

Internal Martial Arts Fighting

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Did you ever notice how quickly sparring, fighting, or push hands using an internal Chinese martial art starts to look nothing like the art being used? We start out doing things by the book, but once it starts to heat up it can easily turn into two fourth-graders at recess. Art turns to expedience. Style turns to survival.

Self-defense using an internal martial art does not come “naturally”.

Internal arts, like taijiquan, xingyiquan, and baguazhang, do follow natural laws (some that we are only now beginning to understand), but actually applying internal techniques when attacked does not come naturally at all.

Internal Chinese martial arts derive their power from a heightened awareness and development of qi, of connective tissues (ligaments, tendons, fascia, etc.), and of internal compression and expansion. Action is not initiated by muscular contraction, although that does occur as a by-product.

Most of us have gotten along just fine thinking and acting “muscularly”. It is the way we learned to move and operate as children, and most of what we learned later is built up from that foundation. It is what is most familiar to us and we need a darn good reason to abandon that when threatened.

Taijiquan players, in particular, can diligently do their various forms for years, quite content with the magnificent health benefits. Most rarely do push hands, much less spar. So, the chances of being able to actually use the powerful martial art hidden in this graceful dance when it is needed most are slim indeed. Many are certain that martial prowess comes from form practice alone. When pressed to actually show what they know, often 20-30 years goes out the window.

Essential to internal arts is a state of mind- a calm, holistic one. The whole body works as an inter-connected, inter-related system. It demands that the fighter be both “inside” and “outside” simultaneously. You have to be sensitive to and responsive to what is going on in your body, while also staying conscious of how the whole thing operates as a unit. Like playing a video game while also being a character IN the game. At higher levels, you extend the system to your opponent, as well. At that point, you are no longer just reacting instinctively to what your opponent throws your way. You are beginning to fulfill one of the promises of the Taiji Classics:

“Make your opponent feel that when he looks upward, you are much taller, and when he looks downward, you are much lower. When he moves forward, he should feel that he cannot reach you, and when he retreats, he should feel that he has nowhere to escape to.” Wong Chung-Yua

You could argue that this could describe mastery in any competitive endeavor- basketball, chess, running, whatever. In the internal arts, that is the path TO master, not a result of mastery. It is the woof and warp of the art.

Yet this mind-set is not “natural” for most of us. It is not the “software bundled with the unit”. It is something we must learn, slowly and patiently over time. It is something hidden deep within our nature, only accessible when we give up that which we have depended on to that point. It requires not one, but many leaps of faith to become comfortable with this whole different set of skills.

We can't expect to practice only scales on a piano for years, then get onstage at Carnegie Hall and perform Chopin. We can't limit ourselves to doing forms and be comfortable defending ourselves. We may be better off than if we had studied nothing at all, but most likely all will be forgotten when the fear hits. If that primitive part of our brain isn't on a first-name basis with our martial art, it is not likely to make the necessary introductions with someone in your face.

Learning to punch actually requires punching someone. How do even know what it will feel like unless you do it? The hand, fearing injury, will lobby earnestly for a less aggressive approach. Learning to kick, the same. How about taking a punch? A small percentage of even skilled martial artists know how to do that safely. American boxers take lots of head shots skillfully, but many pay a heavy price in long-term brain damage. Internal artists can learn how to take a shot without hanging on to the energy, but it takes practice. William C. C. Chen is legendary for his ability to take a punch. He says it takes about 5,000 head shots to really understand how to do it effectively.

The state of mind of an internal artist- how to remain calm and relaxed even when fighting- is a pretty fragile thing in its early stages. Those looking for quick results may be tempted to abandon its development before it learns to stand on its own.

At the other extreme from those who NEVER test their art, are those who like to throw you into the “deep end of the pool” to learn to swim. With this crowd, you only learn by mixing it up. The novice is constantly in over his head, struggling to avoid pain, injury, and humiliation. It is extremely difficult to access that internal arts state of mind when pushed into the “fight or flight” state. What success that does come is usually a pale imitation of what is possible, relying primarily on brute muscular force.

Either extreme tends to yield poor results, missing the mark of the real purpose of internal arts. There will be a small percentage that benefits from each. Most will do a lot better by learning the principles and techniques, calmly and deliberately, testing our understanding by applying them, and gradually raising the bar as we learn to lose and then regain those special qualities that make an internal martial art so effective.