

## **Series of Articles published in the July-September issues of Martial Talk Magazine :**

# **The Reality of Chi**

### **Episode I: Part Myth, Part Science, Everyday Experience**

Deals with the common Eastern and Western (mis)understanding of Chi, and offers basic definitions of Chi Kung & Tai Chi. Disclaimer about different experiences of Chi in different arts. Explanation and proof of the experience of Chi in everyday life.

### **Episode II: Internal Arts for Dummies**

Deals with how Chi is used in interaction with your environment (i.e. other people). Stupid Chi tricks. Discusses rooting, pushhands, and internal striking. Sensation of intention and chi. The Eliminating reaction time by bypassing neuromuscular feedback.

### **Episode III: Chi Kung & Safely Using Chi**

Deals with possible harm caused by improper Chi Kung. Avoiding “Packing the Chi” and shaking it off. Warning signs of poor practice. Advice for further study.

### **Episode IV: Semi-Impact Punch Non-Mechanics**

Deals with the “One-Inch Punch”. The use of the body to cause and direct a chi wave instead of hopeful body mechanics.

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Deals with the myths and facts about various types of iron palm and iron shirt training. Conditioning vs. self-mutilation. How it works.

### **Episode VI: Chi Across The World**

Deals with the experience of Chi as described in other cultures. Linguistic equivalents, and literary and historical accounts relating breath to life force. Fanciful interpretation of Christian theology related to the Trinity in light of Chinese medicinal concepts.

### **Tagline**

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# The Reality of Chi

## Episode I: Part Myth, Part Science, Everyday Experience

*Let me tell you a story.* A veteran Black Belt of Tae Kwon Do once told me not to talk about chi (ch'i, ki, whatever) because – according to him – there is no point in even trying to understand or experience it unless you've been doing martial arts for at least ten years. I was nineteen, stubborn, and way too impious to take his word for it, especially since I had then recently begun training in Chinese-style martial arts and learned some basic Chi Kung (Qigong) practices. I was already learning how to focus my breath in a way that I could not only feel, but also do things my muscles alone could not.

My first teacher was a fraud. But he was still a somewhat learned and experienced martial artist that opened up a new world of experience to me. I had already studied Eastern philosophy since I was thirteen, and remember playing in my basement with ki exercises from a book on Aikido, flinging my arms up and down while vigorously exercising my diaphragm. But as my personality is also that of a mad scientist, I always longed to truly put the theory of such things into practice – to find out “where the tires hit the pavement” in a measurable, repeatable, even scientific way.

Over the years, I took what bits and pieces I learned from training in various arts, including my first teacher, and compared them with extensive book research of modern and ancient texts (translated into English, of course!) and continued to build a theoretical foundation for the martial arts and practices that worked for me. The concept of Chi was central. The practice of chi is another story. That came from interacting with other people – teachers, colleagues, and students – and then became central to my practice as well. My formal education in Philosophy had taught me that reality is that which imposes itself upon you, and so by physical practice and experience, I learned exactly where “the tires hit the pavement.”

Now if you're like me or any other martial artists that read these kind of magazines, you've probably had it up to wherever with articles titled like this one, promising to end the debate over whether chi is superstitious nonsense, magic, or some special practice. Sorry, but I've got better things to do than convince you of something many of you have probably made up your mind about a long time ago.

What I can do is write about theories and concepts that when applied, not only actually work in real life, but help you understand the world around you in an obvious way, as if you should have known it all along. I offer no challenge to you to prove me right or wrong, and no hard feelings if you don't believe me, and you have my blessing to have your own theory, or discard what I say because it is not the way you may have been traditionally (or non-traditionally) taught. All I know is that I have taught these things for many years now, to hundreds of people of all ages and physical conditions, and the universal ability of my students to be able to understand and experience chi in a concrete way, right away is confirmation enough for me that I may not be a chi kung master, but I'm unquestionably on the right track.

***So what is Chi?*** The first thing I tell my students is that “Chi” is simply breath (as in Chi Kung, but not the same Chi as in TaiChi – it’s a different Chinese character and only sounds the same because my inflection of Mandarin is lousy).

But it’s almost as important what it is not. Chi is not “Spirit” (a different Chinese word and concept – “Shen”). It is not some mystical, psychic energy, or at least for practical purposes is left not described like some New Age fad. Chi is simply breath, but as a whole body experience. In the next article in the series, I will discuss specific real-life, try-it-on-your-spouse-or-at-a-party examples of how chi works in relation to body mechanics. But for now, I’ll show you what you already know.

First, consider the way a baby breathes (pardon my quoting Lao Tze). Their lower abdomen goes in and out. Not their chest. Not their diaphragm. Anyone who has taken up a wind musical instrument or done any choral or other voice training knows where to breathe. Down there. Way down there, centering just below the navel. The Chinese call it the lower “Dan T’ien” (whereas the middle one is at the diaphragm – the solar plexus, or “hara” in yoga). If we were dead (“dead weight”?), that would be the geographic center of gravity in our body. The reason it usually doesn’t feel that way is because we breathe too high, even toward our shoulders, which makes us really easy to be knocked over by a smaller person. For practical beginner’s purposes in both chi kung and martial arts, the lower Dan T’ien is the spot you want to maintain your focus, as if you were breathing from that point instead of your mouth, nose, and lungs. So make yourself like that of a child (pardon my quoting Jesus of Nazareth).

Now consider what happens when you try to stand up out of bed in the morning without taking a few breaths. Do you nearly fall? I know it’s not just me. Stretching and yawning and such helps chi flow through the body after sleep (when the chi tends to flow mainly in the torso and not the extremities). Chi is not only necessary for balance, but from a practical standpoint (if theoretically not quite correct), it is balance itself. Your inner ears may give you a perception of balance, but that is all. If you experience vertigo or any other false sense of imbalance (as when you’ve had one too many or are getting over a bad flu), you can use your breath – your chi – to walk straight and stay standing.

You conduct your chi to the ground most obviously through a point behind the balls of the feet. The Chinese call them the “bubbling well cavities”, but you will see people anywhere in the world use that point when great balance is needed. Watch a tightrope walker and you will see that those points are always in contact with what they are walking on. Try staying balanced walking on your heels, and you will find it “unnatural”. Try standing with your knees bent (allowing chi to flow freely) instead of locking them – notice the difference in balance?

Do we really balance our body merely by shifting our weight? If that were the case, why did it take generations of mechanical engineers to build a robot that could walk upright up and down stairs? Instead of countless gyros and computer chips, we have chi.

And what about pets and small kids that don’t want to be picked up? Is it just your imagination (and everyone else’s) that they are heavier? Did someone sneak up and attach a brick to them? We ignore this real-life experience because it doesn’t fit in with

the way we see the world. It is simply the natural ability of animals (including us) to “root” using our chi. Why can’t we root when we grow up? We can – but we just need to remind our body how to a little, that’s all. We’ll cover that in the next article as well.

**And if you really need to know**, there is an ever-growing Western scientific basis for chi. Chi does have a relationship to bioelectric energy in the body, and it is traceable. In the 90s, I’ve seen magnetic detection pointers that can be used to find pressure points. Acupuncturists often have equipment to help them find points (although mine has such equipment, but prefers the old-fashioned way).

Kirlian photography has been used for decades to study the energy fields of living things. The fields extend outside the physical body, and are what some Chinese would call the “external elixir (chi) field” or what in other circles would be called an “aura.” The unique thing is that when part of a leaf is removed, for example, the original shape of the field remains. It makes one wonder about amputees who swear their missing arm or leg itches.

But the most interesting thing is that in the last year or so, western scientists are finally able to track chi flow in specific pathways – you guessed it – the meridians taught in Chinese medicine. So let’s get this straight. We finally came up with the technology to acknowledge something the Chinese always knew was there. Does it officially exist now? Does it matter? What matters is how chi is experienced and useful in health, martial arts, and knowing ourselves in a new way.

Chi isn’t unscientific. It just historically comes out of a different (Chinese) scientific process, and so doesn’t seem like science to us. Our reference system for understanding the world is hypothesizing and then comparing measurable results of trial and error. For the Chinese, it’s observation that leads to understanding. The latter is the same scientific process that gave mankind everything from toilet paper and gunpowder to the seismograph and moveable type (a millennium before Gutenberg). The irony is that many Mainland Chinese, due in part to the mentality of the so-called Cultural Revolution, write chi off, along with their entire scientific heritage, as superstition and inferior to Western science.

If you can understand (and experience) your body and the world around you from this different frame of reference, you will have new tools to use and live by, in martial arts and everyday life. You may even be surprised that some things that were “impossible” from one point of view make perfect sense in another.

So I’m done talking now. **The next articles** will show you how your “tires hit the pavement” with real-life applications of chi, from the much-touted “One-Inch Punch” and much-debated Iron Palm Training to basic push-hands and safely doing chi kung exercises. Like I tell my students – I don’t care if you believe in chi or not. Just be ready for it.

# The Reality of Chi

## Episode II: Internal Arts for Dummies

**There are endless descriptions** of the difference between internal and external martial arts, and between soft and hard styles, some of which are accurate and others that are not. That is not the point of this article. What I mean by “Internal Arts” for our purpose here is making chi the conscious method of martial technique (and force) instead of merely muscular activity. We use our muscles and breath together all the time, but by neglect (being unaware), we fail to use our chi effectively to overcome the limitations of our physical (muscular) strength. Let’s start from the beginning.

When I first demonstrate how chi works to a new class, I don’t do it myself. What would be the point? It would just be a trick I practiced for years, right? So in a class of first-time-through-the-door students, I grab someone who doesn’t think of themselves as muscularly strong and make them do it.

### (Stupid Chi Trick #1)

They stand in a rough “triangular stance” (with one foot forward and the other pointing off to the side – it’s “rough” because they never did anything like this before, but that’s alright). The hand on the side of the body with their foot forward (usually the right) is palm forward, with the arm outstretched, but slightly bent – not locked.

First, I show the class that the arm moves up and down at the elbow. That is the way the body works according to Western Physiology – muscles and bones acting as pulleys and levers. When I tell them to keep their arm stiff when I try to bend it, I have little problem bending their forearm back toward their shoulder. Even against someone relatively strong, it does not require a lot of force to do this.

Then I tell them to use their body as a conductive instrument for their breath (chi) instead of a system of pulleys and levers. This is how I tell them to do it:

“Imagine a well or spring in the ground that comes up into your body up to your waist. It’s capped off at your waste (your center, just behind and below the navel) like a pressure valve. By breathing in and out (and as low as you can, trying to center it there), let the water churn up and out through your hand, with your arm like a pressure hose. Don’t lock the arm, but picture the water flowing strongly up and through the arm in an arc, out through the hand, and out past the wall, past the outside of the building, all the way to the horizon.”

I tell them that they should resist with their muscles too, but to keep this imagery as they push forward instead of down, stronger as necessary while I apply pressure to their arm.

“Don’t hold your breath, just keep the pressure on as you breathe in and out. And don’t laugh – it disrupts your chi.”

By this time, I am usually placing their wrist on my shoulder, and leaning forward, I place all of my strength (and most of my weight) on their upper arm, just above the elbow. When I'm done, I ask them if they are strong enough to do what they just did, and they say no. But did they do it? Yes. The person knows how much force was involved, but just to be sure, I have other people in the class try to bend it. And the "volunteer" did all that without years of meditation and practice.

But WITH years of meditation and practice, even the muscular tension is not necessary. Just so they don't think it's a simple using the muscles in another direction, I have them do it to me, usually three people trying to bend my arm at once, while one other feels my relaxed arm muscles.

### **(Stupid Chi Trick #2)**

Of course this isn't just an arm trick. The whole body can be used that way. For example, I had one of the top instructors of an American mantis style try to impress me by going into a low Bow-and-Arrow stance and have me stand on their back leg. With my few years of experience at the time, I understood that chi was used as a conductive force, extending through the torso, down through the leg and into the ground. I did it myself on the first try. But you may not want to do this at home – if you don't do it well (and even if you do and someone is wearing the wrong shoes) it can be quite painful – not to mention the fact that I almost had my sweatpants pulled down once trying to do it!

### **Rooting (Stupid Chi Trick #3)**

Children and pets are heavier when they don't want to be picked up. This isn't the collective imagination of everyone you've ever met – it's called "rooting" in martial arts. We all do it to some extent naturally, but without purposely using it over the years, we need to remind our body how to do it. Practicing this exercise a few times will do just that.

Stand in what most people would call a "Horse Stance" or "Horse-Riding Stance", feet more than shoulder-width apart, knees bent forward a little, pelvis tucked under. (I prefer the feet nearly parallel for this exercise, but you can try it toes outward if that's what you are used to.) Focus your step – your weight – on the spots just behind the balls of the feet, which the Chinese call the "Bubbling Well" cavities.

Breathe abdominally, of course, and to help you guide the chi downward into the ground, place the hands halfway outstretched at waist level and breathe in as if you were pulling them into your center (below the navel) with your breath. When you exhale push your hands (with a little iso-kinetic tension if you're not used to using your chi) palms down around your thighs until they are on either side of you and focus them downward as if helping push your breath down through your feet, deep into the ground.

Some people try to grip the ground with their toes, and this may help some people, but I never found this necessary. Some masters, such as Mantak Chia, will tell you to picture your weight screwing down into the ground from your feet. I've found it helps is to picture yourself as the top of a mountain that is crushing into itself under its own weight.

Whatever visualization works for you, let the hand motions be low and continuous, and let the breathing roll downward through the feet on both the inhale and exhale. The lower body should be rigid, while the shoulders will be relaxed yet immovable.

To test if you are succeeding, have someone push your shoulders sideways. There should be a strong resistance without fighting the person's strength. Gently have them apply a knee-to-the-back-of-the-leg takedown. If all their weight and strength against your calf cannot break the stance, your root is solid. You will be difficult to lift, if possible at all, and leg sweeps are useless. I'm not kidding. When I stop in other people's schools, I have to "turn off" my chi / root so leg sweeps and such will work on me in practice sessions.

Years ago, I taught this exercise to a 14-year-old acquaintance (a brown belt in Kempo) while watching fireworks one 4<sup>th</sup> of July in the park. I didn't mean to cause any trouble, really. His master was a well-respected teacher (4<sup>th</sup> Dan) who even competes in Japan, but never taught his student about chi (or ki, as it would be called in Japanese). I heard later that the next time his master tried to throw him, he couldn't. There he was, about 100 pounds wet, not even intentionally rooting, with his master throwing other students around to try and figure what he was doing wrong on him. I felt bad because his master wasn't doing anything wrong – I still have a lot of respect for him. The rules just changed, that's all.

The point is that it doesn't take years of training – and once your body remembers, you do it naturally, and your rooting gets even stronger with practice. And if you want to increase the root another 50% or more, you can focus through a third point, but that would be a whole other article.

**So how is any of this practical, you may ask?** Doing stupid people tricks on David Letterman may pay well, but what about the back alley afterward?

When you learn how chi works, you start to realize how it can be used to control your immediate environment – your body and the area around it. You can transfer it to (and through) other people.

That is what internal striking is all about. Just like martial chi kung practitioners can break the third brick in a stack only, you can focus your breath through a strike so that an organ is damaged without leaving a bruise on the skin. This is not extreme. We focus like this all the time, whether it's following Sensei's advice to aim for the back of the target or just past it, or hitting a golf ball by focusing your "hit" through the shaft to the face of the club. (The latter is another reason weapons training is useful, even in internal arts.)

This is also where Push Hands exercises come in. If you think such things are only about leverage and a low center of gravity physically, you're missing half the equation. Such training is more about learning to read a person's breathing, and therefore their center of gravity and when and where their balance is strong and weak. This is done by using your breath through your body as in the exercises above. And you may as well put on a

blindfold for that – apart from proper body posture and breathing, only your feel, or “6<sup>th</sup> sense” for chi will help you.

Lastly, on a higher level, using your chi means something almost thinkable – the complete elimination of reaction time. We see something happening with our eyes, process the stimulus, send a neuromuscular command to the body, and use feedback to adjust accordingly as we go. If this means hitting a professional league fastball, we have approximately one-eighth of a second to swing or not swing, and even if we “just do it” without our conscious mind interfering (reaching “mushin” [Jap.] or “no-mind” through intense practice), there is still a limit. What if the fastball is pitched from three feet away? What if the ball is a fist or a foot?

What if we look at it the Chinese way? Yi (your “intention” or “focus”, sometimes experienced as the feeling on the back of your neck when someone’s watching you) guides your chi, culminating in physical force through the muscles (“li”) with or without muscular tension. If you can train your intention to respond to another’s intention, the chi flows freely at the same time the person moves (or begins to move).

In his brilliant book, Mind Over Matter, Master Shi Ming (OMD) compares the processes in this way. The typical way a person responds to a situation is with the brain like a general shouting commands to the soldiers down the ranks, the muscles. The “higher” way to respond is with the general, the yi, actually fighting on the front lines. This is literally bypassing neuromuscular feedback. It’s the direct sensing and compensation you learn from push hands.

It must seem like fantasy when you consider how we see the idea of reaction time, but again, we are trying to play by different rules. Slowly, with training and practice, one can learn to act appropriately *with* another’s intention instead of reacting to it. The myth of blocking someone before they strike isn’t so much of a myth as it seems once you understand this.

### **Monks Move Over ...**

From this article, I hope you’re discovering that you don’t need to train half your life in the Shaolin Temple to use chi to do many seemingly advanced things (not just party tricks). This may offend some martial artists. After all, many never learned (or were open to?) such things even after years of training. It’s supposed to be something just for the Masters – they “own” the idea of chi, right? Sorry guys – the mystery is gone now, and chi is now open to the general public.

Worse yet, whoever reads the next articles in this series will be equipped to do the “infamous” One-Inch-Punch, basic chi kung exercises for making it all work better, and even a primer in anyone-can-do-it “Iron Palm” training – the right way. And if your 4<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belt teacher can’t throw you any more, just blame it on me.

# The Reality of Chi

## Episode III: Chi Kung & Safely Using Chi

**Some of you consciously practice using your chi already**, and some of you may have just started experiencing it with some awareness by going through the exercises in the last article. This article deals with some basic principles of chi exercises and practices, and instead of going through a vast number of things you can pick up from books and other magazines, the focus will be on general insights and avoiding pitfalls.

**So what is Chi Kung?** In short, “chi kung” is any number of Chinese breath exercise practices. The word “kung” is the same Chinese word as in “kung fu,” which contrary to Hollywood and even modern Chinese connotation really means “excellence through a long period of practice.” Perhaps you have “kung fu” in dance, or painting, or carpentry.

Anyway, chi kung has probably been around since long before recorded history, though nearly all the practices we know today are much less than two thousand years old. Many martial arts have their own chi kung practices, and there are both Buddhist influences that can be traced back to Indian Yoga, as well as equally-as-ancient Taoist traditions native to China. The goals of chi kung can be longevity, martial vigor, and even spiritual enlightenment.

What all chi kung has in common is the intention is for chi to flow through the body. Chi naturally flows through the body, and I could write a whole other article about it, but it suffices here to say that consciously guiding chi, or moving in such a way that promotes chi flowing in a particular way, is the point of chi kung. Exercises given to the common people for health reasons tend to be physical movements that result in proper breathing (corrective chi flow). Many martial techniques start with proper breathing that result in proper physical movement. Proper breath and proper movement reinforce one another.

Many exercises can be done with muscular tension, which helps beginners bring chi to the tensing area. The goal of some chi kung traditions, such as Tai Chi, is to eventually eliminate all muscular tension to create irresistible explosive inner strength. In other words, there are many right ways to do chi kung in both approach and practice.

**General guidelines** for chi kung are simple, even if practices vary. Not all of this advice will apply to all exercises, but most or all of them will most or all of the time. Most exercises can be done sitting or standing, and some in other postures. But regardless of posture, relaxation (of any part of the body not specifically tensed for a particular exercise) is important to better allow chi flow.

Abdominal breathing is most common in chi kung, especially for beginners and martial artists. There are different ways to do this, but I keep it simple for beginners by telling them to extend the belly when inhaling and press it inward when exhaling, as is common in voice training. Unless specified otherwise, you can assume that is where you must focus breathing. Breathing this low instead of the chest or even diaphragm is especially important in martial arts, as the spot below the navel is the natural “center of gravity” of the human body, and wherever you breathe from is where your actual center of gravity

drifts to. That's why people who breathe around their shoulders can be pushed over so easily. You want it to be where it belongs, right? Breath abdominally, as a baby breathes.

Generally, the spine is erect, which means not "straightened" by sitting up or standing up "straight" and tall, but by a slight slouch – tucking the pelvis under the spine for support. This one habit can eliminate many people's lower back pain altogether. This truly straightens the spine, and gravitationally stacks the vertebra one atop another, making weight distribute evenly on the discs. The head tends to be in line with the spine, not drooping down.

Unless tensing, and often even then, joints should not be overextended. Arms and legs should always be slightly bent, even at "full extension" of a movement or posture. This allows unblocked chi flow to and from the extremities.

The rest of the basic principles worth mentioning here are how NOT to do chi kung.

**So what can go wrong?** Some of you have come across martial arts magazine articles from time to time on "Bad Chi" or "Chi Disease" and legitimately wonder what the dangers are, if any. Just as many people with no mentor cannot handle hallucinatory experiences in the higher levels of meditation, some people push their breath exercises in the wrong direction. There is a wrong way. Many wrong ways, in fact. But it's not a minefield if you use some common sense.

How do you know if you're doing it wrong? There are obvious warning signs of poor practice. If you are doing something wrong, or your body does not want you to do a particular exercise for some reason, you will most likely experience some degree of light-headedness and/or a feeling of being sick to your stomach.

If this happens, stop. Reevaluate what you are doing, and if you can figure out what you were doing wrong, try again the right way. If not, do not continue the exercise. Try it at another time or until you find someone with much greater experience with Chi Kung, preferably an OMD (Oriental Medical Doctor).

### **"Packing the Chi"**

A common practice for some martial artists to develop immense striking power is to "pack the chi" by concentrating and holding it at the lower dan t'ien – the point just below the navel. Don't do this as a regular practice – ever. Chi is like water. If it isn't moving for a while, it becomes stagnant. It makes as much sense as trying to hold your breath for a few weeks. From what I've read here and there over the years, common damage from doing this long-term can be both physical and mental. Mentally, practitioners may become obsessive compulsive, manifesting in addictions both behavioral and chemical, such as gambling and drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. Physically, they tend to lose the ability to use their legs, perhaps describable as gradual paralysis of the lower body.

Few people will ever take poor practice to this extreme. Only if your body tells you something is wrong and you keep doing incorrect or inappropriate chi kung will there be problems. Can you ever “pack the chi” or focus it in one area? Of course you can – it’s an essential part of many exercises. The difference is that when you accumulate chi in one area for concentrated use, you USE IT and don’t just leave it sit there.

**For example**, in my beginner’s class, we go through the “water path” variation of an exercise often called the “microcosmic orbit” or “small tour of the body.” To make it easier to feel and focus chi through the path, students first breathe into the center (lower dan t’ien, below the navel) and visualize it compressing it while exhaling, accompanied by tensing the abdominal muscles a bit. We do this “packing” for a minute or two until most of the students can clearly picture the center. Then we draw it through our body using our breath focus and visualization.

But at the end, just to be sure there’s no accumulation of chi to become “stagnant,” we breathe in picturing our breath washing away tension in the center, and then breath out visualizing the chi flowing outward throughout the body to the extremities. Placing the hands way from the center, as on the knees, helps draw the concentration away as well.

No doubt many of you would do this practice differently, or even say I’m doing it wrong based on your own learning, but this article isn’t about different styles of chi kung or better and worse methods. The point is that however you focus chi into an area, it must be released.

#### **(Stupid Chi Trick #4)**

Another example is a simple hand-warming exercise. This seems to work best in a standing position, knees not locked, abdominal breathing, the rest of the body relaxed, etc., all as mentioned in the basic principles above. Generate heat in the hands by “pressing them together as hard as you can without letting them touch.” Move them slowly past each other, as if rolling a ball of dough between the palms.

Once they are nice and toasty (after a few seconds to a minute or two), we move them slowly over our eyes and down the front of the body to in front of the center, and then place them firmly on our kidneys, focusing the hands inward as if they were rubbing the inside of the front of the abdomen in circles. Quite an interesting feeling once you get it.

But what happens when you’ve had enough? Your hands are still “charged” with chi. It’s simple – shake them off for a few moments. Clap a few times if you like. I often throw punches where the fist opens upon extension. It’s strange how natural this is – some students unknowingly try to shake their hands right after the hands are first charged, and have to be told not to yet. The body does not want to be “overcharged” with too much chi in any one area for long.

**So where do we go from here?** No matter what art or discipline you study, and for whatever purpose, use common sense. If you want to play with simple exercises from a book, magazine, or video, watch your body’s reaction. Don’t play with advanced exercises or meditations without supervision. I tell my students that what we do in class

will not hurt them, but for advanced study, the guidance of someone who knows a lot more than I do is a must. If there's no one in your area whose experience you can trust, it's better to drive a hundred miles every week or two than to play with fire. Besides, you can spend a lifetime studying basic chi kung, and improve quality of life and martial ability just the same. Best of all, the next couple of articles will be on the "One-Inch Punch" and Iron Palm training theory, where a little chi kung practice goes a long way.

# The Reality of Chi

## Episode IV: Semi-Impact Punch Non-Mechanics

Ever since Bruce Lee demonstrated publicly the “Three-Inch Punch”, people have tried explaining it away with “traditional” (Western) body mechanics. That’s understandable, but wrong. Some people think it’s fake altogether. Insistent cynics are welcome to believe this all the way to the floor behind them, over and over until they figure it out.

Some people call it the “One-Inch Punch”, but it really doesn’t matter what the distance is. In fact, I call it the “Semi-Impact Punch” because I start with my fingers gently touching the person before the strike, and close the fist against them. Until you understand how it REALLY works, it seems like pushing the person really fast, when you’re actually just striking them at a distance of zero. And understanding how it works makes all the difference in the world.

Mechanically, people often practice punching while focusing a twisting of the hip. They insist that the hip movement makes the body weight go through the punch for a huge result. This may unknowingly help their chi flow better to get the desired effect anyway, but some of us just use our chi and don’t turn the hip at all for at least the same amount of force. After all, hitting someone with the ground behind you is a lot more force than hitting them with your limited body weight. Let’s review the physics of force as we learned in school.

In an impact, the force equals the mass of the object hitting multiplied by its speed. Using this formula, the force of a strike, even assuming most of the kinetic energy transfers to the person being hit, is never greater than the mass of the part(s) of the body used to strike and the speed of the strike. Turning the hip with the strike uses more of the body’s mass and therefore creates more force. Doing the strike quickly also assures more force. The problem is that even “throwing your weight into it” without a reasonable distance to have any real connecting impact at a decent speed does not result in any huge increase in power. Instead of the weight of your arm at some particular speed, as in an ordinary strike, you are maybe able to quadruple the mass involved at a somewhat lower speed, given no room to accelerate. Unless you are quite strong and quick, that will not slam most people into the chair behind them when hit by such force.

**So how can you get more force without more speed or mass?** By conducting the force of chi (breath) in your body between the ground and the rear of your target. Let’s break this down, starting with the last part of the statement.

In most arts, you are taught to aim past the point of impact to maximize force. It is a matter of focus, not physics. In fact, the physics model does not apply to focus, which in Chinese internal martial arts is simply understood as your chi being drawn to the point of your intention (yi). That’s why you see practitioners breaking, for example, the THIRD brick in a stack of five without breaking the others. Focus determines the force instead of the strength and speed dependent physics of impact.

The rest of the statement then falls into place. You must change your focus quickly, through your Bubbling Well cavities (the points just behind the ball of the feet), up through the body, and then released through the front of the person you are hitting, and beyond. This draws the chi from the ground beneath you upward and outward like a wave clear through the person.

**But how is it done specifically?** There are countless ways depending on training and situation, but here is a simple practice method. Stand with one foot forward with most of your weight on it, hips forward. Remember, we're not concerned with playing a game with body weight by turning the hips. Knees and elbows must be relaxed and not locked. The hand position I use is with the back of my fingers lightly touching the person's chest (actually I usually hit a phone book I have them hold lightly against their chest for safety). It looks like grabbing an imaginary staff in right front of them, or the finishing position for a punch against their chest, but without the hand closed in a fist.

The secret is being relaxed, staying focused, and tensing the body in a coordinated way from ground to fist. This by itself does not generate any real physical force, but unless you are used to using your chi without corresponding muscular exertion, the tensing will help your chi flow properly from one area of focus to the next. Breathing will be at the center (just below the navel) and after a deep inhale, you exhale and strike.

This strike happens by quickly doing the following. Visualize a heavy, compact wave shooting up from the ground into your back leg upward, tensing the body as you go. It should flow up through the center, upward and outward through the hand as you close it into a fist against the person you are hitting. The tension should be released as you continue your focus through the person immediately after the moment of impact.

Can you do it now? Probably not on the first try. It takes some practice to build such coordination, but it's still easier than you think, especially if you regularly practice chi kung and can consciously control your chi, as in the exercises in the last article. Just be aware that on a good day you can do internal damage to the person you are hitting if you stop your focus just past the fist, or take too deep of a breath once you get the hang of it. The person will also be affected depending on their breathing, stance, etc., so it is difficult to reproduce consistently in a coffee shop. But even with all these variables, it will be obvious when you do it right.

In the end, you may not think this technique practical in a real fight, but teaching your body to explode outward with such force eventually depends less and less on precise conditions. After a while, you can launch your "wave" at any time when needed.

Unfortunately, you need a (willing) person to practice, as people are a lot more responsive to chi than a punching bag, namely because they have chi in the first place. If you want to practice on something else, like a wall or a tree, the next article is for you – Iron Palm training. Unlike the millionth article to "set the record straight", I will explain how it works in terms of chi, and go through the right and wrong ways in beginner's practice. In the meantime, practice and practice, and you'll soon "catch the wave!"

# The Reality of Chi

## Episode V: Yes, Virginia, There Really is Iron Palm Training

In previous articles, we talked about different experiences of chi and chi kung and how it relates to martial arts. These things have been discussed in print before, but it seems you can't open more than a couple martial arts magazines without seeing at least one article on Iron Palm. Methods, debunking, debunking the debunking, and mostly just opinions based on one person's experience, and often that person isn't even the one writing the article.

This article will speak from both research and experience to give a basic understanding of iron palm, as well as some insight into why it's so (unnecessarily) controversial. But I have to admit that my experience is limited, and so I won't try to make this a how-to article. Find a teacher for that.

**The biggest problem** when talking about Iron Palm is what kind of conditioning you are talking about. Many people apply the term "Iron Palm" to physical hardening of the hands by abuse of repeated impact. By itself, this is not conditioning at all really, but just hardening through calluses and calcification. Some cultures, without access to Chinese medicine, or perhaps for different purposes, practice this way until the knuckles are enlarged, the skin rough and de-sensitized, and on rare occasion even to the point of disfiguration and paralysis of the fingers.

On the other hand, Iron Palm conditions the hands for both impact resistance and penetrating power, without the loss of sensitivity or softness of the skin. It is consistent with the rest of internal arts and the concept of "iron wrapped in silk." This differs from hardening in both theory and method.

**The theory of impact resistance** may best be explained in Mantak Chia's book Iron Shirt Chi-Kung, where Master Chia describes this phenomenon as hyper-oxygenating the fascia, or in Chinese terms, filling the space between skin and muscle with chi. He makes the apt comparison to the tires on a car, which are soft and vulnerable when flat or unfilled, but impact resistant when inflated.

The difference in practice is not as obvious. Many practitioners will start out each day striking softer material (traditionally such things as warm sand or a bag of mung beans), and slowly working up to harder materials (such as an iron ingot or a bag of iron pellets). This process may take years when done properly, and any combination of strikes (including finger strikes) may be in the regimen. This by itself may be called Iron Palm, but it is the focus with one's breath and the use of Chinese herbs (including Dit-Ta-Jow) that prevents damage and promotes impact resistance instead of desensitization.

Every school has its herbal prescriptions at various levels of practice, but the early levels can be done without such supplement (although Rose Milk or other skin lotion wouldn't hurt). The practice is in focusing through the hand into the material from the lower dan t'ien (the point just below the navel). Regular practice of all the strikes common to your style or other practice is the best plan. Don't rush into harder materials, and don't hit as

hard as you can with your muscles. Work on solid impact and hold the position for a moment on impact. There are all sorts of contradictory advice about the specifics of practice, and you can go elsewhere to read about them, but the best rule is to do whatever your teacher advises. Certain details of practice work with each other and some against.

The result that few people realize at first is penetrating power. With even a little training (and if you practice such strikes), not only will you be able to smack a piece of wood with fair force with the back of your hand without regretting it, but you can poke people with your fingers with amazing (but probably annoying) results. In fact, I would not recommend learning finger strikes if you do not at least do a little Iron Palm.

**But what about conditioning other parts of your body?** Knock yourself out, but you may not find too many books on Iron Elbow or Iron Big Toe. However, general impact resistance can be achieved through Iron Shirt training, which can be either smacking yourself with socks full of sand (which some martial artists actually do), or more intense (and effective) chi kung practice. This is best done under a teacher, and you may have seen the results in documentaries, where someone will bend a metal bar over someone's back, or drive a van over their stomach. It's all real, but don't try this at home.

So is Iron Palm real? Only to people who've done it, and there are more than you think, and I don't mean people selling videos about it. I mean people like you and me. This article concludes the training-related part of the series, so have fun with it, but tune in one last time next issue – we'll be talking about the experience of chi in different cultures, with some interesting interpretations of its impact on literature, linguistics, and even religion.

# The Reality of Chi

## Episode VI: Chi Across The World

The way chi – breath-body energy – is viewed by the Chinese is unique to their culture, but the reality behind it is always present, and understood in different ways in different places. For example, some Japanese martial arts, Aikido in particular, makes a point of integrating chi (“ki” in Japanese) into training. As Japanese medicine could be describes as a simplified derivative of Chinese medicine, it is no wonder many of the points and exercises are identical. However, the Japanese do understand (and therefore use) body energy somewhat differently, which is why practices like Reiki are a distinctly varied tradition from chi kung.

Chi kung is sometimes described as “Chinese Yoga”. Then again, yoga could just as easily be described as “Indian Chi Kung.” Again, they are different traditions pointing at the same reality of the human body, breath, and mind, but each has their own cultural interpretation. Yoga uses the breath – “prana” in Sanskrit – as a guiding, cleansing, whole-body experience as does chi kung, and the meridian along the spine is just as important. The main difference is that instead of focus on the “Triple Burner” system of Dan T’iens (energy *fields* below the navel, solar plexus, and third eye), yoga uses seven energy *points* – charkas – that are not equivalents in location, function or structure. The middle dan t’ien at the solar plexus (diaphragm) in yoga is called the “hara”.

There are probably many other correlations between the two theory systems, but without extensive study in both, it is all too easy to say “this is that” when the relationship is not there. New Age theories tend to mash such different traditions together haphazardly, and then the practical use of all traditions are watered down or lost.

Throughout the ages, people have had a natural understanding of chi. These are not isolated secret practices, and even if a culture does not have a special tradition for breath training, it is evident of this understanding in language. The breath-like “spirit” of a person in the ancient classical world was called the “spiritus” (Latin), or animating life force, the rough equivalent of the Greek “pneuma” or breath. Until the measurement of brainwaves, death was deemed official at the stop of breathing. “Giving up the ghost” was understood for countless generations as a last breath where the spirit leaves the body.

Interestingly, the “spirit” of God in Judeo-Christian scripture is the Hebrew word “rhea”, roughly meaning breath, as in the spirit/breath of God moved over the waters in the process of creation, and is consistent with such passages as when Jesus of Nazareth breathed His spirit upon the apostles. What does this have to do with chi? Here is a fanciful correlation between Chinese medicinal concepts and Christian trinity theology.

The Chinese understanding of the body-mind relationship is not that they are two complementary things, but that body, breath, and spirit (think “will”) are all part of mind (think “self”). The body is the physical part, the spirit is the spiritual part, and the two are connected by chi (breath). One’s higher self “connects” with your body using chi – it is sort of like a computer (or operating system) connects the user to electronic data. No wonder chi kung improves body, psyche, and the connectedness of the two!

Anyway, the concept in Christian theology of the trinity is that God is made up of three parts – Father in heaven (spiritual), the Son (physical incarnation, or “avatar” in Eastern thought), and Holy Spirit/Ghost (which is the most enigmatic of the three). The “Spirit” here could easily be understood in light of chi kung theory as the interface or connective force between the universal spiritual self and the physical world. Again, this is interesting to talk about, but is just a fanciful interpretation. But chi kung theory allows one to approach such spiritual-physical dichotomies in a whole new light.

The conclusion of all this is that chi is real no matter where or who you are. Use whatever words your culture affords you to use to know and describe it. Practice using it any way you want, be it yoga, chi kung, aikido, reiki, or singing. In the end, it’s just common sense experience in everyday life, as long as you do not limit yourself to the framework in which you see the world. And freeing up your perspective will give you tools and new experiences you never would have thought possible.