

On Understanding Form and Function

By Harvey W. Liebergott

The ability to use T'ai Chi Ch'uan as a martial art comes from reaching higher levels of understanding and practice, not just becoming adept at techniques, according to Calvin Chin, a veteran Wu stylist, who has trained many years in hard and soft styles.

Chin feels that the general loss of T'ai Chi's martial applications stems from its growing mass appeal and an increasingly transient society. "Both factors make it harder to establish close teacher-student relationships," he said, "and time with a good teacher is the critical factor because students can evolve only with constant interaction."

"Of course," I responded, "most people practice T'ai Chi in fitness centers, or senior centers, as an exercise. Their teachers are not masters and are not necessarily even advanced students themselves."

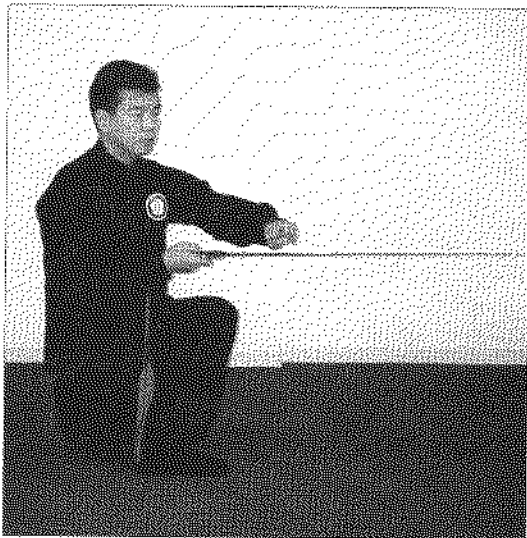
He said he did not object to this form of teaching, only to its misrepresentation.

"The people who teach T'ai Chi only for recreation usually do not understand its many levels of development. What they teach is a kind of dance. Most people think of T'ai Chi only as a slow-motion series of movements and that is what they learn.

"However, there is a difference between form and function. And T'ai Chi's one main form can become functional on many levels. In T'ai Chi, you learn the basic movements and postures of the form, then refine them for the rest of your life. By the time you reach the second level, you begin to understand the postures, and you start to learn structure.

"People who do not understand the structure of the form stay at the first level, developing coordination and flow, but mimic the postures, without understanding what is inside them. When they get to the end of the first level, they simply continue repeating the sequence without improving functionally."

Harvey W. Liebergott practices in Newton, MA.



Calvin Chin demonstrates broadsword.

"Even that is not bad," I noted.

"True," he replied. "Even at the first level, memorizing the form and getting through it offers significant mental and physical benefits. But the potential benefits are limitless."

I suggested that he was describing the difference between taking an art appreciation course and learning to be an artist.

He agreed. "Not everyone wants to be an artist. That is why, even with good teachers, only a few students make the commitment."

"It takes forever to cover such a long distance, moving so slowly," I said.

He laughed. "I have been experiencing the stages of development for thirty-two years, in myself and in my students. It is not enough to execute the

I have studied for 25 years with Sensei George Mattson, who was described by Sensei Kanmei Uechi as "the father of American Uechi-ryu karate." Mattson's karate is soft and flowing, reflecting its kung fu roots. My form was no longer evolving as fast as my arthritis. So about a year ago, I asked Mattson if he thought that I could help my karate by studying T'ai Chi at Calvin Chin's Martial Arts Academy, in Newton, Massachusetts. Mattson responded positively, noting that Chin was one of a handful of truly

sequence of the form; you must understand the principles that underlie its deep structure. The principles that lead to continued improvement are what we call 'the ten essentials,' which are the main training concepts for developing higher skill levels.

"The ten essentials must be supported by additional principles of execution that guide structure and transition. Progress is not consistent; learning sometimes plateaus, and skills do not necessarily develop in proportion to effort. They evolve erratically, as the individual evolves. So, the same exercise may reveal and accomplish many different things, according to how ready the student is.

"Students have at least as difficult a time finding teachers, as teachers have finding students. Many students develop only a superficial understanding of T'ai Chi because their teachers do not commit sufficient time and energy to training them, or they are not adequately skilled, themselves, as practitioners or as teachers. And even students with good potential plateau out, if they do not get appropriate help when they need it."

I wondered if lack of progress could be attributed to the students' lack of character or willingness to work through the tough spots while they were not getting reinforced.

"It may be," he replied. "I call those tough spots, 'thresholds.' You have to get over them or you are stuck. Some people just give up. Some people feel that they have peaked out and that there is no place to go."

knowledgeable people in the art. Sifu Calvin Chin teaches the classical, long form of Wu style T'ai Chi (Wu Chien Chuan), the unabridged 108 positions. This has turned out to be an especially good fit with Uechi-ryu karate and with old knees that resist getting down too low. And most importantly to me, he teaches T'ai Chi as a martial art. I came to Chin thinking that there were certain moves or positions that made some forms of T'ai Chi martial. His response evolved into this article.

— Harvey W. Liebergott

hands and to try to identify martial arts techniques inside of T'ai Chi. But, too often, the rush to achieve the obvious buries the organic truth even deeper. It is similar to what happens when archeological sites are unearthed by amateurs. A few, conspicuous artifacts are recovered out of context and their meaning is lost. Every movement in a T'ai Chi transition is made within a context and has significant meaning. And the form must be practiced until its underlying structural integrity becomes natural."

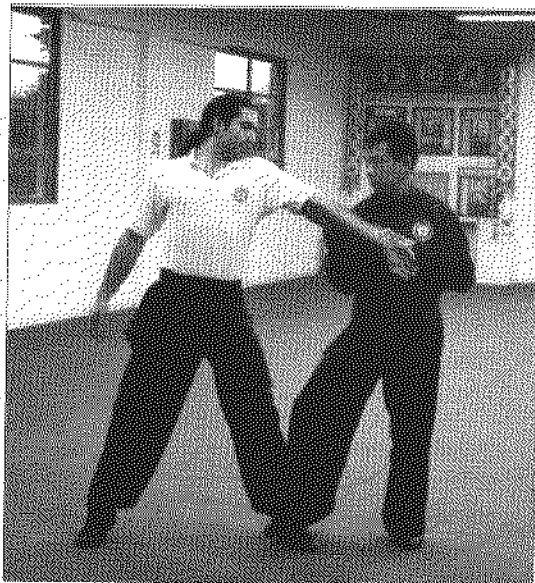
I told him I knew that push hands was an exercise for fairly advanced T'ai Chi practitioners, but I did not know exactly how it fit into T'ai Chi training.

"Push hands is a drill for two people to develop sensitivity and awareness," he said. "But today, push hands is sometimes taught without T'ai Chi form. You do not need T'ai Chi form to push hands. But you do need the form to develop the T'ai Chi principle inside of push hands. Today, many people who want to learn push hands, to help them fight, take a short-cut and learn some push hands attributes without T'ai Chi form.

"But one cannot do correct push hands and develop a true sensitivity and awareness of posture and movement without going through the stages of the form and reaching the fourth level of execution; push hands is cultivated there."

I began to understand. "When you teach push hands," I asked, "do your students relate it to their T'ai Chi form? Do they say, 'Aha, I just realized what this movement means?'"

"Actually," he replied, "push hands, T'ai Chi form, and all of the exercises have to complement each other. The sensitivity you develop in push hands is using your hands to 'listen' to external force. The sensitivity you develop within yourself in the solo form will be heightened when there is an external force. So, as you develop more sensitivity and awareness of your own movement, you will be able to detect any external force that is not yours. You cannot develop profound awareness simply by pushing hands because you do not know your own sensitivity. If you do not know yourself, you cannot know your opponent."



Calvin Chin and Lucien Zoll demonstrate the splitting (Lei) movement, breaking the elbow.

"Can you develop that sensitivity without pushing hands?" I asked.

He nodded. "Just practicing T'ai Chi form, you can become acutely sensitive to whatever force you contact. That is why push hands should not be taught until a student is approaching the fourth level of T'ai Chi form."

"What is the difference between push hands and sticky hands?"

He thought for a minute. "I would say 'sticky hands' is intended to develop a similar sensitivity. But I do not think it involves the total body the same way. Wing Chun uses two or three basic forms to develop hand movements. And it develops very good hand and arm sensitivity. But where sticky hands sensitivity is an aspect of Wing Chun, total body awareness and sensitivity is T'ai Chi at its highest level."

It seemed clear that body awareness and sensitivity were also critical aspects of Uechi-ryu and its kung fu antecedents and, in fact, of all martial arts, though the others were more aggressive and less patient than T'ai Chi. In any event, Chin was also an expert at Hung Gar Kung Fu and most of his students were either kung fu students or advanced kung fu students, who were also studying T'ai Chi. Few seemed to study T'ai Chi alone. I assumed that at some stage, he put the T'ai Chi back into the Kung Fu.

"It is not that you put T'ai Chi back

into another system," he replied. "It is simply that the mechanics and principles of movement should be consistent through all systems. But because people can learn fighting skills in external styles, even before they reach the highest levels of achievement, most do not pursue their styles to a soft stage.

"There is no question that hardness works. And in my Hung Gar classes, even though I teach soft as well as hard, most students struggle to integrate the hard and soft. To soften, one has to understand and internalize the principle. Hardness works, even if it is not perfect, because it has force. Softness is more sophisticated and less forgiving. The soft side requires the 'summation of components,' the proportional involvement of the whole body and the mind. As more components are involved in a movement, less is required of each one to generate the same, total force. And the reserve force that can be generated is enormous. But there must always be the potential for hardness in softness and softness in hardness. Hardness should never be rigid and lifeless; softness should never be flaccid. Hard and soft are two extremes we never want to touch."

"When does T'ai Chi become a martial art?" I asked.

"T'ai Chi skill can be used crudely at every stage," he replied, "but beyond the fourth level, one begins to develop fa-jing, explosive power. Fa-jing is live strength, as opposed to

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"Maybe they have peaked out," I said, "though I am not sure that a student can tell that."

He nodded. "That is the frustrating part of learning; as you approach the top of each threshold, you find that you are not as good as you should be. One day, your teacher is praising you for improving and the next day he says that you are missing the mark. It is a cycle that never ends. That is where all of the mental questions come in; you wonder what he is talking about."

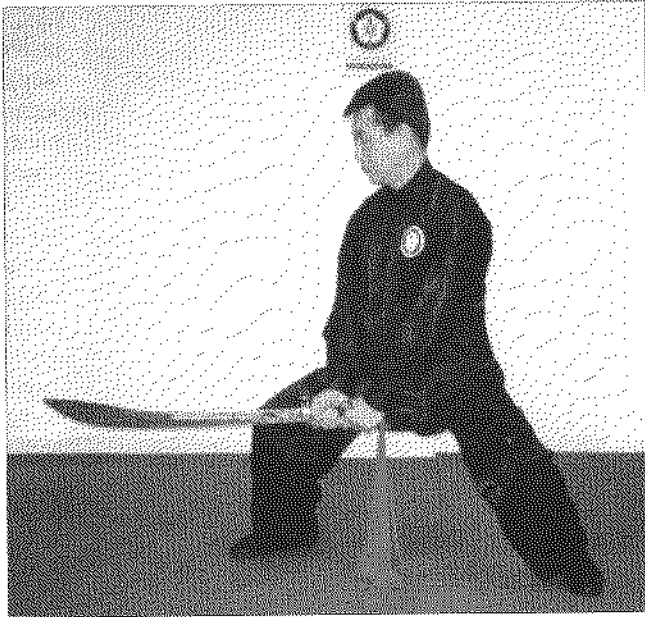
"If you do not want to work any further, you may resolve your problem by deciding that the teacher does not know what he is talking about. But if you are committed to learning, you may conclude that he sees something that you do not, in which case, you are on the way to the next level."

"However, because martial arts are physical and organic, rather than intellectual, you have to make the investment before you can have any idea of the return. You work through these thresholds on faith until your body realizes what the teacher is saying. Suddenly, your body understands and, after your body, your mind understands. . . ."

He paused and I asked him to continue with his initial assertion that it was the level of understanding that made T'ai Chi a martial art.

"At the first level," he said, "one learns the sequence of movements and identifies the 37 postures. Some styles, of karate or kung fu, for example, have many forms and are not so fixated on postures. But in T'ai Chi, the 37 postures linked together with the 108 movements are essentially the whole thing. The 108 movements go through different transitions that allow you to realize the 37 postures. So the first stage has to be to identify the 37 postures. You develop some balance, breathing, and rough coordination, some flexibility, and some concept of T'ai Chi, but you are far from being able to execute the T'ai Chi movements as they should be performed."

"Some people will continue to practice very slowly, striving to perfect that sequence. And they will even develop a flow. But at this first level,



Calvin Chin with broadsword.

they will not know that their transitions are not structurally sound and their movements are without martial arts integrity. That is one reason why there are so many variations of style, even in the same family: people go off on tangents, pursuing an objective, or a look or feel, that is unrelated to the original martial arts function.

"At the second level, consciousness comes into play. You have to have intent in your movement to understand that each movement creates an energy force. You realize that each movement has an interpretation, and you try to direct the movement."

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"You no longer go through the form the way children do, without realizing that it has a purpose. Now you realize that T'ai Chi is not only arm movement. And you begin to coordinate your right and left sides. Generally, people can use the right and left sides together towards the same goal. But they cannot use both sides simultaneously, in different ways. The importance of center line and structure starts to become evident at the second level, and the postures and sequence struggle starts to become natural."

"Is the second level where most people stop?" I asked.

"It is probably the level for which most people strive," he replied. "And even at this level, people are still trying to perfect the postures and the sequence as active meditation. Most people, who feel comfortable with the sequence and postures, practice them without realizing that there are other elements to develop. They tend to stop learning when they plateau at a spot that seems to be a reasonable return for their efforts. They see T'ai Chi as soft movement with hands flowing in space. And that is enough for them."

"The third level begins the martial arts aspect of T'ai Chi. After you can do the form softly and relaxed and flowing, it becomes possible to develop structural and natural strength. When you get to this third function level, you have to reestablish your form. The second level had form, but form without function. When an external force impinges on your T'ai Chi movements, your natural response is to resist with force: yielding is foreign to the body."

"At the third level, you begin to realize that you do not know how to use force effectively. So, for example, when you do push hands, you find yourself resorting to tactics and strength. You know what the movements are supposed to be used for, but you cannot use them yet. You have to go back to the beginning, to relearn the form with function."

"In fact, progress requires going back to the beginning and reintegrating

your new understanding into the form. Most people do not continue to evolve, because they do not have teachers, who can take them to the higher levels.

"This is no different from what happens in other martial arts. First, you develop a theoretical understanding and the ability to perform a relatively empty sequence of moves, but you lack the ability to use the moves in fighting. Later, if you practice properly, your movements gain meaning. But more often than not, you do not practice properly because your teacher's knowledge is limited to either brawling or to dance.

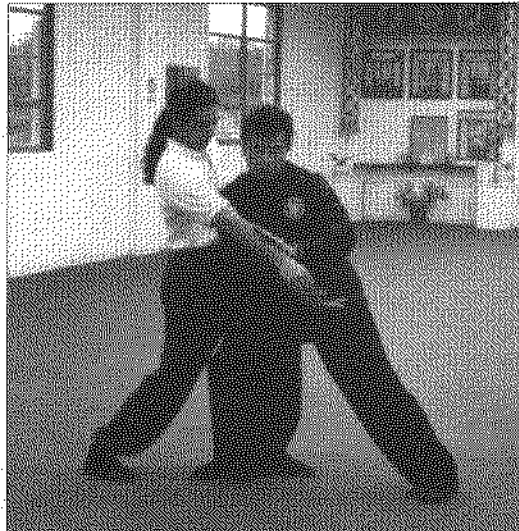
"You learn a form; it looks good and you think that that is all there is. So you learn another form or another style. You collect an inventory of forms or styles, but your practice never takes you over the threshold between form and function."

"Part of most martial arts practice is sparring," I said. But in T'ai Chi, you do not spar."

"In T'ai Chi," he replied, "you learn not to resist and to neutralize force. The concept of ting jing means listening, being sensitive to force. This is what we mean by 'hearing (detecting) hands.' Tung jing means 'understanding,' or interpreting and dissolving the force.

"Understanding is not only mental, it is also physical. Your body has to understand, to interpret, reflexively. First, the brain learns that every movement has strong and weak points. You practice the movements with that awareness, which we call 'conscious intent.' Eventually your body learns to respond with awareness, and you move to the fourth level.

"At the fourth level, you begin to re-analyze the form. You begin to fill the empty spaces in each of the 108 transitions. Filling the empty spaces means eliminating pauses with transitions of sound principle and structure, so that every point in the form has movement and meaning. When your body becomes sensitive, it adjusts all over in response to force. It reacts in total, not just at the point where it meets resistance. The signal that comes from being touched is felt throughout your body, so that when you want to



Calvin Chin demonstrates the shoulder stroke on Lucien Zoll, one of his instructors.

change the direction of the force, your body compensates automatically and realigns itself reflexively.

"You may not realize that you are developing this ability as you practice. It comes over time. From the third level on, we use specific training techniques, such as silk reeling and power-releasing exercises, to develop all of the movements. You have to learn to synchronize your body, but you cannot develop that ability without first isolating and practicing individual patterns of movement. So we practice discrete movements and then reintegrate them. For example, if I tell you to turn your waist, or bend your knees, you can approximate this. If I tell you to bend your knees and relax, I am asking for something different than bending.

"People cannot focus on that much detail at once because it is too much information to process. The body needs time to absorb information into its sys-

"Understanding is not only mental, it is also physical. Your body has to understand, to interpret, reflexively. First, the brain learns that every movement has strong and weak points. You practice the movements with that awareness, which we call 'conscious intent.'"

tem. Eventually, you develop *sung*. Instead of bending your knees, you 'settle' in your stance. Your legs bend without resistance. You begin to distinguish between substantial and insubstantial.

"Even the understanding of how to use a stance helps define each level. As you advance, you learn to transfer your weight and shift from one stance to another to execute a technique and develop power. At an earlier stage, you might have had to use much more energy to generate the same power because the parts of your body were less cooperative.

"Most people think, for example, that 'a punch is a punch.' But that is true only if you equate a punch with a clenched fist. A martial artist knows that a connecting fist is only the last manifestation of a totally integrated series of body movements rooted to the floor.

"Even most T'ai Chi teachers have not made the art their lifetime focus, and very few progress to the highest levels. I have no objection to students or teachers stopping short of total commitments; no one can do everything. But without a teacher who can translate the principles at each level, you have nothing on which to work. And I worry that teachers who do not know their limitations are diluting the art.

"For example, I see some people whose understanding is limited to static postures, judging T'ai Chi forms or push hands, without any idea of what they should be looking for. And that means that their students and, eventually, their students' students will have the same limitations. They look only for picture-perfect final positions. But the art is multi-dimensional. It must have flowing, continuous movement."

I interrupted with, "It is an art of flow . . ."

He held up his hand. "Actually, it is not. Flow is its most obvious characteristic. And many people are content to practice T'ai Chi as an art of flow. But you cannot use the movements or even teach them simply by keeping them flowing. They must have structural integrity. They must follow correct principles at every point. Otherwise, no matter how pretty they are, they will not be applicable.

"It is popular today to rush to push

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brute force, which is dead strength. All martial arts strive for fa-jing, but they tend, to a greater or lesser extent, to telegraph strikes and to allow their power to linger afterward.

"Fa-jing can be more or less explosive. One of the things I worry about in T'ai Chi is that people try to create fa-jing by forcing it. Movements that are forced have resistance and become stiff. In T'ai Chi, fa-jing should not be detectable before it is released. And afterward, it should be instantly gone."

I said to him: "I suspect there is a similar distinction to be made with regard to push hands, but I am not sure that I can tell with something like push hands if the person who seems to dominate has more skill or is simply stronger."

Chin shook his head. "In push hands, there is really no power. Push hands requires the opposite of fa-jing, soft jing, or neutralizing force. Fa-jing is issuing power at exactly the right moment. Soft jing is interpreting and neutralizing force at exactly the right moment. In both instances, the beginning and end of the force last only a split second. In T'ai Chi, the energy between fa-jing and neutralizing is always connected: one neutralizes, strikes, detects, neutralizes and strikes, in a continuous cycle.

"In push hands, one often sees people butting and resisting, using strength that begins and is sustained beyond its usefulness. The skill of push hands is in detecting and neutralizing force, not in meeting force with stronger force. That is why, in competitions, when judges see that one contestant is using brute force rather than skill, they take points away from him and give them to his opponent."

"That sounds like a good way to do it," I concurred.

"Yes, but it only works if the judges are advanced enough to recognize the difference. Sometimes it is hard to find good judges and brute force is allowed to win over skill. Obviously, scoring a push hands competition is more difficult, for example, than refereeing a boxing match. In boxing, a fighter with less skill is sometimes able to absorb more of a beating and stay on his feet until his opponent tires from hitting him. If he can somehow knock out his opponent, he wins, even if he has

thrown only one punch and lost every round.

"But push hands is not a contest of gross strength; it is a contest of skill. A ninety-seven year old man does not push stronger opponents around; he uses his skill to make them push themselves around. The same discrepancies exist, of course, with regard to forms. A judge who is a master will have a different appreciation, for example, of emptiness and flow, a different sense of weighting and unweighting. A judge who is not very advanced might not care about transitions, only about the final postures."

"If judging is not always good, why do schools go to competitions?" I asked.

"I go for several reasons," he replied. "First, I am in the business of teaching, and I want to see what and how other students are taught. Competitions for martial artists are like exhibitions for painters or recitals for musicians. Practitioners enjoy showing their work and seeing the work of others. Sometimes, judging is very good and so are the competitors.

"Competitions can also be quite helpful to students, not for the prizes, but for the experience of appearing before strangers and staying calm under stress. Students need to be desensitized, less self-conscious. Performing in public can help with that. Finally, I think that supporting the tournaments helps to ensure a future for the martial arts. If traditional schools did not participate, the spirit of the martial arts would be lost."

We had come full circle. I understood, fairly early in class, Chin's assertion that it was the quality rather than the type of movements that made T'ai Chi a martial art. Now I realized that developing that quality, which begins at what he calls the third level, requires a teacher who can see inside your moves and sense your body, even when you cannot.

Not everyone wants to be an artist. And there are certainly exercise and health benefits for recreational T'ai Chi. But for the student who aspires to more, it seems that it is critical to develop a relationship with a teacher who will be present to assist at the moments when the student is ready to change. ●