

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

BY PAUL FRETTER, JULY 2017

There are three basic components in partner training: My awareness of my structure and movement, your awareness of your structure and movement, and then the *connection* between us, manifested in how each of us perceives and responds to our relative changes in direction, position, balance, movement and contact. It is important to draw a clear distinction between your awareness of your own structure and movement, and what you can really only *infer*¹ is happening to the other person, or of what they are doing, or are about to do.

Your *somatic*² (body) senses are based on information from mechanical *receptors* in your own nervous system, and since you have no physical connection to the other's nervous system, you do not have a direct awareness of what their body is doing. However, through experience you can develop an ability to *infer* what may be occurring in the other person's body, based on associating what you feel happening in your own body paired with observations of the effect on, or feedback from, your training partner. These observations will be coupled with your own experiences of how you feel when training with a more experienced partner.

When someone touches your body and applies a force, your sensory and nervous system will give you information about your own body's response to the force. If the direction of the force changes, the 'receptors' in your nervous system will inform your brain (sensory system) of changes in force or position in your body.

It is therefore logical to assert that improving your ability to accurately *infer* what is happening to the other person requires that you train predominantly to understand your own body senses; primarily *proprioception*³ (the position and force sense) and *touch* (contact with the partner and the floor). When training with a partner you will then be able to test your awareness, such that you can separate the effects of your own initiated movement from your reactions to, or consequences of, changes in the other person. This is why the majority of our weekly practice time should be spent on the solo exercises, refining our movement and the awareness of it, with only perhaps 10-20% of time training with a partner.

It is the understanding of ourselves, and the nature of the *interaction* with a training partner, that are important. If we are too pre-occupied trying to directly interpret the other person's movement or intention, we will neglect to adjust our own movement properly. Therefore we should not waste our time trying to 'feel' the other person's 'base', and nor should we try to force, manipulate or control them. Instead we should focus on maintaining our own uprightness, centre of equilibrium, balance and relaxation, whilst being aware of the nature of

¹ From <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/infer> to infer is "to form an opinion or guess that something is true because of the information that you have"

² The somatosensory system https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somatosensory_system is a complex system of sensory neurons and pathways that responds to changes at the surface or inside the body

³ Proprioception <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception> "is the sense of the relative position of one's own parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement"

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the interaction. The nature of the interaction is to “*Give up your own ideas and follow the other*”.

As your skill and awareness develops, you will begin to sense smaller and more subtle changes in the connection, that will *infer* an early sign of an impending change initiated by your partner, and thus allow you to also change so that you maintain your own equilibrium. This skill is called *listening* in Taiji terminology, and is developed gradually:

Stage 1 – you realise there was a change, but only after the event and therefore your response is very late.

Stage 2 – you realise there is a change happening, but it is already too far advanced for you to do much about it, so you are also late.

Stage 3 – you sense an early sign of a change and you are able to respond to it early, before it becomes too far advanced.

Most of us love to teach others but, when training with a partner, remember we should not be too concerned with analysing and telling them what to do, or what not to do, especially in ‘free’ partner work. Unless specifically requested, or we are in a teaching/instructing role, we must allow our partner the chance to make mistakes and develop their awareness and understanding at their own pace, without the constant interruption and hindrance of our own opinions or advice.

When you are teaching, teach. When you are training, train.

For all of the above reasons, the best advice I can offer when training partner work is to *Mind your own business*.

Paul Fretter.