

Experimenting with Principles

BY NATHAN MENAGED | ISSUE 24

Nathan Menaged began his martial arts training in 1976 with Okinawan Gojuryu. His continued search led him to Grandmaster William C.C. Chen. He is a senior disciple of Grandmaster Chen. Sifu Menaged continues to teach using the body mechanics approach he learned from Grandmaster Chen at his school in Columbus, Ohio.

Often, when I practice Tai Chi, I imagine I am standing on an imaginary square. If, when I'm pushed, I move my axis backwards or to one side my opponent can feel me, he knows where I am, and so it's easy to move me. What I try to do is not to shift my axis, not to move my waist from the center of the square, even though my feet move out to the edges. To practice this, sometimes I do the form trying to keep my waist from moving horizontally as far as possible, while trying to be single-weighted.

That way I can work better on yielding. I think of my torso as a rectangle with a fixed point in the middle. So, if I'm pushed to any of the four corners, represented by the shoulders and hips, or two points closer to the center, this rectangle oscillates around the central point. These ideas may seem to contradict the classic saying that the waist is the commander. The waist is indeed the commander, but it's working inside the body, not outside. I have developed six exercises, based on the arm swinging exercises taught by Cheng Man Ching, which allow us to protect the four corners and counterattack at the same time without shifting the center.

Regarding double-weight, I have my own theory. I think that when people make an effort to be single-weighted, they are in fact being double-weighted and it's more difficult to move. I think double-weightedness has nothing to do with 50-50 in both legs, but it's more to do with tension and a frame of mind. When you turn over an hourglass the sand does not fall to the back and then to the front. It drops like in the three nails mechanics: it falls to the inside then spreads out. That is single-weight. If you are able to let the weight fall on a single point, even on one leg,

then you are acting like an hourglass, with three extensions to grab or strike.

The principle of developing now is that everything is right triangles. We can move the weight from one leg to another without the need to move the waist in two ways:

A) the feet move and the torso remains fixed. If we want to change the weight on the back leg (full) to the front leg (empty), the latter moves to the center and fills, while the back leg empties and goes back. To change the weight from the front leg to the back, the back leg moves forward to the center and fills, while the front empties and advances.

B) the torso leans and the feet remain static. In the second case, relaxing the hips and the Tiantien area backwards or forwards, the weight would transfer from the forward leg to the back leg or vice-versa.

I can already see eyebrows being raised at the word "lean". Some people think that if your upper body is not straight all the time you were not doing Tai Chi. But this does not contradict the classics in anyway. As I'm being pushed, I'm changing the right triangles I lean on and can neutralize the force without moving off the same spot, relatively speaking.

The use of counterbalance is based on the same principle. People in Tai Chi generally speak of balance in the sense of 50-50 or empty-full. But when the Chinese weigh their medicines, they use a steelyard. A construction crane has the same mechanism. That's how I think balance works most of the time. And using counterbalance allows us to neutralize attacks, both above and below the waist.