Sensitivity Training

The civilised art of combat

by Adrian Chan-Wyles

A term common to many traditional Chinese martial arts is ting (聽). Translated as to 'hear' or to 'listen', it is the essence of sensitivity training. It points to a way of gaining knowledge that is beyond ego, a kind of learning that can be a method for personal growth. This idea can be seen in the Chinese ideogram for ting, which comprises a scholar, who listens with his ear to train his mind/heart, and through this activity his character becomes upright and powerful.

In this context, 'listening' implies a method of learning that, although it includes listening with the ear, is not limited to the hearing process. It is the ability to clearly perceive all the information being processed by the all the body's senses, simultaneously and without confusion or haste. As the mind/heart is calm, no unnecessary internal chatter gets in the way of the 'listening'.

The ideogram used for ting can illustrate this idea too. The right-hand side signifies de (德), often translated into English as 'virtuous power' and 'moral force', and the de ideogram contains the particle 'to walk a path'. This implies a 'direct sensing', unhindered by habits or preconceptions that might otherwise get in the way, a kind of awareness that is intuitive and conscious of what is happening both inside and outside the human body.

Timing and placement are essential to ancient Chinese thinking, notably forming the basis of Feng Shui (風水), a method by which qi (氣) or 'vital energy' is helped to flow smoothly through the physical world (including human beings). When everything stands in its proper relationship to everything else, according to ancient Chinese philosophy, there is balance and universal harmony, both within the person and in the world around them. The philosophical concept of dao (道) is used to describe the situation when qi flows freely through humans and their world. The ideogram here suggests a learned person deliberately and carefully pursuing a path that brings the 'universal' and 'personal' together. At a profound level, such an activity is an exercise in sensitivity.

What is required for this unity of 'universal' and 'personal' is hinted at by hexagram 30 of the Yijing (易經), or 'Classic of Change'. Hexagram 30 is li (離), one of the translations of which is 'clinging'. Originally, the li ideogram referred to a yellow bird that would appear, perched on its branch, when spring was at hand. This is the time of year when Chinese New Year celebrates the promise of a new harvest. Like the yellow bird, we need to be aware both of what we're perched on or clinging to and of the seasons as they are changing around us.

If the mind is not calm and reflective, it is difficult to be 'aware' of both the perch (as taijiquan practitioners, the ground we're stood on) and the cycle of seasons (what is happening around us as we stand). The mind often creates inner barriers that block such deep awareness. In martial training, one common barrier is fear - especially, as so often happens, when fear triggers unhelpful defence mechanisms (tense muscles instead of relaxed muscles, busy thoughts instead of mental clarity). Through careful training, these barriers become transparent or dissolve. Inner awareness replaces vague sensations, and a confusing multiplicity of observations is transformed into a higher sensitivity, into a state of mind that seamlessly integrates the 'inner' with the 'outer'.

One 'sensitivity' exercise common in taijiquan is tui shou (推手), or 'push hands'. Within the martial context, tui shou trains keeping yourself 'rooted' to the ground even as you strive to uproot your opponent. Again, the ideograms that make up the term tui shou are revealing. The first ideogram, tui (推: 'push') can be divided into two particles: the left particle is seen as a simplified 'hand' (shou), pushing the right particle, pronounced zhui, 'short-tailed bird'. (The same 'bird' particle, by the way, as is found in the li ideogram mentioned above.) The second ideogram, shou (手), means 'open hand'.

An association between 'hand' and 'bird' exists purely at the level of the sound - an action performed with the hand (tui, push) sounds like bird (zhui) - but the historical association can also be explained in action. We might picture someone creeping up on a bird, asleep on its perch, ready to grab it off its branch. Alternatively, we might consider someone frightening birds off their crops by waving their arms. Within taijiquan, the level of sensitivity required to perform tui shou effectively is like that required to get rid of a bird, either stealthily snatching it off its perch or more expansively swinging the arms to scare it up from a field.

Another useful association comes from noting that the same ideogram '推' ('push') is used on the doors of shops and

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restaurants in China. When you push hands, be aware of how you might push a revolving door. Although the circling of the arms in tui shou can be fast or slow, the movement must always allow continuous contact to be maintained. Whatever the speed at which tui shou is practised, there must be no break in the exhange of qi energy between opponents.

Another sensitivity exercise is found in Wing Chun Kune (詠春拳, 'Eternal Spring Fist'). Known as chi sau (黐手), it can be translated as 'sticky hands'. The first of these two ideograms, chi (黐), denotes 'bird lime' (a sticky substance that used to be put on branches to trap birds). The chi ideogram has wheat/millet in the top left corner, written above the symbol for a person, which is in turn above the symbol for water: someone who mixes water with wheat/millet makes a type of glue, hence the use of these particles in this ideogram. The sau ideogram (手) is again 'open hand'. As with tui shou for practitioners of taijiquan, the Wing Chun practitioner trains to become so sensitive to their chi sau opponent that contact is never lost. In this way, an opponent's sense of balance is continually tested. Any uncoordinated movement leads to a loss of contact; if, at that moment, the appropriate pressure is applied at the correct angle, the opponent will lose their balance. No matter that chi sau is often performed at blinding speed, 'sticking' to your opponent as they move is the key to this training method.

A third example of such sensitivity training is found in baguaquan (八卦拳, 'Eight Trigram Boxing') and baguazhang (八卦掌, 'Eight Trigram Palm'). The practice of rou shou (揉手) in these martial arts is very subtle, but basically the palms are moved in a circular motion to create openings that enable you to penetrate the defence of your opponent. With these movements you seek to 'meet' and 'integrate with' your opponent's energy – and 'overcome' that energy through superior positioning and the correct combination of assertiveness and yielding. The Chinese character for rou (揉) is translated as to 'rub' or 'knead', with the additional medical implication of generating heat through rubbing to make a muscle pliable. The character rou has three aspects: an open hand (手), a hand in motion (扌) and the root '才' (pronounced 'cai'), which means 'to have talent' or be 'a gifted or brilliant person'. Rou (揉) can be interpreted as 'moving the hands with masterful purpose, in a relaxed manner, applying appropriate pressure where and when required'. A 'gifted or brilliant' practitioner of rou shou must achieve their objectives without undue haste, unnecessary physical force or the interference of the ego, since the presence of any of these three failings produces tension in the system as a whole, blocking the enhanced perception and movement that are available to a master practitioner.

The rou shou movements closely resemble those taijiquan movements (found in both Chen and Yang styles) that are translated as 'To Move Hands Like Clouds' (運手), or more literally 'Cloud Hands'. The circles employed in rou shou are in the vertical plane: one participant places their palms on the outside of their opponent's hands, while the other uses the upper side (the back) of their hands to meet their opponent's palms. This arrangement can be reversed at any time, with the ensuing circular movements having the effect of opening and closing each participant's guard.

All these sensitivity exercises are designed to train students to 'engage' and find a rhythm in response to potentially violent

situations. Careful and structured initial training in tui shou, chi sau and rou shou will inevitably lead to free associative movement, often termed san shou (散手; literally, 'free hand') or san da (散打; literally, 'free fighting'). In the traditional arts, these terms may refer to a level of mastery whereby the clearly defined movements of a style, learnt in a structured way through their training forms (形, xing), are applied in a free-moving and fluid manner, with the practitioner adjusting imperceptibly to their opponent as the circumstances change. As the student matures over the years, the ability to understand how a set movement can be adapted and applied to any number of different and demanding circumstances is deepened in both mind and body, until the process becomes intuitive and immediate.

Such sensitivity exercises, applied throughout a lifetime of martial practice, foster the necessary skills for combat and self-defence, but at the same time can give access to a higher level of civilised being. Remember de (德), the right-hand particle of the ideogram ting (聽, 'listening')? We translated it above as 'virtuous power' and 'moral force' - it can also mean 'moral uprightness'. Certainly structured sensitivity exercises have the potential to build character, insight and compassion, conveying a deep understanding of human interaction through their many highly formalised techniques.