



Ongoing Notes

by

Ken Van Sickle, 2021

Not Fight or Flight

When we are at ease, relaxed in a normal everyday mental and physical condition, we are said to be in a parasympathetic nervous system mode, or a walk or talk mode. If we are attacked or for whatever reason are afraid or insecure, we will probably assume another mode in which we will breathe in the chest, our adrenaline will increase, our blood will prepare to clot and our large muscles will tense up in preparation for violence. This is a sympathetic nervous system mode, referred to as fight or flight.

If we are doing tai chi, the forms, push hands or fencing in the fight or flight mode, we are *not* doing Cheng Man-ch'ing's tai chi. Tai chi only works when we are in a tranquil mode. Any angst or stress, any effort or struggle obviates it. If we are relaxed and calm, we have the time to respond.

Rollback

Rollback is the signature, the quintessential, the *sine qua non* move of tai chi chuan. Rollback is not an aggressive move, it is a passive response to an aggressive move.

Rollback occurs only four times in Cheng Man-ch'ing's thirty-seven move form, but the essence, the act of Rollback shows up throughout the form. It can be described as a posture, a move or technique when we respond to an incoming blow, strike, punch or push by sitting into our back leg as we turn our waist, causing the strike to miss our center. As we are moving toward the back leg, the forward arm connects to the waist-turn which is applied to the back of the striker causing the striker to fall off balance in the direction of the striker's push.

Many students give up on Rollback while doing push hands because it is not easy to do. We must sit back and turn at the right time. If we begin to turn too soon the attacker will feel our yang arms' pressure and will readjust the attack; if we turn too late we will not have gotten out of the way sufficiently.

There are around fifteen Rollbacks in the form by other names, such as Single Whip, Cloud Hands, the transitions within the last two Brush Knees,

as well as the transitions after the first and the third Fair Lady Works Shuttles, also known as Four Corners.

All of these Rollbacks align with the tai chi principle of following the direction of the aggressor's movement, and by doing so evading the attack and ending up in an advantageous position.

When Cheng Man-ch'ing created the shortened Yang Form it was not only to make it shorter. The two other changes that he made are essentially much more significant. He omitted several moves that are martial but do not conform to the core principles of tai chi: Needle at Sea Bottom is a Chin Na move, and Strike Ears with Fists is a basic striking move that can be seen among Shaolin or Gung Fu techniques.



Flexibility

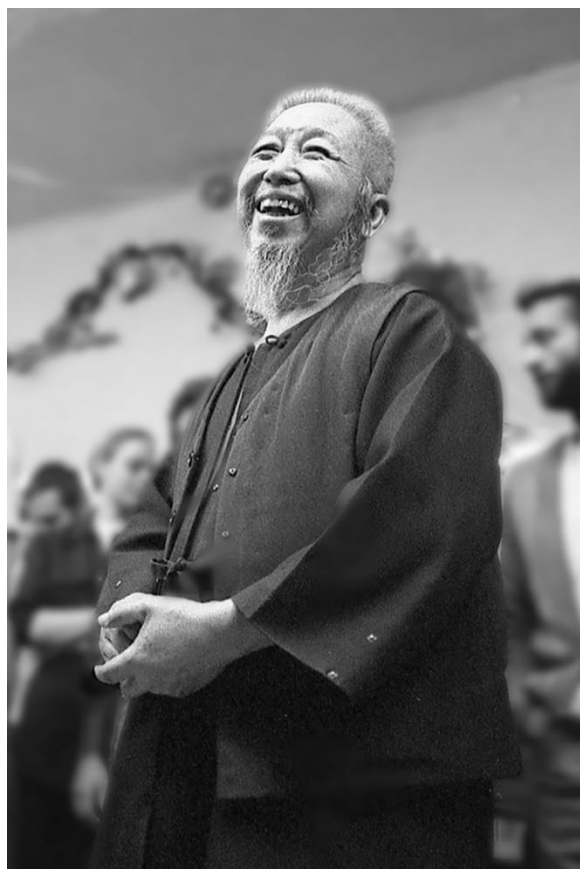
Ben Lo came to visit Cheng Man-ch'ing, at 211 Canal Street, and it seems that they used to test each other by chopping (as in Karate) one another's forearm to determine who had the heavier chop and who had the better receiving chi. Ben chopped Cheng Man-ch'ing's forearm with no response from Cheng Man-ch'ing; then Cheng Man-ch'ing chopped Ben's forearm which seemed to cause him some pain.

Ben said that he had been working on his receiving energy since the last time they did it and he was sure that he had gotten much better. Cheng Man-ch'ing responded, "you did, but did you think that I had not?"

This was very interesting, but what really impressed me was that I could swear that I saw Cheng Man-ch'ing's forearm bend when Ben hit it, as if the bones in his arm were like a spring.

Ride the Horse in the Direction It's Going

I brought my son, Krae, to 211 Canal Street in 1969 when he was nine years old to see where I practiced tai chi and to meet Cheng Man-ch'ing.



The Professor always bonded quickly with children soon to everyone's delight. Krae and Cheng Man-ch'ing spontaneously began to kick a piece of balled up paper back and forth like a soccer ball.

After a few minutes, they stopped and Cheng Man-ch'ing, being in a playful mood, told one of the male students to pick Krae up. He indicated with his hands how the student should place his hands on Krae's waist to lift, and he told Krae to resist being lifted. Krae resisted by pushing down on the student's hands. The student lifted him easily.

Then Cheng Man-ch'ing told Krae (through Ed's translation) "Make your body feel heavy and place your hands *under* the lifter's hands and when he

tries to lift, pull up on his hands."

To everyone's surprise, the student could not lift him. Another tried with the same result. The Professor said that this was an example of a main

principle of tai chi, Taoism, and life in general, to go with the flow and not struggle against it.

Then Stanley Israel said, "Let me try." Stanley was one of the Professor's advanced students as well as a nationally ranked *Judoka*, and exceptionally strong. He picked Krae up with little trouble, although Krae winced at the intense pressure on his waist.

So two lessons were learned, the second being, circumstances alter situations.



Tai Chi Sword Use

First we learn how to move the sword according to its structure, its function and its nature. Then we learn the Tai Chi Sword Form, slowly as with the Tai Chi Form, in order to learn the foot movements and the many

techniques that it includes so that the mind and body contains them. We do it until we can do it at speed. Then we do it with the tassel for a while to make sure the sword is being moved from the center, at a speed that keeps the tassel dancing and without wrapping around our wrists.

Then we begin fencing. Here we move the sword relative to the *O's movement. We begin to develop the skill, to *listen* to the energy and intent through the pressure of the O's blade. We acquire the skill of sticking and following the flow that is offered to us.

We only cut/touch the O if they have invited us to by any excess or deficiency in their energy, alignment, relaxation, attention and more. Our reason for touching/cutting them is so that they will ultimately stop making that mistake and become more skilled with this wonderful instrument of the Tao.

This is the process. Any desire to *get* the O, to win or be better than the O, puts you in the fight or flight mode and you are no longer doing tai chi.

This skill will improve our abilities with all tools and instruments, be it a shovel, a tennis racket or a violin bow.

*"O" represents "other."

All photographs by Ken Van Sickle