

Chen Youze:

On Creating a State of Song

By Marvin Smalheiser

Translator was Anthony (Tony) Wong of San Francisco.

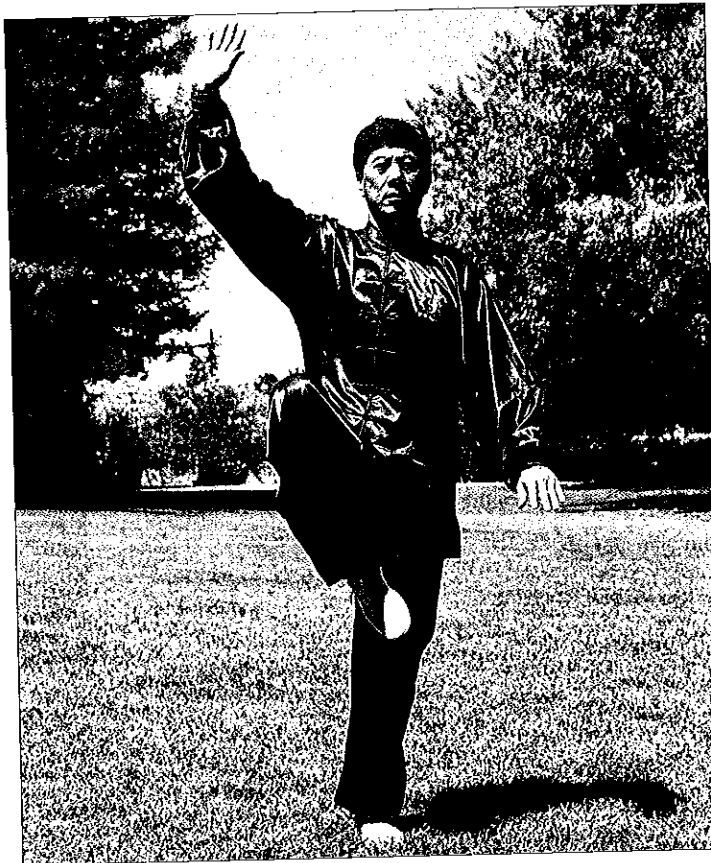
Creating a state of song (a relaxed flexible energy) in Tai Chi Chuan requires cooperation between heart, mind and body, according to Chen Youze, a Chinese national push hands champion as well as a national coach and trainer of judges.

The eldest son of Chen Qingzhou, who was a student of Chen Zhaopei, Chen Youze said: "Your heart knows that you want to be song, but your mind may not be giving the right signal to your body."

Mentally, he said, a lot of people are not able to achieve a state of song because of the tension they experience in their mind and also because of their misunderstanding of what song is.

Song, he said, is a kind of energy that embodies but it is not just relaxed or collapsing. "It is almost like the springy energy expressed by peng (ward off)," he said. "You cannot just collapse your body or your muscles to achieve a state of song."

Chen Youze said that song has to be studied with the mind. "You want to relax the mind and the heart to be ready to become song. Song is an alive quality. It is not passive. You want to start being song by using your mind. You have to be men-



Chen Youze in Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg.



Covering the Hand Forearm Fist.

tally ready to song. This involves relaxing the mind and the heart to be ready. Song has an alive quality and is not passive."

However, he cautioned that song does not mean that you use peng energy in song. Although peng energy is also there. "A lot of times when you touch a person, you can feel that person is song and relaxed. If they have peng energy, you can feel that they are not relaxed if they do not also have song. You can feel a little resistance, but it is very alive and has a kind of springy energy."

One of the reasons that song is important he said, is that it also embodies a way of neutralizing. "A lot of times, when you push a person who has developed song, that person actually redirects your energy automatically."

One of the main things that distinguishes stiff energy from song energy, he said, is the ability to redirect a larger force applied to someone using stiff energy. "When an opponent exerts a large force when I am song, I can turn and deflect that energy. When I turn, I have the power of four ounces to defeat 1,000 pounds. You can't get away from the force of another person unless you are song."

Chen said that even when the opponent is trying to lock up, you still have the ability inside to move in any

way you want if you are song. There is no loss in the ability to move.

“First you have to have the equivalent of 1,000 pounds of your own to deal with an incoming force of 1,000 pounds.

Otherwise you would just have to back off. But if you are song, then you can redirect. But without the song quality, you cannot redirect. First you want to learn to be song, then you have to know how not to be stiff. If you are locked up and cannot move because of your own tensions, then that is not song.”

He said those with only stiff energy can be equated with death. They will not be flexible. “Getting to the point where you have a state of song,” he said, “depends on how well you understand the theories and whether you understand what is stiff energy and what is song. When you have this understanding, then you will be able to find a way to achieve a higher level of skill.”

Understanding song, he said, means understanding how tension affects the muscles, skin and tendons. Without song it is hard to open up your posture and then your range of movement will be less. When you develop song, your muscles relax, the skin is more sensitive and these conditions help to create a springy energy.

“We need to be song



Grab and Tuck in the Robe

in order to be relaxed and we need to train to have peng energy,” Chen said.

“In Tai Chi postures, each of the postures has a different level of song. And there are different kinds of song for different applications. In each posture you have different



Dan Gere and Chen Youze in Da Lu Push-Hands.

requirements. Each has a different center of gravity, application, direction, head position, etc. If you do different postures, the body will be more song. Those postures and training can be song in different ways.”

Chen said that in every lineage, every school has their own way of training for their students. In the past, a lot of time was spent with these training methods and they became a secret of each school and not shared with other schools.

“I always tell students to search very carefully in each posture to find what is the application and intelligence behind each movement. If you are not focusing on why you are doing the movement when you practice, then you are only doing

empty form. Once you start to search for those applications you insert intention, or yig, into them. If you have your yig in the movement, the qi will come. This will help you to build internal strength.”

Chen Youze said he emphasizes training in Tai Chi fundamental principles such as suspending the crown of the head upwards. “The body must be upright, the shoulders relaxed and the elbows dropped.”

He said the chest should be relaxed and the back is slightly

raised. "Hollowing the chest and raising the back is very critical but it is very hard to do. A lot of people hollow too much and they collapse it and can not raise the back correctly. This is critical because a lot of the Tai Chi movements are generated through the waist and it is important to connect the upper body and the lower back."

He said that when he teaches, he makes sure that students do not do too much or too little. This is important with the principle of raising the head. He said it is through form training that this can be corrected. "Then it is easier to see if the shoulders are relaxed and the elbows dropped. Hollowing the chest and raising the back is a subtle movement. It is harder to see if it is just right."

The kua must also be made song. "If you do not release the knees, you will never make the kua song. If you relax the knees a little bit, then you can go down. If you lock the knees, you can never do this. If the ku is relaxed, you have a lot more range in turning the waist. Also, because you relax the ku, you can turn the waist and it can be alive."

He said developing the waist is the best way to find your center, your whole body's pivot. "Once you start wobbling at the hip, you have lost your unitary connection. When the lower back is relaxed, he said, you can make the lower back full." When the lower back is full, he said, then the dang, the arch between the



Step Forward and Pierce with the Spear

legs is like a bridge and you are more stable, stronger and balanced.

Because of this, he said, the perineum acupuncture point between the anus and the genitals will be



Halt the Staff with an Advancing Step.

open and relaxed, not tightened up. This a way of stimulating the perineum.

All these principles and others, he said, have to work together in each movement, then the energy can rise from the feet, fill the body and be expressed by the fingers. Then movement will not be in simply a straight line but in curves. All these curves when put together become like chan sou jin, silk reeling energy. The energy is spiral and because all these points are connected together and they work together as an integrated, organic structure.

Chen said that there is a saying that you finish one movement with one breath,

but he explained that what that means is that all parts of the movement are connected. The idea is that the movements are coordinated and connected with the breathing.

"It is like the energy goes out and then comes back. It is like a circle or a cycle that includes the breath, body, muscle, arms and legs. All go together. In other words, the internal and external are connected."

Another principle that he said is important in Tai Chi practice is the concept of distinguishing between empty and full. "You always have to balance yin and yang. For the beginner it is very hard for them to understand. Beginners always misunderstand how to distinguish the empty and the full in the body. Between the two legs, one is empty and one is full.

"But if you are going to

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go to the right side, you have to start with the left foot to push with the right hand. So the right foot would be empty and the right hand is full. So that is one of the ways that yin and yang, empty and full are utilized.”

Often, he said, people talk about distinguishing between full and empty in reference to external movement and are just looking at the accuracy of this hand or this foot. Externally is actually the right hand linked to the left foot because of how they coordinate.

“When we generate energy on this side it goes through the waist and then goes to the other side as it rises. So the empty/full should be watched both for the left hand and the right foot instead of the right hand and the right foot.

This makes for an integrated body. It is three dimensional.

Chen Youze said that his father, Chen Qingzhou, taught this principle all the time but it is sometimes hard for students to capture.

He said his father also teaches that we all have our territory or safety zone. When people push us there we feel pretty safe as long as we don't get out of our safety zone and lose our balance. As we practice and improve, our safety zone gets bigger as our central equilibrium, or balance point,



Balance with Behold-the-Moon Posture.

gets smaller and thinner.

“When people are getting better and better their his balance point is as thin as a paper and harder for the opponent to find. You have to be able to find this balance point in



Sink Down the Step and Carry the Staff

order to unbalance him. You have to know where his balance point is. You have to find the balance point at which the person can be pushed. We practice slowly to try to find the balance point and to improve our own balance point so it is thinner and smaller. It is hard to find in push hands. This balance point is a point of leverage to access the person's center. We can use different angles to look for the balance point.”

As a person practices and improves (through form and push hands), the person wants to have a bal-

ance point that is hard for people to get to your center.

When asked how to improve the balance point, Chen Youze said: “First, we have to understand this principle. We have to buy into the

idea that we have this balance point. That we all have this balance point. Then we need to practice form and meditation and find our center. Through those training methods and push hands and learning how people push you, then you gain experience and sensitivity and you will become more agile. Your body will be more relaxed.

“Through these training methods, you will slowly increase your level of efficiency and know how your body moves and how effective it is.

“Practicing the form, you will really find out

your balance structure. We all have this balance point. If we have a good, thin balance point, we can push better and when we are pushed we can evade it easier because our opponent cannot find the balance point.

“Many people through their whole life try to achieve this. They don’t succeed because they don’t understand the principle nor how to apply some of the principles. As you improve, it is harder for people to find your center because the center moves agilely. It is always alive and narrow.

“When you have the self-realization and know yourself well, you can find other people’s center. It is easier because you have found your own center. It is like knowing yourself so you can better understand others.”

All the principles in the classics are important, he said, because they all build one upon another. If you are missing one leg, the other one will collapse. They are all equally important to try to get to a high level.

In his teaching, Chen Youze said that with beginners he teaches mainly form and principles since beginners usually do a lot of external movement.



Lower Six-Tenth Thrust Spear

At a second, or intermediate, level, he said people start feeling the internal qi. So then he will teach them internal movement to help them guide the qi and learn how to use the qi to guide the external movement.

For the beginners, he said, a lot of times the movements are very choppy because they are more concerned with external movement. But after several years they can become smoother. You can feel how the dantian moves and how to use the intention. Then the intention can drive the qi.

At the advanced level, he said, it is the time when you have the qi and the yi all connected and the whole body moves together. It is inside, pushing out.

“At a high level, movements become very subtle. Sometimes, for people at a very high level, you don’t even see the movement of the body because it is very subtle. It is because they are connected with the intention and qi together. Then, once the intention goes somewhere, the qi is already there.”

How fast one can progress, he said, depends on their understanding of the principles. Some people advance faster because



Beginning of Six Sealing and Four Closing.

they understand the principles. Some people take a long time.

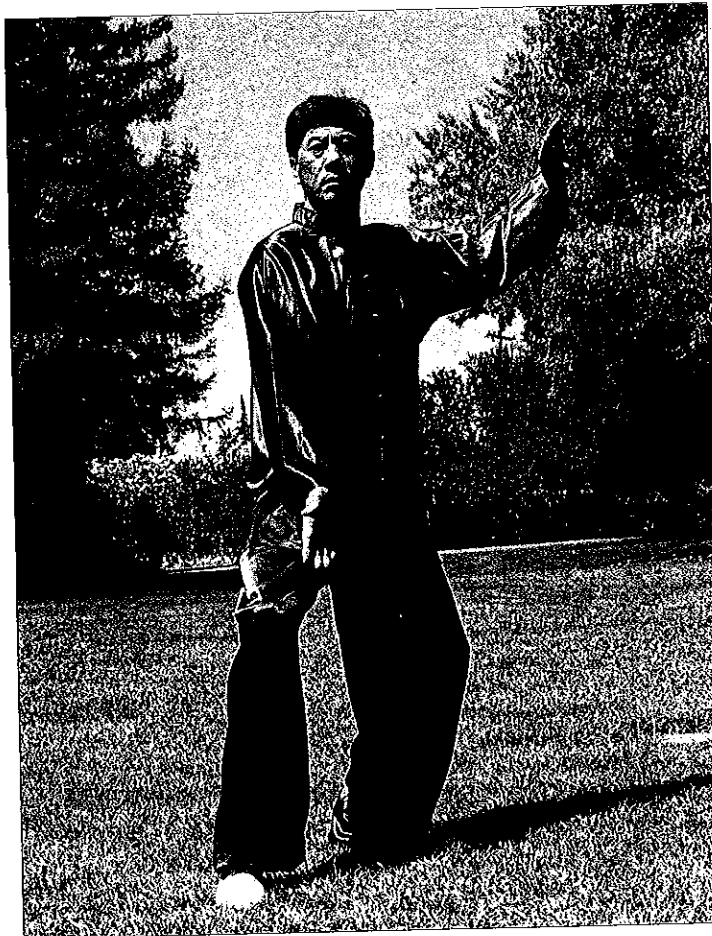
"It not advisable to say how much time it takes. Even though you have the same understanding as others, if you practice more repetitions you will advance sooner than another person who doesn't practice as much. Our times to reach certain goals are different. The more you practice, the faster you are going to get there. It depends on how much work you put in.

"And you cannot lie to yourself. You will know when you have progressed. You will know the sensation. It is like a warm streaming coming out and coming back. People who achieve it practice consistently."

Normally, in China, serious people do 20 to 30 repetitions a day. It takes 15 minutes to do the Lao Jia form so that would make four repetitions in an hour.

"The quality must be good and the person must be paying good attention to the foundation. Then in around three years a person can have a breakthrough. According to the math one can go from one level to another. Then in around nine years a beginner can become advanced."

Chen Youze said that any martial art should include qigong since qigong is an exercise cultivating internal energy. Internally you do the



Forward Trick



Subdue The Tiger

breathing and nurture the breathing. Externally, it nurtures the skin, tendons and bones.

"Qigong is an exercise in cultivating internal energy. When you practice Tai Chi, actually you are doing qigong, because you are moving and integrating breathing and internal energy."

He also teaches zhan zhuang to help the students adjust and balance their internal systems. "When you do zhan zhuang, you strengthen your internal organs and the muscles. Actually, it is to adjust, improve balance and to improve your internal system.

He normally teaches a zhan zhuang gong fa as a way to increase internal strength. He also teaches a hunyuan (hun means mixing, yuan means vital energy) system. In Tai Chi zhan zhuang, standing still is used to search for movement. Hunyuan zhan zhuang uses movement to search for stillness because you are actually moving.

The zhan zhuang methods are led by the intention. A lot of time you may see the hand movement is a little different. That is not critical. What is critical is the use of the intention, or yig. yig is more important than anything else. It teaches how to guide the qi from one acupuncture point to another.

All these zhan zhuang have three critical aspects:

External Movement, Movement and the Intention and Qi Movement and Intention. Combined, they make all the zhan zhuang methods work. The benefit is to integrate both the yi and the qi.

When asked about common mistakes students make when they are learning, he said it is important to understand that there are different categories of students. The young students make different kinds of mistakes from adults who are just starting out.

“A young person can learn a posture very fast and be very good, but by the next day they have forgotten how to do the posture. Older people have physical restrictions. They may not be able to sink down enough like a youngster. And they may have trouble connecting all the movements together.”

Generally, he said, a beginner cannot calm his mind.

“When you are not calm, you cannot relax. If you cannot be calm, you cannot be song. Because of this, movements will not be agile and alive. They will tend to be stiff. It will be difficult to nurture springy energy in your practice.”

Another common mistake, he said, is that beginners use energy in the wrong way. Some people do not know where the energy starts or how to generate it or



Sweep Across the Front Leg

how to use it and in what part of the body.

“A lot of people when doing a posture instead of being relaxed and using whole body movement,



Hack with a Sweep, Sink Down the Step, and Carry the Staff.

they will lift their shoulders and actually use just local body movement.

“Most of the time, when you stiffen your shoulders, it is a pretty good indication that the qi will be blocked and your chest will tighten up. Once you have that state, the qi gets stuck in the chest and you become top heavy.

People who practice in that way and do not get corrected by the teacher, it is not good for them. Also a lot of people because they are using a lot of local muscle, do a lot of straight line movement. Instead they should have all the joints working together to create a curvature, or spiral energy.

“It is the curvature in the movements that always lets you complete the movement very nicely and smoothly. For people who do a lot of straight line movement, it is hard for them to manifest energy or a nice spiral action.”

Chen Youze, oldest son of Chen Qingzhou, teaches all the basic Chen style forms that he learned from his father, who studied with the famous Chen Zhaopei. Chen Qingzhou was one of a small group of students, who studied with Chen Zhaopei, who is credited by many with the revival of the art at the Chen village in the 1950s and 1960s.

In addition to the First and Second routines, Chen Youze teaches weapons such as the sword, broadsword, spear, guangdao, ball, stick and bang as well as push hands. •