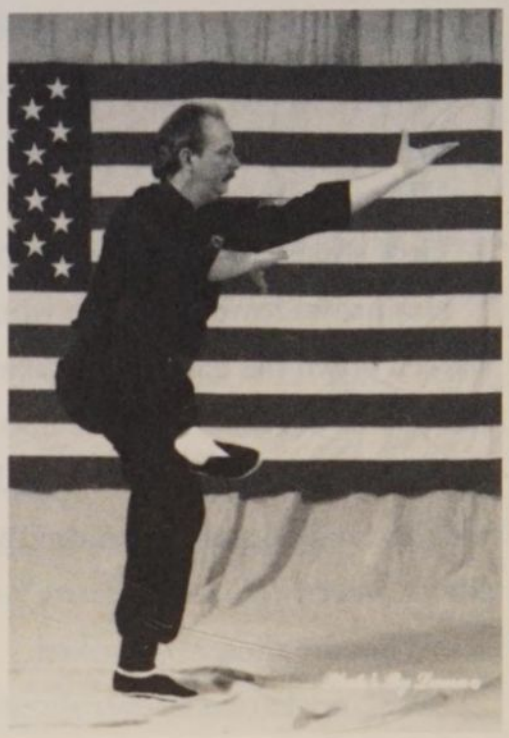
I looked around the room for objects I might use as bases upon which I could set the boards. Nothing.

"What are you looking for?" Chen asked.

I told him how the boards were usually set on bases and I needed something to use.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. "That is like practicing to hit someone who is lying down. When you hit an enemy, he is usually standing up."

Well, he's got a point there.



Posture from the Yili Lungxing Baguazhang form

"Here," Chen said as he handed me a board. "Hold this out in front of you."

I wondered what he had in mind as I held the outer edges of the squared plank and thrust it out in front of me. Chen stood before me and seemed to study the board for a few seconds. Then in a flash, his fist shot out and the wood snapped cleanly in half. He didn't seem to exert much force at all.

"Huh," he grunted, savoring the experience. "Try three boards now."

Three?

"That's kind of a lot if you've never done this before, *Sifu,*" I warned.

Chen's eyes told me to shut up and hold out three boards. I hurriedly picked up the wood, stacking the boards neatly, and

held them out before me. I braced firmly, knowing that he would have to use considerable power to cut through three inches of wood. Chen pursed his lips as he looked at his target. He calmly scratched his chin and then suddenly fired out a thrust that cleanly split all three boards. I felt a slight jolt, but nothing like what I'd been expecting.

How'd he do that? He's never done this before!

Chen smiled. "Now I am ready to fight the big tree outside," he said.

I shook my head and placed the six pieces of wood next the ever-shrinking stack of boards.

"You know, it really is kind of fun," Chen mused. "Okay, now you do it. Try ... two boards."

Hey, I haven't done this before.

Chen scooped up two boards. "It's very easy. Go ahead."

I wasn't so sure. Chen held the boards out in front of himself and I settled into a strong *bow and arrow stance,* extending my left fist and drawing y right fist back to my hip. I studied my target carefully.

I don't know about this.

Chen immediately lowered the boards. "You doubt yourself."

Well, I'm just wondering.

"You must have no doubt," he said crisply. "You must see yourself doing it in your mind. What you see is what will happen."

I decided not to give myself time to imagine failure. I pictured my fist penetrating the boards and then fired a strong punch without the slightest hesitation. With a loud crack, the boards snapped cleanly into four halves. I let out a sigh of relief.

"If you think you will fail, then you will fail," Chen said as he tossed the broken wood onto the floor. "In our training, we develop the mind by developing the body. The body learns to do what the mind tells it to do. If the mind thinks the body will fail, then that's what will happen."

I nodded my understanding.

"When you really want to do something, your *yi* [will, imagination] must be like iron," Chen said. "Nothing can break it. Nothing can stand before it. Without an iron will and belief in yourself, you can do nothing. The world is full of failures. You will not become one of them because I will train you to believe and know that you can do anything that you want to do. This is the most valuable gift I can give you."

"Thank you, *Sifu*," I said as I bowed humbly. He was right; such a thing is an invaluable treasure.

"If you can cut two or three boards with a single punch, can't you get better grades in school?" Chen asked with a smile.

I bit down on my lower lip and nodded.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

"Things are only as difficult as you make them," Chen said. "Or as difficult as you imagine. There is no difference between breaking boards, getting good grades, or defeating an opponent. They are all only as difficult as you make them.

"Remember that nothing is impossible if you believe in yourself. Nothing."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phillip Starr began his martial arts training in 1956 as the youngest member of a small judo club on a military base in the Panama Canal Zone.

Which means that the mats and I really bonded. A lot.

Since that time he has studied various martial arts including a form of northern Shaolin kung-fu, Xingyichuan, Taijichuan, Baguazhang, Kyokushinkai karate (3rd Dan), and Filipino arnis.

So? Everyone should have a hobby. I like to hit things.

He began his career as a martial arts instructor in 1967, teaching kung-fu for the Physical Education Department of Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa.

That's right. I was too short for basketball, too small for football, and too tall for chess.

In 1976 the United States Karate Association named him a U.S. National Champion.

Yeah, I got lucky. I kept a rabbit's foot inside my jacket. Then I realized that it hadn't worked too well for the rabbit.

In 1982 he developed a martial art system that he named Yilichuan (One Principle Boxing), an amalgamation of China's internal systems and a form of northern Shaolin kung-fu.

In 1991 he was elected as National Chairman of the Amateur Athletic Union Chinese Martial Arts Division. Within one year

it became the largest kung-fu organization in America, and he was named to the Inside Kung-Fu Hall of Fame.

It's been said that a man with a new idea is usually considered a crank ... unless it succeeds. It did. Then they just figured I was a successful crank.

He now resides near Omaha, Nebraska, with his wife, Becci, and his daughter, Rachel. And yes, he's still teaching.

It's pretty obvious that I've also taken up writing. And if you buy this book I can keep doing it.

of your feet. If your balance is bad or if your legs are weak, the power cannot come up to your hands. It is said that the first seven years are spent building a strong ma. *After that, you are ready to learn."*

— From the book

At a time when Chinese martial arts were rarely taught to *gwai-lo* [foreigners], Phillip Starr entered the training hall, the home, and the heart of legendary kung-fu master W.C. Chen. In this collection of stories and humorous anecdotes from his apprenticeship, Starr passes on the techniques, forms, and philosophy of his *sifu* [teacher]. Each story provides detailed instruction, as well as insight into martial arts practices and life itself, from the words of the master.

"*The Making of a Butterfly* is a rich story of old Chinese kung-fu meeting American culture. This book made me long for the old ways of martial arts instruction before McDojos and health clubs dominated the land. I had been waiting for this book for a long time and didn't even know it. A wonderful book, lovingly written."

— Kris Wilder, Goju-Ryu karate instructor and author of *Lessons from the Dojo Floor* and *The Way of Kata: A Comprehensive Guide to Deciphering Martial Applications*

"Phillip Starr is a very personable and knowledgeable *sifu* in the Chinese martial arts. I endorse his knowledge and teaching, and hope that everyone reads *The Making of a Butterfly* with an open mind and body."

— Sifu Harlan Dai Tong Lee, five-time U.S. National AAU Kung-Fu Champion and head instructor of the Gee Yung Fut-Ga Institute in Honolulu, Hawaii

PHILLIP STARR has been practicing martial arts for nearly fifty years. He is the founder of Yilichuan kung-fu, a style that merges China's internal systems, and he holds a third-grade black belt in Kyokushin karate. Starr lives and teaches in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

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