

LETTING GO

BY PAUL FRETTER

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In 1997, after thirteen years of training in Karate and six years studying in Taiji, I thought I had developed a reasonable degree of body awareness, coordination and power. Given enough time to practice, and with the right teacher by your side, you think you can turn your mind and body to most things that are asked of you, and be able to make at least a rough imitation within a short period of time. But then one day you meet someone who asks you to do something that sounds effortless and simple, yet it leaves you baffled as you just cannot make your body do it; not even slightly!

So it was for me when Wee Kee Jin tapped me on the chest and said “let go from the inside”, meaning that I held unnecessary tension in the body. For those of you who have not met Jin, he is one of those rare Taiji practitioners who can not only demonstrate what he is teaching, leaving you in absolutely no doubt of its efficacy, but he is also prepared to let you feel and experience it first-hand. Over the last eleven years, Kee Jin has many times allowed me to feel his shoulders and ribs seemingly melt into his body and it just felt like he was....well....melting! He would ask me to push him, but for some inexplicable reason I could never seem to build up any force and then I’d find myself off balance, or if I pushed hard enough I’d be airborne while he just stood there, smiling! Sometimes he would push me, and with the lightest touch I would find myself airborne, surprised, and completely baffled by how I’d got there, even though he told me precisely when he was going to push, and I was carefully watching him do it to me. Kee Jin first visited the UK (for Taiji) in 1997 at the invitation of my then Taiji teacher, Peter Dobson. Pete had just spent 6 months working in New Zealand and it was then that he first met and trained with Jin. Upon his return to the UK Pete announced that we should let go of our current Taiji practice and all begin again together under Jin, as his system was much clearer. If Pete was brave enough to let go of his current practice and teaching in order to progress, then I was prepared to follow him. So then, under Pete’s guidance, and along with my friend and karate teacher Bob Honiball and a small number of other stalwarts, we began our training again.

It gradually became obvious that I carried around much more muscular tension than I was aware of, and certainly more than I could exercise any real control over. By accepting the need to ‘let go’ on what at first appeared to be the physical level, and applying myself diligently to practice, it set in motion a long and slow process that caused a paradigm shift in my understanding of body movement, power, speed, timing and the overwhelming importance of the mind. I come from the Jundokan tradition of Okinawan Goju Ryu Karate Do, under the tutelage of Bob Honiball, and contrary to popular opinion about Karate, this system is not

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all about speed and power. In principle it requires a balance between 'hard' and 'soft', external and internal, with the emphasis on 'hard' in the early years and then a gradual transformation to 'soft' as you gain experience and progress to the higher levels of training. However my own understanding of *Go* (yang) and *Ju* (yin) was at that time, I now realise, quite rudimentary in comparison to the older teachers in Okinawa. I was used to 'making' my body do things by actively engaging the muscles, tensing and 'relaxing' as seemed appropriate, rather than using the mind intention to subtly encourage the body to create space and lead the movement. Through the practice of Taiji I gradually came to realise that what I regarded as 'relaxed' was not relaxed at all, and was merely 'a bit less tense' than when I consciously tighten a muscle. At the time this was an important breakthrough in my understanding, so I had to let go of my current *understanding* of what 'relaxed' is, and then try to develop a different one. The word 'relaxed' perhaps has the wrong connotations for me, in that it implies ceasing activity and a lack of mental engagement, whereas I needed to create a new habit of letting go of *unnecessary* muscular tension. Intellectually, superficially, I understood, agreed and accepted that I should let go; to use the mind and not physical strength but, despite willing my body to comply, the old habits were ingrained too deeply to be washed away overnight. This was getting more difficult and more interesting, and although I knew I needed to internalise the principle until it became a habit, my mind was filled with questions: "why am I holding so much tension", "where does it come from", "how do I find it and turn it off"? If I tried too hard to "let go", Jin advised it might actually create more tension as it would be too wilful, but then if I didn't try hard enough then I would never achieve it.

'Letting go' is neither collapsing, nor holding on. It is to let go of *unnecessary* tension. Unnecessary tension is anything more than the minimum required to maintain the structure, or to support movement. 'Letting go' is also not losing all muscular tension because without at least some we would just be a pile of flesh and bones on the floor. It is a controlled process, not an abdication of responsibility for our limbs. Kee Jin tirelessly reminds us that an upright and level structure, the 'central equilibrium', is essential for being able to let go. In turn, the letting go is the foundation for sinking, and sinking is the foundation for grounding. When there is sinking and grounding there will be stability and the opportunity to cultivate the relaxed force. If the central equilibrium is not maintained, then the body will be out of balance and tension will result, disrupting the letting go, the sinking and the grounding.

"To learn something new you must first put aside what you already know".

Wee Kee Jin.

EMPTY YOUR CUP

After a few years, some of Kee Jin's oft-repeated words really began to sink in; *"To taste a new kind of tea you must first empty your cup. To learn something new you must first put aside what you already know."*, and *"You cannot use the normal mind [intellect] to rationalise and understand Taiji"*.

Trying to accomplish “letting go” in terms of *not* doing my current habits, or using any concept that derived from my current knowledge simply held me back in the old mindset. Through Kee Jin’s explanations, the apparently ephemeral descriptions in the Taiji Classic texts looked like they might actually offer an answer. Kee Jin also said that you must have one hundred percent faith in the principles and the training method, and if there is even one percent of doubt, it can prevent you from ever discovering Taiji. I needed to use the imagination to visualise the feelings in my body, even though it may not seem like anything actually happens at first, and then eventually imagination might just create a reality. Crucially, I realised that trusting this process in my intellect was not enough and that to assimilate it must be taken to heart, and I was amazed at how clearly I could now see a difference between the two approaches.

It is only possible to “let go” if we can first recognise what we are holding on to. Initially we must cultivate an awareness of the body, and be able to ‘feel’ the individual parts, but then gradually the awareness of ‘holding on’ begins to develop and we can instruct the body to ‘let’ go. As one thing is uncovered and rectified, then after a while it reveals another that requires even more subtlety to notice. So for me ‘letting go’ is a long-term process of iteration with small incremental improvements, not an overnight transformation, and I expect I will spend the rest of my life working on it as there is always scope for improvement. The more we are already holding, the more we have to eventually let go, and the harder we hold onto things, or the more attached we are to them, the more difficult it will be to let them go.

After many years of developing the physical speed and power that I knew worked well, it is very difficult to let go of it in exchange for this ‘soft power’ that I couldn’t adequately reproduce in a fixed exercise, and therefore would not be able to use in a fight. When letting go we must sometimes become weaker at first in order to grow stronger later, and Cheng Man Ching emphasised this with his now famous instruction to “invest in loss”. Jin’s advice to “let go from the inside” meant more than just letting go of the muscles in the body. It encompasses a whole raft of habits, preconceptions and ego-related ‘baggage’ which must be dealt with using the mind. Even thinking is nothing more than planning what to do, so I would somehow have to let go of that too, and engage with a physical feeling instead of my rather cumbersome and cluttered intellect. Well, even if the mind was willing the body still required a lot more persuading. After a time I found I could create a facsimile of softening in the chest by breathing out and relaxing, but this was far from adequate, and Jin explained that letting go must not be dependent on, or adversely affected by the breath. So, it was back to the drawing board for me!

WHITE CRANE

The transition from hard/external to soft/internal requires careful management of the change process and the placement of ‘stepping stones’. When Kee Jin offered to teach us the Bai He Quan (White Crane Fist) that he learned from Master Huang, we jumped at the chance. Aside from the strong historical connection with Goju Ryu Karate, Kee Jin explained that it is also an internal art, but is less refined than Taiji and consequently easier to learn. Master Huang taught it to Kee Jin because it would speed the process of understanding the relaxed force in Taiji, and Kee Jin taught it to us for the same reason. So in the last nine years it has formed a ‘bridge’ between Karate and Taiji, allowing me to let go of hardness and experience softness in a more visible and accessible manner. In turn, I am actively teaching it to others so they can share the benefits. If White Crane is a rough diamond, then Taiji is the polished gemstone.

THE PAIN OF LETTING GO

I expected learning Taiji to be difficult, although I never imagined that something so apparently simple as ‘letting go’ would be quite so elusive or so painful! I can vividly remember the day I first felt my ‘insides’ moving and the skin around my back and ribs gliding down against the material of my shirt. It was small and uneven, but for the first time I really felt that something *inside* me had changed and I had made a small but significant breakthrough. Armed with this small piece of ‘experience’, I began to work systematically through the major areas of the body and to cultivate the same feeling.

It became apparent that the amount of muscular discomfort I experienced was in some way proportional to the habitual tensions I carried around within me. The process of using my (not yet adequate) body awareness to sense the tension and then feel it to let go had taken a long time to begin to take effect.

Up to now the Five Loosening Exercises ¹made my thigh muscles ache, and the standing postures made my shoulders and upper back very sore, but things were slowly beginning to change. Different and more specific parts of my body seemed to be getting sore and the sensations varied from numbness, to tingling and aching, or even intense burning. The degree of discomfort in one part seemed to relate to another part letting go, almost as if the loosened parts now hung freely letting their full weight draw on their neighbours. The natural reaction is to stop letting go, so the pain disappears, but it felt necessary to endure it and allow my body to continue ‘letting go’ whilst being mindful of maintaining a correct structure and checking that I didn’t tense up elsewhere in reaction to it. Kee Jin often says “make pain your friend”, usually with a big grin on his face, and then sometimes he quotes his teacher saying that, “at first the taste is very

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within your body do
battle there will be
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calmly wait for your
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suffering will resolve.”
From the Song of
Realising Relaxation in
Taijiquan 1, by Cheng
Man Ching*

¹ Master Huang Sheng Shyan created the Five Loosening Exercises in the 1960s and 1970s, as a way of preparing the body for Form practice.

bitter but eventually it is very sweet". The pain is a sign that things are changing, and for a time I needed to seek it to know that I was practicing properly. However, it is important to not get too attached to pain as a sign of progress, because it gradually subsides over months and years as the body learns to relax and loosen. Beyond this, it is necessary to seek and cultivate different sensations, so it was also necessary to 'let go' of the need to feel pain as it might only hold me back, and in its place seek what happens after it subsides. Much of my martial arts training has involved the endurance of pain and discomfort, with the understanding that it is a symptom of the process rather than an end in itself, and will in time subside. What really intrigued me was that internal training was even more rigorous and painful than Karate ever was, and I like to think that I have known a fair bit of suffering and hardship in that way over the years.

I consider myself very fortunate to have had guidance through this from Kee Jin, and I can only imagine what a monumentally difficult task it would be to develop the process and navigate through it without access to the experience of an adept. It also gives me confidence in my direction when I know that someone else totally understands what I am going through and that, one day the pain will slowly begin to subside. To quote Cheng Man Ching *"As the soft and hard within your body do battle there will be painful points, but calmly wait for your skill to ripen and your suffering will resolve."*

ACCIDENT

In 2005 I suffered a broken leg in a skiing accident, my own fault of course, which left me on crutches for several weeks. I remained as mobile as I could and carried on training in Taiji and Karate, having missed only one training session. However, I was aware that walking two or three miles and tackling dozens of stairs every day on one leg, with crutches, was causing my upper body muscles to grow and my lower back to become tilted, tense and unbalanced despite my best efforts to keep straight. It became abundantly clear that fighting whilst only having one leg to stand on was difficult and it was not possible to use gross muscular power as I did not have enough mobility. Some folk who have never been in this situation blithely assume you can just use the crutches as a club or a restraint weapon, but this is a ridiculous fantasy when you really need them for balance during movement, and in any case landing even a moderate strike could result in the recoil force tipping me over. Through experiments with willing Karate students attacking me in various ways, I realised that to stand any chance against even a casual shove I would need to be soft and evasive. But, when you can only 'hop and clatter' instead of step this is easier said than done, and of course my taiji skill was not good enough to accept a very strong force without moving my base (legs). Fighting whilst seated was a different matter though, as I could find stability through my seat. In terms of self-defence, there is limited value in being able to fight only when you are young and strong, fit, awake, sober and upright,

because we are most likely to be vulnerable when unaware, old, sick, injured, drowsy, drunk or supine! I had known this second-hand for years, but now the reality had sunk in for me and I clearly needed to refocus my training to explore this weakness. An old (Karate) proverb says, “Turn your weaknesses into strengths, and your strengths into super-strengths”.

Let’s be clear though, self-defence is about defending your health, avoiding injury and disease, and ‘fighting’ is only one small aspect of it. In our comfortable Western civilisation, most of us are at far greater risk from rotten teeth, road accident, heart attack or cancer than we are from any threat of physical violence. Oh, and skiing accidents of course!

Eventually, with the aid of a rather nifty leg brace called a “3D walker” loaned to me by the hospital, I was able to put weight on both feet and I could then begin to undo some of the stiffness that had formed in my body. After the weeks of strenuous upper body effort transporting myself around, my back now felt about as pliable as a plank of wood, but I was not worried as I had the training process which I could use to undo the damage. At first, I could only do the exercises that did not require too much weight transference or turning of the hips, so I concentrated on just two of Master Huang’s loosening exercises in the parallel stance. The number four loosening exercise stretched the muscles and freed the vertebrae, which felt almost ‘fused’ together, but it was in the number two exercise that I had my next significant Taiji breakthrough. I noticed that when I was trying to let go inside my upper body, there was movement in the front of my chest but very little change in my back. I asked Kee Jin about it and he reminded me that the letting go must come from within otherwise it will be uneven. Now at the time I really thought I *was* letting go from the middle of the body, but the evidence clearly showed I was not. The inaccurate awareness of my central axis and the lack of looseness in my back were clearly limiting factors. I schemed that if my mind awareness was actually further forward than I thought it was, then perhaps if I brought it further back then maybe in reality it would end up in my centre. So, I began work on letting go in the back specifically by moving the awareness through the muscles around the spine and feeling each part. There were large blank areas that needed to be explored, but gradually I learned to feel them and then one day I actually noticed some small muscles holding on in my lower back. I felt them and then gently let them go as I moved the awareness through to the sacrum and coccyx, and was then startled as the tailbone and hips dropped and I felt my spine stretch. That felt weird!

I was fascinated that I now had a significant movement in the full length of the spine and, although it was uneven and embryonic, it transformed my understanding and my Taiji practice overnight. I can remember the feeling of excitement vividly.

The skiing accident marked a turning point in my approach to training and that after many years developing speed and external power, and several

years trying to discover internal power at the same time, I knew that to progress any further I must now concentrate almost entirely on the internal aspects.

External power through muscular contraction is relatively quick to achieve, but it is short-lived in the absence of regular vigorous practice. I had long since reached a plateau of speed and power, and no matter how much harder I practiced I could not improve it much, to the point whereby if I tried to add more power the result was slower and weaker than before. In Taiji, allowing the muscles to elongate and store (potential) energy for later release requires a different mind-set that values awareness and timing instead of speed, and accuracy instead of power, and so necessitates a 're-programming' of the nervous system.

Although freeing my back was an important breakthrough, it was only a beginning because I still had to establish with my awareness precisely where the centre of my body is, and only then can I actually begin to let go from the inside in a meaningful way. If the letting go does not come from the exact centre within the structure it will be uneven, and thus in turn will affect the central equilibrium.

PARTNER WORK

"Give up your own ideas and follow the other" and, "invest in loss", advised Cheng man Ching when discussing Taiji partner work (push hands). It is necessary to 'let go' of one's desire to push, to win or in any way to dominate or control another person. It is only by letting go of the desire or expectation of victory that one is then open to understand the other's intentions, and completely accept their force without causing harm. Once we learn how to accept the other's force into the ground, and we have let go of the desire for control, then their force will return to them and they will be 'hoisted by their own petard'.

To invest in loss is to let go of the need to be the best all the time. Train with your partner and accept when you are pushed, going with the flow of the movement instead of digging in, resisting or reacting, so that you both learn what the opportunity felt like, what caused it and how it can be utilised or avoided. To start with you will be pushed over many times, but gradually as you begin to comprehend the situations where either person lost, you will understand more and lose your balance less.

THE FUTURE

The small areas that still hold on feel sore when the weight of the rest of the body is hanging, but gradually I will let them go and maybe one day in the not-too-distant future I will glimpse the feeling of being loose and completely free of unnecessary tension.

For all of my years of training I have tried my hardest to do what was asked of me, to the best of my ability. I listened to the instruction, thought and calculated, and then threw myself into practice with full commitment, as we all did. In the hard style the rapid transition from beginner to a fast movement trains a functional fighting skill in a few short years, but allows little opportunity to learn how to move in balance and continually adjust. Now I can far better appreciate the relaxed, graceful and incongruously powerful old Karate folks in Okinawa. I had mis-understood their slower and softer *Ju* movement as simply due to being old, and I didn't really have a clue about Taiji either. Of course, there are a number of senior Karate practitioners in Okinawa, and Japan, who have also developed internal skill although it may differ from that found in Taiji.

I began Taiji in 1991 after my Karate teacher, Bob Honiball, was advised by our master in Okinawa (Miyazato Ei'ichi) that we should study another martial art, so that we gained a different perspective on our training. Through Peter Dobson and then Wee Kee Jin, Taiji has given me the 'other view' and my aim is that one day the internal 'skill' will fill every movement I make, be it Taiji, Karate, walking, swimming or running. The increased relaxation, postural awareness and grounding lead me to more fluid and powerful movement with more efficient use of the muscles and a far greater appreciation of the role of the mind. Over the last twenty-four years I have reached a basic level of competence in Goju Ryu Karate Do, and attained the grade of Fifth Dan. That is an achievement in itself, but like many things in life, once you possess something you must also be prepared to let it go so that you can continue to develop. In the last few years I have gradually let go of speed and power, and immersed myself fully in Taiji and White Crane in order to discover the subtle internal methods that turn disadvantage to advantage, and open the door to greater refinement.

'Understanding' is not only an intellectual exercise, and we must let go of our expectation of being able to reason and deduce superior knowledge without first putting in the practical effort. An intellectual grasp of concepts or facts is not the same as knowledge or skill, and it is merely a fortunate place from which to start. True understanding results only from creative practice, experimentation, investing in loss, sensing, feeling and most of all developing an upright character. Proof of understanding lies in the ability to demonstrate, and if we cannot demonstrate then we do not yet understand. By requiring us to first recognise and then 'let go' of our habitual tensions, grasping and ego-related maladies, Taiji is a process that can provide benefit and enjoyment for our entire lives.

Paul Fretter, August 2008

Paul is a student of Wee Kee Jin and he is actively teaching Taiji Quan and Bai He Quan (White Crane) in Norwich, England. For information on classes and workshops please visit www.taiji.org.uk.