

Chapter six.

The first method.

Pushing hands. Magnetic hands. Electric hands.

I arrived at the park to find that Peng and his friends were already well into their practice. This would certainly make things interesting as I had noticed that they began their morning sessions very gently and slowly indeed, gradually building in force and intent as they went on.

I stood quietly at the edge of the practice area, which seemed to be the thing to do until one was invited over the boundary. The boundary itself was a low ridge of earth, running in a large oval and created by half-burying and covering over a thick rope, such as might be used to tie up a ship at a mooring.

It was a nice space, with several trees standing inside the boundary and stone benches dotted around on the outside. These tended to be covered with the work clothes, briefcases and other bits and pieces belonging to the group and I felt completely at ease putting my backpack among them, despite the horror stories I had heard from others about bags being stolen.

One concession to safety which I made in this respect was to always carry my passport on my person in a specially made waist band, along with some emergency money.

As Peng gestured to me to approach, I dropped my bag on one of the benches and thought it odd that there were so few other things piled up there, as the whole group appeared to have turned out that morning.

I put that and any concerns for my own bag out of my

mind as Peng took me through some exercises which soon turned into a playful session of tui-shou, which at that moment I came to think of as "Raggedy Rob Doll Time."

I smiled to myself at this, a big smile which caught Peng's attention and caused him to stop. He turned and said something to the rest of the group in Taiwanese dialect, which attracted a round of applause from the rest of the group which appeared to be directed at me!

"I'm not sure what you said" I gasped out, my lungs taking full advantage of the break in the exercise to suck in as much oxygen as they could.

"I feel like an idiot most of the time." Peng spoke to me in English then. Really bad English, but I could tell he was being very serious and obviously thought that hearing what he had to say in my native language was important for me, so I listened hard.

"When you started practicing with us, I told you that relaxation was the most important thing; that you should take it easy and that you shouldn't worry about winning or losing. In fact you should learn by investing in loss." My ears pricked up at that phrase. Hadn't that been what Shun Yuan was talking about when he was describing the chess game?

Peng continued, "You are one of the few people who have taken immediately to that advice, to remain relaxed and fluid despite being thrown all over the place. Although I have seen this in you before, your smile just now was a big sign that you are relaxed not only physically, but mentally and emotionally." Peng took me by the arm and led me out of the practice area, giving a faint nod of the head to his group as we left.

We walked over to another area of the park where a small group were training in similar methods.

"These are Master Wu's students" he explained and

continued by pointing out one individual.

“Over there is Master Wu.” Master Wu was working with one of the students, practicing tui-shou techniques which where, to my eye, very similar to those used by Peng and his group of friends. The Master was tossing the student here and there with a casual effortlessness, as it seems Masters will.

“Watch the student very closely,” said Peng.

“Watch his body. Watch his face, particularly his mouth.”

I watched intently and after a short while some things became apparent. First, that every time the student got pushed, or thrown or simply stumbled and fell, it was because he had overextended himself. At first glance, one might have assumed that the Master was bullying his student, deliberately pushing him around in order to boost his own ego in front of an audience, but on close observation this was absolutely not what was going on.

The movements of the Master appeared to only have the impact they did because of the way the student had unbalanced himself. Frequently these moments came when the student attempted to press home an advantage that he thought he had gained.

Something else became quite obvious too. The student was not relaxing. His body was tensing up, his lips became pursed and his breathing erratic and shallow. I turned to Peng and nodded and then thanked him for the lesson as we walked back to his practice area, where he spent time pointing out the different strengths of the members of his group.

“I don’t show you any specific technique” he said.

“What I am trying to do with you is to find out which principle will work best for you to begin with, so that I can pair you with the right person to teach you that.”

“Why can’t I just pair with you?” I asked.

"It's been working so far hasn't it?" Peng thought for a moment and then agreed. He explained that the principle he worked with was a strong shaking force and he showed me how he generated this force with his entire body and let it travel out through his hands. I could see ripples of energy travelling up his body and along his arms as he demonstrated.

"Even in playing the piano" he went on, "the entire body must be involved, not just the hands, or the music will not be right. So imagine how much more important that is when you are doing tui-shou!"

Peng called over another member of his group and showed me how he used his shaking force to destroy the balance of his opponent. Each time he did this he followed up by throwing his opponent to the ground, something which I had not noticed him doing before.

Another member of the group came over and joined us. This was Mr Tsai. With his full head of grey hair he appeared to me to be the oldest member of the group and he moved slowly and deliberately. He was also a very quiet man; in fact I didn't think I had ever heard him speak.

He and Peng crossed hands and began performing a repeating exercise that I had seen others in the group doing, intermittently pushing and yielding. Their bodies had a gentle swaying motion back and forth as their hands went round and round in a circular pattern which reminded me of the ubiquitous Yin and Yang symbol.

Suddenly, with a ferocity that took me completely by surprise and made me gasp out loud, Peng grabbed tightly onto Mr Tsai's arms and performed his favourite shaking technique. I had been on the receiving end of that technique enough times, although never had Peng exerted anywhere close to this amount of force when practicing with me, so I just knew that Mr Tsai was going for a dust bath.

I am glad I didn't blink just then. Mr Tsai did not even wobble. He stood there, utterly motionless except for his arms, which were only moving because Peng was giving them a violent shake. His arms certainly resembled the rag doll that I became at such moments, but the rest of his body was perfectly still.

I thought he was just like a tree in a gale, the branches bending and swaying with the force of the wind but the central core remaining still and erect. Peng stepped away and the two men bowed deeply and very formally to each other, before big smiles broke out and Peng announced, "I almost had you! I was so close that time!" and I heard Mr Tsai's voice for the first time as he replied.

"That's getting much closer my friend. I think in a year or two, your shaking fist is going to surpass my relaxed fist". I couldn't help the look that came over my face. Mr Tsai's voice was a soft, but very high pitched squeak and it was no wonder I had not heard it carry across the practice area. Thankfully nobody was looking at me at that moment and I apologized to Mr Tsai internally for the instant judgement which had come to my mind, "Weird."

Peng explained that he had been working for years on his one technique and that he had bettered all the other members of his group except Mr Tsai, who had taken the ability to allow an opponent's energy to flow through him unhindered to new heights.

We began working then on specific methods for me to train. He showed me how to grab my opponent so that my fingers were not in danger of being seriously damaged. He demonstrated how I should sink my weight into my posture and develop what he called "rooting force".

It was while Peng was going through a sequence of movements with me, for what seemed like at least the tenth time that I asked "What time is it? Don't you have to start

packing up for work?"

"It's Saturday Rob." The reply, so normal in any other circumstance almost floored me. I had lost a day. I had been completely convinced that this was Friday. I had missed class. I had missed meetings. I had missed Sofia's study time. I had not eaten or drank or peed or been aware of doing anything that whole time.

I ran over to the bench, with the briefest of nods to Peng as I crossed out of the practice area, tore open my bag and grabbed my wallet. I was something of an obsessive when it came to keeping receipts and ticket stubs and the like, but I had nothing for Friday. The last date on anything I had was on a receipt from a shop where I had bought a bottle of water and this had Thursday's date on it. "Are you ok?" Peng asked. I hadn't even noticed him approach, my brain still reeling as it was from the gap in time. I replied that I was ok, but thought I'd better head back home as I was having trouble recalling the events of the previous day and was beginning to feel quite anxious about it. Peng offered to drive, which I gratefully accepted and before long I was back at Mrs Lim's tea house.

Mrs Lim wasn't around, but I found Sofia sitting in one of the booths reading an English book. As she looked up at me she said, "Oh you are out and about then. You've left the sign on your door and I wasn't sure."

"Sign?" was all I could manage in reply.

"Mum put a do not disturb sign on the door. She said she popped her head through your door on Friday to see if you were ok and found you in the middle of some intense meditation, so she left you to it and put the sign up."

I stood there, still feeling odd. My immediate fear; that I was suffering from some terrible brain disorder which was causing me to lose chunks of time was gone, replaced by complete disbelief that I had spent the entire time from

Thursday night after my meal with Shun Yuan, until the early hours of Saturday morning kneeling in meditation in my room.

I nodded and mumbled a vague apology to Sofia about missing her time on Friday and was about to turn and go when she said, "I really need help with this! I can't understand a single word of it!" This was strange coming from Sofia as her English skills were exceptional, my tutelage only really being needed on the rarest of occasions, or when Sofia wanted a written piece to have a particular flavour.

Her call for help had broken me out of my daze at least and I settled down in the booth with her and took the book. A noise came out of my mouth then, I think was trying to say "Oh" but it came out as a strangled gurgling sort of gasp.

The book in my hand was a copy of TS Elliot's "The Wasteland" and was so far out of my league that I was left once again, feeling like a complete idiot.

Such was my surprise that she had been assigned this poem that without thinking I asked Sofia if I could talk to her teacher before we began working on it. I wasn't really sure if I was doing anything but stalling for time, but Sofia seemed to think it was a good idea and said she'd arrange for a class get-together at the tea shop one evening.

I sat there for a while feeling that I'd had a psychological battering from multiple directions at once. My mind felt like Peng had taken hold of it and shaken it almost clear out of my head and I wished that I had an inkling of the understanding that Mr Tsai had demonstrated when he stood unruffled against Peng's onslaught.

As if all this mental excitement and confusion were not already enough, for some reason I reached into my backpack and took out the book I had put there. The

previous owner, the tea shop regular who had gifted the copy to me had been right; it twisted my brain. When I went to my room that evening I fell immediately into a deep sleep and slept like the dead until the next morning.

Upon waking I checked the clock which showed the time at a quarter to five. I pressed the little button which would cause it to show me the day and date and was relieved to see that it was Sunday.

I went down to the park and joined in with Peng, assuring him that I felt fine and had just had a weird couple of days. Peng had me start practicing a simple version of a technique which he said had eventually developed into what everyone called his "shaking fist".

After spending the morning working on that one simple movement, I thought I was beginning to get the hang of it. Peng had me practise with several other members of the group, all newcomers themselves and I handled myself well, managing to make a couple of successful throws to the ground while not being thrown myself.

At lunchtime I left the group to continue their practice, wanting to return to the tea house to see if I could arrange to bump into Shun Yuan. If he did not show up, I had decided I would ask Mrs Lim where I could find him. I sat for a while waiting for him to show and eventually decided that he wasn't coming, so I asked Mrs Lim if she knew where I could find him and she wrote down the address for me.

It was a long way across town and after a few minutes of arguing with myself I took Sofia up on her offer to use her scooter. I had ridden motorcycles and scooters before, but was apprehensive about the traffic in and around Taipei. Various cities in the world compete for the title of world's worst traffic and claim to be home to the world's worst

drivers, but in my opinion Taiwan beat them all.

I was very cautious indeed as I crawled my way across town, by far the slowest moving object on the road including I might add an old man on a bicycle who overtook me. At least I arrived in one piece and still in a fraction of the time it would have taken to walk and not drenched in sweat as I would have been if I had taken the horrendously overcrowded bus.

As I turned up the alleyway I could see Shun Yuan, sitting on a porch and drinking from a huge blue bowl. He spotted me and called out a welcome and in moments we were sitting together on the porch. I politely refused his offer of a bowl of soup and he asked how I had been.

"Did you do something to me?" I asked. I went on to explain about the missing day spent meditating.

"What kind of answer do you want?" he replied.

"I would like to give you a real answer, but given what you've been through recently I'm not sure you are in the right state to hear it." I didn't even hesitate before answering, "I really need to hear it. If I think I'm going to freak out I can always escape on the scooter!"

He laughed at that and said, "There is no you; there is no me. There is no doing. There is no something." I recalled a book I had been reading on the use of a form of questioning called "Koans" in Zen Buddhism, which were designed to provoke intense insights and immediately asked him, "Who just said that?" He replied by grabbing another bowl from where it lay on the floor, this one made of metal and having a carved wooden stick in it. He took the stick in his hand and struck the bowl, which made a metallic ringing noise like a gong. I wasn't sure if this was his answer, so I asked him to explain.

"Rob, if you are going to play 'spring the Koan without warning', you either have to make sure you are delivering a

finishing blow, or you have to be ready to go one round or two!"

"Where did the ringing sound come from?" he asked. I replied that the bowl had made the ringing noise and he went on asking, "what about this wooden striker?" holding it up in his hand.

"What about my hand, my arm, my intent? What about the air around the bowl? What about your ears? All of these things are intimately involved in the experience of hearing the ringing sound you just heard. All these things, which your mind perceives as separate isolated objects are connected as one in that experience of ringing." I thought I understood what he meant.

"So, when you say that there is no you and no me and no anything else, what you really mean is that these things only appear to be distinct things" I ventured. He nodded and said, "That'll do for now. What's next?"

I had driven out here without knowing whether I'd find Shun Yuan or having any clear idea what I wanted to say to him, but I blurted out, "I go out to do tui-shou in the morning with some friends and do my chi-kung and meditation at night. I read somewhere about Yin chi and Yang chi and wondered if you could help me understand that a bit better. I certainly do feel a big difference in the quality of my own energy in the day compared to at night."

Shun Yuan sat thinking for a moment and then explained that there were many different interpretations of what he was about to tell me and that I shouldn't think of his as any more right or wrong than any other. This was simply his understanding being expressed in his own way.

I told him I understood and he said, "For me there is no Yin chi and Yang chi. Yin and Yang are the polar opposites from which apparent reality is composed, but true chi

belongs to neither of these poles. In my Order we think about Yin and Yang as two great dragons swimming about in the void and chasing each other. The bodies of these two dragons continually slide one against the other and this action generates an energy, which we are now calling chi."

He had me hold my hands up and clap them hard and then vigorously rub them together. After a while he asked me to stop.

"This warm tingling sensation that you feel now, is it left tingling or right tingling?" he asked.

"Chi is just like that. It doesn't belong to one pole or the other, but arises out of the interaction of the two poles."

"If there is no something, how are there two poles?" I asked. In response Shun Yuan picked up his wooden striker again and said, "Let's remember that by 'no something' we meant there are no really separate things, meaning that all things are connected. Here look, there is only one stick, but your mind divides it into left and right. The two poles of Yin and Yang are not separated by anything but your mind, just as the left and right sides of the stick are not separated. In fact, if you try chopping the stick in half to separate left and right, you find of course that both pieces still contain the complete picture."

A question popped out before I had even realized I was going to ask it.

"I feel like I am making real progress with my chi-kung, but it's still a thing that I do separate from anything else. How can I use what I am learning while doing my chi-kung to help my tui-shou get better?"

A long pause followed while Shun Yuan appeared to be mulling over what he should tell me.

"Ok, I'll give you a method to work with which may help you" he said and asked me to hold out my two hands in

front of me as if they were holding a small ball between them. He took me through some exercises then, having me imagine the ball filling up and deflating as I breathed in and out, but after a while he shook his head and said, "No, not like that. You are too much in your head. You have to be in the ball."

With that he took my right hand and placed his two hands on either side.

"Are you going to teach me some healing hands?" I asked. "I have read something about Reiki and Mrs" I stopped abruptly. I had initially noticed strong warmth coming from Shun Yuan's hands, which is what had caused my comment, but now something else entirely was happening.

It felt like a pressure was building, getting stronger and stronger as I sat and looked at my hand and felt it getting gradually squashed. Far from being hot, Shun Yuan's hands now seemed to be emitting a cold breeze. He moved his right hand ever so slowly until the fingers were pointing at my palm and then drew a circle with those fingers just millimetres away from my skin.

I could feel a cold point on my skin and felt it move down and around as he traced the circle with his fingers. Just at the point where the circle became complete and I was completely entranced by what was going on I felt a shock, like a powerful spark of electricity which struck me in the palm and travelled up my right arm.

I leaped up out of my seat with a cry, my arm flailing about and knocking flower pots off the ledges where they had been placed. I tumbled backwards out of my chair and landed heavily on my back, winding myself in the process.

"What the hell was that?" I demanded. To which Shun Yuan said, "You tell me. You did ninety nine per cent of what just happened, flailing about like that and smashing up my hosts flower pots!" I wasn't going to be put off.

"You know exactly what I mean" I said, "what was that and how did you do it?"

"It's just not sinking in is it?" he asked.

"Perhaps it was a poor choice of example."

"Then show me another one!" I said eager for more of the same.

Shun Yuan stood then and led me off the porch to a grassy area beside the house. He stood in front of me and without any warning at all he thrust his forefinger at my belly. My body reacted, instantly doubling over; though whether in reaction to something he had done or in fear or anticipation of what might be imminent I wasn't aware and never did have any time to work out.

As I doubled up my head had struck his and as I fell to the floor I thought that this must be what it is like to head-butt a bowling ball.

"I'm sorry" he said. "That is going to bruise badly. I didn't expect your reaction to be quite so energetic and was too slow getting out of the way. Let me see if I can find something so we can prevent you having a black eye."

A few minutes later he returned with a damp cloth which had a similar smell to the medicinal plasters that Mrs Lim had given to me.

"Perhaps I'm just thick" I said as I nursed my head.

"But you are going to have to explain to me how you did that."

Shun Yuan had the oddest look on his face, which called to mind the look my physics teacher had given me after trying to explain a concept to me for the hundredth time and getting only my blank stare in return.

"I am not trying to be difficult" he said, "but you must understand this. That was not something that I did to you. In a very real sense everything that has happened is a thing done between us. It's like we are dancing a dance, with me

doing my steps and you doing your steps. It's just that in this dance just like in tui-shou, I have a different intent, which is to upset your centre and take advantage of that while you are off balance. What I failed to realize is how tightly wound up you had become, so the slightest trigger was enough to cause a massive reaction."

"Perhaps you are right" I said.

"Perhaps I'm just not ready to be able to hear what you are trying to share with me, but I have an idea. Would you agree to come to the park with me? Perhaps if you were to demonstrate your method with my friends there, we would be able to come to a better understanding."

Shun Yuan nodded in agreement and we arranged that we would meet at the park the following Sunday, when we would have the whole day to practise again. I was hopeful that a good number of Peng's group would be around as I really wanted to see what their reaction would be.

After assuring myself by prodding and poking at my face and head that I had not suffered any permanent injury, I climbed on the scooter and rode home.