

# Chen Hsin Tui Shou

## THE ART OF EFFORTLESS POWER

A LOOK AT THE WORK OF PETER RALSTON  
BY KALUS-HEINRICH PETERS | ISSUE 20, SUMMER 2005

*Peter Ralston began studying martial from the age of nine. His martial arts travels lead him to Judo, Pa Gua, Aikido, Hsing I, numerous styles of Kung Fu, boxing and, of course, Tai Chi Chuan. In 1978 he won the Full-Contact World Championship held in Taiwan. He has been developing Cheng Hsin since the 1970s and teaches workshops the world over.*

*“A warrior is measured according to this: that he learns from the dregs of the ancients and extracts clear liquid from them.”  
--Choizan Shissai, Japanese sword master, 18th century*

As everyone knows, the Tai Chi Chuan tradition is centuries old. Each tradition's different forms, rituals and exercises are a way of passing on the living experience of their founders. However, there is also the danger that these rituals can become an end in themselves and so the tradition stagnates and becomes a system of dogmatic rules without a trace of the original experience. The “inner” arts in particular cannot be learned purely by imitation, rather through deep understanding. As a result, they rely upon the fact that at least a few are able to reach the truth of the matter, which the rules and forms were originally based upon. We called these people “masters” and, because of their skills, these are the ones who have the right to change or found styles and forms.

Peter Ralston is a master in this respect. He succeeded in discovering the essence of the forms not only in Tai Chi but also in a wide range of other Far Eastern and Western martial art disciplines. In doing so, he reached the conclusion that the systems of exercises often failed to represent the real intelligence of these disciplines sufficiently. None of these traditional forms satisfied him as a way of practicing the principles of effortless power and affective interaction that he had discovered and so he created Cheng Hsin Tui Shou, the “art of effortless power”.

Cheng Hsin is in complete harmony with the principles of Tai Chi Chuan, however, much of it surpasses the ideas known from Tai Chi. Externally it is at first obvious that throws onto the mat have been added to the classic Tai Chi techniques (uprooting, joint techniques). The whole domain of falling, rolling and throwing which makes arts such as Judo or Aikido so fascinating, has been included. As a result, Tui Shou has gained completely new ranges of movement and has opened up new areas in the three-dimensional orientation and physical awareness. In particular, falling and rolling allow a really relaxed relationship with the floor to

develop, however, the main effect is a greater sense of joy in playing and moving. Similar effects are achieved through the intense dynamics of performing the techniques: circling backwards facing a partner, then changing direction to find the right timing and the perfect distance not necessary for performing the technique not only trains the intelligence needed for moving and interaction but is also a lot of fun.

This external “increase” in variations of the game thus reflects the inner wealth of insights into the possibilities of the human body and human interaction. Cheng Hsin Tui Shou is by nature a system of exercises through which the principles of effortless effective body-being and of effective interaction can be experienced.

The most important principles of Cheng Hsin include first the classic virtues of Tai Chi such as relaxation (of the body) and yielding (during interaction). Characteristic for Cheng Hsin is its uncompromising consistency with which these principles should be practiced and realized. There are no “if’s” and “but’s” for relaxation and yielding, rather a sense of “more” and “even more”—they form the basis of effortlessness and being a body as well as in interaction.

As the pull of gravity is the most important external factor of physical existence, it limits the fundamental parameters of the organization of the body and movement. Through relaxation it becomes possible to build up a fruitful relationship to gravity: instead of fighting against its pull, it can be used as a source of movement.

Total relaxation encourages the realisation of the body's intrinsic strength. The body remains a connected whole when in a relaxed state; and when relaxed the arms do not fall off the shoulders and the legs do not fall out of their sockets. The inner strength, which keeps the body together, is obviously always there and does not require any effort. It is the basis of effortless power. “Intrinsic strength” is revealed in two ways: either as a compressing or stretching of



the bodily tissues. The effortless performance of the bodily tissues. The effortless performance of Tui Shou techniques is thus based entirely on transference of the “inner “strength produced by compressing and stretching. For example, after having established the physical contact in the case of a simple push-uproot, one’s own body is “moved into the partner” in such a way that the whole structure- hands, arms, trunk, legs, feet- becomes compressed from the point of contact into the floor. In this way, the natural elasticity of the bodily tissues can do the work needed for a push uproot. So, the idea is not to push the partner away but, on the contrary, to integrate with him to create compression within one’s own body. It does not require more effort to carry out an exercise using intrinsic strength than would be needed for moving the body alone (ie. without contact or a partner) The crucial factor here is of course the connections within the whole body from the hand to the feet. The main challenge lies in not cheating by stiffening the body, but in aligning all parts of the body so that they fall into place along the path of the physical forces, which makes any further muscle power unnecessary. Ralston likes to use the game of “pool” as an image. Just as each ball has to hit the next one at an exact angle so that this ball then hits the next one at the right angle... until the final ball ends up in the pocket, the impulse to move has to be transmitted from the center of the body to the extremities with no further intervention and vice versa.

The principle of yielding forms the basis for each interaction in Cheng Hsin Tui Shou and the rule of thumb when interacting freely is: do not let anyone put more pressure on your body than a mosquito sitting on your skin would be able to withstand. “Yielding” has a universal importance because it is independent of the partners strength. The effectiveness of strength and resistance is always relative, and is, of course, effective only when use against weaker partners. But even when a bull attacks there is still the one option- get

out of the way. Yielding, without resisting the partners movement or intention, not only serves the purpose of getting away from the partner, more importantly, it is the basic requirement for a smooth entry into his flow of movement, out of which the appropriate- effortless and effective- technique can be developed. Yielding as the basis for working with not against the partner’s movements and intentions, makes the application of further principles of interaction possible.

“Leading” is one of many such principles. For example, as the partner aims to uproot me or make me fall, conversely, I can lead and direct his movements by the movements of my body. As long as I am the target, he has to follow me which means I can mostly control his movements through my own. In this way, the leader directs the partners movements and attempts to put him in a difficult position.

“Leading” is an art in itself – even making an offering that the partner would really like to accept not only requires a serious offering of the self as a target, but also a clear perception of what it is the partner wants. Also, the gradual withdrawal of the offering so that the partner is able to and wants to continue following its path and requires a continual and alert presence in the interaction. The various aspects of leading enrich Cheng Hsin Tui Shou enormously. It is not limited to leading astray which expresses the idea of tempting the partner onto thin ice. It also shows that the partner under attack is by no means just a victim whose only possibility lives in escape, but that he is also responsible for shaping the interaction from the start. And finally, it may be seen even as a form of seduction, which brings the suddenly “erotic” interplay of revealing and concealing into the game.

Cheng Hsin consists of around 153 Tui Shou techniques from a simple push to complicated throwing techniques, very short and longer tai chi forms (12 and 64 postures respectively), a sword and a san shou form, in addition to boxing and countless exercises and games for

free interaction. All of these techniques and forms have been created especially to train the basic principles. Therefore, each technique has an “entrance” where the time-space set up for the application of a certain technique first has to be created by leading, yielding and neutralizing. The technique itself, namely the throwing or uprooting of the partner, is not at all the decisive part of the exercise. The actual interactive skill is revealed in one’s ability to play with the physical forces involved, the spatial relationship to the partner, and last but not least, with his intentions and perception. The subtle beauty of the game lies especially in this area, and the technique successfully executed at the end is only the icing on the cake. Practicing such principles is the only way one can reach new levels of interactive intelligence, instead of just learning mindless movement sequences. The Cheng Hsin training does not aim at an accumulation of individual technical skills, rather at a heightening of the overall intelligence of movement and interaction.

As with learning from any artform, the student is confronted with his limits, which he has to challenge and finally overcome. However, what makes Cheng Hsin unique is the extent to which the practice process is embedded in the art itself. It seems that training and enthusiasm are not enough to perfect an art. For the effectiveness of the exercise, it is important in which context the training is held – such successful use of context is usually referred to as “talent.” How can the fact that some people are “good at” or “gifted in” something and others obviously are not, be explained? What is it that makes a person “an expert”? The special quality of an outstanding musician is not revealed simply in an assured command of his instrument, just as the mastery of a painter is not only based on the perfection of his technique. The brilliance of a mathematician is not founded on the number of theorems learnt and memorize, rather in an access to the inner beauty of mathematics, which makes learning and practicing easy and actually possible. A person’s true potential in relation to an art seems to lie in a preconception of what he wants to learn and in his awareness of the underlying sense and the true nature of the matter. Alongside continuous training, a crucial factor for the students learning process is the fundamental attitude towards his art: the way in which it is perceived, how it is felt, imagined and judged-in short: how it is experienced and the extent to which the matter itself is present in this experience. The art of learning an art comprises the changing of the interpretations, moods, feelings and reactions, which determine the action to such an extent that appropriate and creative behavior concerning the matter becomes possible. To achieve something like this it is

necessary to question and eventually transformed the perception of the self and the matter. The fundamental beliefs of “who and how I am“ and of what the matter is must be given up in favor of openness to the whole spectrum of human potential.

Peter Ralston has developed a series of workshops on the subject under the main heading “ontology“ whose aims range from the development of interactive skills in Tui Shou to a direct experience of “who I am“. In this context the study of Tui Shou and learning is simply an opening for general questions about the nature of perception, experience and self that extends far beyond the art itself into the basis of our lives. Why is it that we get caught up in rational and emotional automatism when dealing with the rest of the world so that the events which actually happened only reach us through a veil of interpretations and judgments? What is it that restricts us to a certain perspective, to a certain image of ourselves and others, to certain opinions of “right “and “wrong, “to certain motives and intentions? What prompts us to see and treat things in one way and not another? What happens when precious concepts of god and the world do not prove to be the truth but just a concept? What is the truth then? And what is the world? What are relationships? What is communication? We live our lives and shape our relationships and behaviour according to the subconscious and seemingly self-evident answers to these questions. However, honest to God, we do not have any idea what these things are really about. Cheng Hsin does not provide answers to be believed, and is neither a system of beliefs, nor a philosophy. It is rather an invitation to experience the truth directly and for yourself, independent of philosophical concepts. This is the core of Cheng Hsin. The Chinese words mean: “your true nature. “

All in all, it is true to say that Peter Ralston’s teaching illuminates the space within which most of the taiji players are moving and exploring. The bridge the Tai Chi has built connecting the ancient Chinese philosophy to martial arts and physical training acquires a new foundation in Ralston’s hands based on living experience. Cheng Hsin with it’s techniques and games provides a new opportunity to explore and rediscover the effortlessness and functionality of movement and interaction, which Tai Chi promises. After the dust of exotic folklore and fantasies of Far Eastern wisdom has been blown off, an immediate directness and asking about the conditions of being a body, being in relationship, and being conscious opens up- revealing that the truth is after all wilder and more incredible than our most exciting fantasies.