

## A PERSONAL ODYSSEY THROUGH THE MARTIAL ARTS

## Discovering the Inside of My Body and Chi—Learning to Stand



Experiencing the amazing chi of Wang Shu Jin in the summer of 1968 was the definite turning point that motivated me to commit fully to learning the Chinese way of developing chi for martial arts. Although I wanted to remain in Taiwan indefinitely to study with Wang, obligations to continue at the university in Tokyo prevented it. Back in Japan, I explored the internal martial arts scene there frequently. As fate would have it, this search led me to a primary route for developing chi and an awareness of how it worked inside the body. I found Chang I Chung and the practice of standing.

Three days a week, Chang I Chung (one of Wang's main students) taught tai chi in a large cement-floored storage room above the Botan coffee shop in Tokyo's Shibuya district. The class began with standing, a chi gung warm-up series, and then progressed to doing the **Chen Pan Ling** combination form (see p. 340), a cane form, Push Hands, and two-person fighting sets (bare-handed and with a cane). For the first few months, I did the warm-ups,\* and then the form, putting hours a day into practicing the form on my own, as well as attending other Japanese martial arts classes.

After a few months I asked the teacher, "If I really want to improve my tai chi, what should I do?" A week later, he answered: "If you really want to learn tai chi, first seriously focus on standing and only afterwards on the basic exercises. Then you will be ready to learn the tai chi form." He then said, "This has been told to many of the students here wishing to learn tai chi as a martial art, but rarely do they listen. Will you?"

Shortly thereafter, I received this same advice from three other martial artists I highly respected. The first was a man named Kawashima, a serious karate practitioner and graduate student who was one of Chang's better proteges. Kawashima had followed the advice to stand, and

**CHEN PAN LING**

A combination form of tai chi chuan.

\* Later I learned that these warm-ups were part of an ancient Taoist chi gung series, although they lacked the last component of a spine stretch. Although I first learned the external aspects of these exercises from Chang, it took eighteen years of difficult cross-research to actually understand all the internal work of this 3000-year-old Taoist methodology. I learned the most important interior components from Liu Hung Chieh in Beijing. Without Liu's teaching, I could never have discovered how to complete the work begun with Chang. (*Editor's note:* For more information on this chi gung series, see Bruce Frantzis', revised edition, *Opening The Energy Gates of Your Body* (Blue Snake Books, 2006).

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explained that Chang was very generous in telling me the no-frills truth. The second was Kenichi Sawai, leader of the I Chuan school (see p. 180) in Japan, and third was his immensely powerful student, Goto. Each told me that the standing practice would lead to real internal power. (In my view, they all obviously had it.) I took all this advice to heart, and concluded that it was serious business. Since I had traveled half-way around the world to learn “the real stuff” of martial arts, I undertook a rigorous standing practice. Besides learning the tai chi form, I reached a point over the next few years where I was capable of holding the standing-posture only,\* or standing and doing the whole set of basic internal power development exercises for six hours continuously, without breaks.

Religiously following Chang’s original advice to stand, I was eventually, after two years, able to surpass most of his advanced students, even some who had over a decade of experience in tai chi. Throughout the next twenty years in all parts of China, I was to hear this high regard for standing chi gung expressed across a wide spectrum of top tai chi and hsing-i masters, each of whom had more or less parallel procedures for holding tai chi and hsing-i postures. In Beijing, Chen style tai chi stylists also advised that, after being able to do the movements reasonably well, one should practice standing, arms in the air as if hugging a tree, for a long time. This practice, they said, is a requirement for obtaining authentic internal “gung fu”; that is, power and skill. The consensus of the many internal masters I met in China was “It is necessary to stand and do basic exercises (called *ji ben gung*—see p. 84), if you want your movements to have power and not be empty.”

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\*Years later, this same static process was suggested to me by teachers for San Ti (see p. 190) in hsing-i and for various postures in tai chi. Although I did not do the tai chi postures continuously for several hours, the practice of holding them for up to an hour at a time clearly was one of the reasons for my eventual success in being able to sink my chi.