

The Mind of Martial Arts, part II: Wuwei and Combat

In my previous essay, I concentrated on the mental aspects of martial arts that should be brought to bear during training. In this continuation of that essay, I will discuss the Chinese concept of “Wuwei” or “non-action”, which is the most important concept to understand to become fully effective in street self-defence.

“Wu” means “not” or “non” and “wei” means “doing”, “striving”, “straining” or “busyness” (Little (Ed.), 1997:127). Now, obviously, this doesn’t mean doing absolutely nothing, since no one would get too far doing nothing in a self-defence situation. What it implies is acting naturally and spontaneously without the interference of mental deliberation. Fundamentally it’s that simple - in combat, one should act and respond naturally to the situation. In practice, for various reasons, it can be much harder to get to the point where you can act in such a comfortable and natural way. Even if you do, it would still take more than a lifetime for anyone to really refine their martial art to perfect naturalness.

To clarify the idea, let us take the examples of actions and behaviours that come most naturally to us - walking and talking. When a child is learning to walk, their legs often seem really stiff and they tend to bounce along the floor if they reach any reasonable velocity, and always seem just about to fall flat on their faces. But, as children get older, they refine what was once a conscious effort at balance and motion into something that we all do with pretty much no effort at all and certainly no conscious effort. If we really think about how complex the biomechanics of walking actually are, it’s staggering. People working in computer graphics for film, or robotics, have spent decades trying to create the same sorts of motions that we do naturally everyday.

Wuwei in martial arts is like wuwei in walking, martial arts skills are just a more complex set of motions again, and also they relate not only to oneself but also to other people.

The other example is talking. The way in which we learn to communicate closely resembles the way in which we learn martial arts. When we learn to speak, particularly when learning to speak a foreign language, we learn a lot of different words and we learn different grammatical structures that we can use to string those different words together in order to produce different meanings for different circumstances. Initially, people tend to use the language clumsily, with frequent grammatical mistakes but, as they practice, their speech becomes more natural and fluid and they will use correct grammar without any recourse to conscious thought. But, to really become fluent, a person should be able to use those grammatical structures not only fluidly but also creatively, to respond to a wide variety of circumstances - or perhaps even to write poetry, where constraints are loosened even further.

Martial arts are similar, in that people learn the “words” of martial arts, which are the individual techniques, and the “grammar” of martial arts, which is the way to string those techniques together in response to a particular situation. If a person wants to become proficient in martial arts, just as they would in a foreign language, they need to be able to use those “words” and “grammar” fluidly and creatively, without needing to think about them. The reason that martial arts are a form of “art” is because like all other arts, they offer a mode of self-expression and communication with other people. Learning to express oneself fluidly and creatively in martial arts is the “poetry” of martial arts. That martial arts are a mode of self-expression may sound strange but, when you think about it, it really only takes about two or three years of practicing a decent and realistic martial art before you become proficient enough to deal with 95% of physical assaults by untrained antagonists. In this case, why keep studying, unless there is some life enhancing aspect to martial arts. In my view, wuwei in itself, the feeling of naturalness and relaxation, improves the quality of living, it just makes one feel pleasant like one is swimming.

I will now go through some of the elements of wuwei and some of the general elements of martial arts and how they relate to wuwei.

Forms

Forms/sets/kata are the basis for almost all martial arts. They compile techniques and “grammar” of combat into a readily communicable format. Even martial arts that overtly claim not to have forms per se, such as Jeet kune do or Yiquan follow the same format; teaching a combination of techniques strung together, the number of techniques is essentially irrelevant. In many internal styles like Xingyiquan and Xinyiliuhequan, a “form” may comprise only two or three movements which are repeated over and over on left and right sides.

The point of performing these forms or sets is as a mnemonic device. The aim is not to make you remember the sequence of techniques. Rather it is a muscular mnemonic device, which makes your muscles and nervous system remember the techniques and their intent. This is why it’s always important to bring a context to form-work, otherwise it’s all just meaningless movement.

While a baby’s wave of the hand and a block or finger strike to the eyes may look structurally the same, obviously the context and meaning varies considerably – depending on the intent or context behind the moves. In order to make the nervous system “file” the motion as a combative motion, which responds to a particular stimulus, one needs to mentally understand and create that context, so visualisation and interpretation of techniques becomes extremely important.

There are several facets to bringing the feeling of Wuwei into form training. One of the most important is relaxation. It is extremely important to note that relaxation does not mean floppiness. The Chinese use the word “Song”, which implies a sort of reed like softness and flexibility and, in my opinion, “relaxation” does not really do this concept justice as a translation. If your muscles are relaxed into floppiness,

they cannot exhibit power and do not have any structural strength, meaning that the technique will not work in a realistic context.

What we should strive for in forms training is a structured sort of relaxation, where your body is relaxed enough to move explosively and supports the structure of the bodily weapon (hand, foot, elbow...etc) that is being thrown into the target. In order to achieve this, one needs to visualise what the technique is and how it's going to work. Obviously, techniques in forms are subject to different interpretations, which will give different feelings, in order to get a natural feeling to it, one should visualise different interpretations at different times.

As a simple example, a thrusting technique with the fingers outstretched could most obviously be a finger jab to the eyes, and the focus of the technique would therefore be in the fingers - but it could also be an intercept to an incoming punch, coupled with a cut across the neck, in which case the focus would be more in the forearm. While practicing forms, it's best to not use only one feeling or interpretation all the time but to also vary them until you feel like you are doing all of them at once.

Another concept related to relaxation is fluidity or flow, which means that one can go from one technique to another with the minimum of time wastage. Being able to deliver one punch quickly and explosively is not enough, for one thing you might miss and, if you haven't got a back up technique, you may put yourself at a distinct disadvantage. Also, the human body is quite resistant to damage and a single technique, even one delivered at high velocity, may not necessarily be enough to cause enough damage to stop an attacker, particularly a drunk or enraged one. So, the techniques need to be strung together in quick succession, and in order to do this, the body needs to relax quickly after each technique has been delivered so that it can deliver the next one with as much velocity.

Relaxation also gives the body the ability to use the limbs at a wide variety of angles and change those angles very quickly. So, for example, if you're using the same limb to initially deliver a punch to the solar plexus and then subsequently deliver a claw technique to the throat, you need to be able to rapidly change the angle from a horizontal one to a vertical one.

Another important aspect of Wuwei in actual combat is having and using a variety of fluid techniques, and formwork can help in developing this skill. When you look at forms or sets in most martial arts styles, the techniques and mechanics of a particular style or system are repeated throughout the different forms. This can be a setting for confusion, where you might accidentally swap from doing one form to another, because a technique is similar or identical in two forms. However, this confusion can be extremely useful, since it allows you to subconsciously string the techniques together in many different ways.

If you make a mistake in your form, just keep going. The other way you might go about this is by consciously "doing your own thing", and, from time to time, it is useful in the middle of a form to throw in a bunch of your own techniques that seem contextually appropriate and then continue with the set form. You may even start a form and continue it, using your own techniques that follow the same feeling or principle that is present in the form.

For example, in the Bac fu Do form Hung Hok, the feeling or principle, is of many broad grappling and throwing type techniques. So, you might start with the form just to give you that feeling, then, continue with that style of movement but with your own techniques. This means that you are also learning to string together your own set of techniques, in a natural and effortless way.

Bag Work

Many martial styles, but again not all, have a bag-work component to help in power development. However, it should also be noted that bag-work can serve an important role in effortlessness and naturalness.

What I have said above about relaxation and fluidity applies in this context as well. One should strive for a relaxed structure that can deliver power into the bags and one should be able to deliver fluid techniques in rapid succession. In this context, though, one actually has a target to hit, and this changes the dynamic a bit. Firstly, it gives you the feeling of actually making contact with a target and teaches you how to release the power into the target. Secondly, and apart from that, it also gives you a variety of physical targets with which to interact.

The key word in making bag work useful in teaching Wuwei is variation. You should change the state of bags from static to moving, passive to aggressive, change the size and shape of bags, the height at which they are held, and the number and configuration of bags. This will give you a feeling for a whole range of different combat contexts and environments. In fact, what the bags are trying to do is move naturally, as well in order, to give you the feeling of naturally interacting with them.

In this context, bag-work can also help in improving the naturalness of footwork, which allows you to get from one target to another and the footwork necessary to deliver power from a variety of positions.

In my opinion, although bag-work is a useful tool for developing natural effortlessness, at the same time it is important to note its weaknesses. The first is that bags can actually constrain the range of techniques that can be effectively delivered into them, because bags are generally flat in the front, techniques can be most effectively delivered at a ninety degree angle to that flat target. On the other hand, a human body is broadly speaking a cylinder with three hundred and sixty degrees of angles around the outside, so techniques can be delivered most effectively at a ninety degree angle to the tangent of any point on the curved surface. Obviously, where one strikes in fact depends on a variety of factors including whether there is a valid target, whether the target is exposed, the distance and positioning relative to the opponent etc. Since it is obvious that the range of techniques that can be delivered in the bag is extremely constrained, by comparison to the human body, this means that bag-work cannot be the single tool for teaching Wuwei.

Equilibrium

In my view equilibrium, or balance, is the most subtle and refined setting for the understanding and expression of Wuwei.

In a physical sense equilibrium is the ability of the human body to readily adapt to different surfaces, to different slope angles, to slippery or rough surfaces and to react appropriately to having one's balance seriously disturbed by an opponent. In basic and fundamental terms it is the way that we interact in a tactile sense with everything around us, including the very ground we walk on, and our centre of gravity is the locus where our actions should be initiated and with which all tactile interactions inevitably go through.

In my view, the main difference between the so called external and internal martial arts styles is essentially the way that they approach the understanding of equilibrium and its role in the generation of power and feeling-sensitivity. The external styles start by teaching how to generate power from rapid hip movements and a whip-like generation of power along the limbs. Eventually the external stylist if they progress, will refine their movements until they become more structured and connected to the rest of their body, and will eventually also gain a sense of how their entire body relates to their centre of balance. The internal stylist on the other hand begins by gaining an understanding of his entire body's relation to its centre of balance and the interconnectedness of his bones, tendons and ligaments. However, it will take longer to be able to properly develop power and to be able to use the art combatively. In fact there is a Chinese saying which holds that Tai Chi, is only combat effective after 10 years of practice. Obviously there are other differences stylistically, but overall what this means to me is that the internal and external styles aim to achieve the same thing but simply start from opposite ends of the spectrum.

In a practical sense, what are we trying to achieve by coming to a realisation of our body's centre? The answers are numerous because as stated earlier we relate to much of our surroundings through our centre of gravity and in various different ways. To gain a sense of what I mean, try standing with your feet together and close your eyes, you'll more acutely feel how you are constantly adjusting and readjusting your balance, weight is shifting from one foot to the other and to different points on your feet, now if you move an arm you'll feel the effect on your balance, even this slightest movement of a finger will change the state of equilibrium. This should emphasise the pervasive nature of a person's equilibrium on all movement.

Within our selves then, we are in a constant state of relating to the earth beneath us, to stop us from falling over, but also to shift our weight and get from one place to the next. To create the martial power necessary to incapacitate an opponent, we use the shift of our weight into the target, high velocity, and a structure that is firm enough to stop energy from being redirected through a weak point at the time of impact. The weight shift and the velocity are connected concepts and should be

balanced with one another, one cannot adequately fight by just throwing all one's weight at an opponent, but without velocity, at the same time if a technique is delivered very fast but with nothing behind it, it will not cause the necessary damage to incapacitate an attacker. With an awareness of how the body relates to its centre of gravity, the balance between velocity and weight should occur naturally. In Xingyi, for example, the splitting fist (Pi Chuan) is a good example of how to approach this (Fig. 1, below)



Figure 1.

This posture is held for periods of time to get the feeling for the bodies internal connections, and importantly to feel the relationship between the centre of gravity and the part of the body which is being used to strike the opponent. Here the practitioner can feel that if his weight is transferred and down the his weight will transfer to his forward hand in the same way (this is only one possible energetic which can be derived from Pi Chuan practice), however at the same time if the arm is not relaxed the necessary velocity will not occur and the movement will only create a dull pushing sort of power, whereas if it is relaxed it can transfer a great amount of energy into the target. He will feel the relation between his legs and the force which he feels through his arms and hands, and the vertical circle of force that starts at his front foot and comes up through his body to his extended arm (again these are only a few of the possible feelings derived from practicing this posture).

The sense of relatedness to the centre also allows the legs to relax more readily and therefore they will also transfer energy more smoothly and effectively just as the hands and arms do. In internal styles it is often said that the waist is primary, what this is really referring to in my opinion is that the legs should not push the hips into motion to create power but rather that the waist or centre of gravity should be the first thing that is felt to move and this should in turn produce the movement of the hips and legs and thereby also produce the movement of the shoulders and arms. This means that the legs should be relaxed and move freely so that they can transfer the power generated by the connection to the ground without the obstruction of tension in the muscles.

The above illustrates how the sense of the relationship between the whole body and its centre of gravity relates to the generation of force, but of course this is only half the story, a powerful technique is only combat effective if it is delivered into the target and if this is done before the opponent can overwhelm you. In other words, one must have a way of relating to one's opponent as well as to oneself, in blocking techniques and in delivering techniques. I'll use another Xingyi posture to illustrate this point since they are fixed and easier to explain. In the Crushing Fist (sometimes referred to as Pounding Fist) Pao Chuan (Fig. 2) illustrates how the body can adjust to incoming energy through the centre of gravity.



Figure 2

In this posture the body may be receiving energy on the right side (as illustrated), and using this energy to power the punch delivered by the left side. The body adjusts to the reception through the centre of gravity with a relaxed body and the energy can therefore flow to the other arm. If you closed your eyes again and got someone to even lightly put their hand on your shoulder you'd notice that even subtly your body would adjust to this new situation, what is happening in pao chuan is essentially the same just done at higher speed and in response to more energy. Any time that a technique is blocked or redirected by an opponent they will adjust your centre of gravity if only a little, and if your sense of this is refined you should be able to adjust very quickly to the change and to therefore adjust the technique or change techniques and still make the strike against the opponent count. It is the same when you are doing an intercepting technique into an opponent, you need to sense the energy of the technique and lightly use energy to deflect the technique.

The sense of equilibrium will also allow us to keep our own balance while being able to at the same time disturb the balance of an attacker, it means not only can we adjust to a block, but we can also adjust to being hit or pushed and keep our own balance and hopefully even be able to deflect some or all of the energy delivered into us, and thereby negate the effectiveness of the technique. It will also allow us to understand the opponent's balance and thereby to disturb it, certain angles and body positions will be difficult or impossible to adjust to, and with a sense of the opponent's balance it is easier to direct them to one of these unbalanced positions or to sense when they are adjusting their balance to your own technique and therefore respond.

The second and related aspect of equilibrium is its mental facet, obviously in many cases physical and mental equilibrium will be related, if one is off balance

physically, one will usually feel mentally out of balance as well. But mental equilibrium has its own separate expression as well which can be maintained or disturbed in the absence of any effect on physical equilibrium at all.

In fact some styles such as Baguazhang and of course Bac Fu Do, specifically train to keep mental equilibrium when physical equilibrium has been disturbed, for example In the Chang Style of Bagua, the seventh palm change simulates (or could simulate) where an opponent has pulled one's hair or head back from behind, and therefore one's balance is disturbed backwards, in spite of this however, one twists over to adjust the physical equilibrium while always maintaining mental stability.

One of my instructors recently said to me: "You must not let your Shen escape, why should I look a you? I just choose an abstract point and I can see every way you're going to move". To my mind this has a lot to say about mental equilibrium. What it means is one should never become fixated on the opponent or the situation, or one's mental equilibrium will be disturbed. Everyone has done it, when sparring you start to look intensely at what your opponent is doing and before you can react they've already hit you. Just as you relax your body in order to lower your centre of gravity it is important to relax your mind so it can retain its equilibrium. Remember that, from a neuro-scientific perspective, a lot of martial arts tactics in combat are performed from the brain-stem, as reflexive actions, and should not become a part of your conscious thoughts. The feeling of relaxing the mind and allowing a free flow of stimulus is analogous to allowing the free-flow of feeling sensitivity through the centre of gravity.

At the same time, disturbing an opponent's mental equilibrium can be a useful way of gaining the upper hand in a street self defence situation. The most obvious way as discussed above is to disturb their physical equilibrium, which will in turn affect their mental equilibrium. Another way is to initiate combat while the opponent is using their brain for some other activity - most obviously for talking (and probably threatening). During this time, the opponent is already engaged in using another part of their brain and, therefore, it will take them longer to react to other stimulus, so they will probably react too late to stop any strike, and the ensuing mental disequilibrium should allow you to finish the fight off fairly quickly.

Another way is to act in an unorthodox manner. Cultural biases often determine the way most people think a combat situation should proceed. If one acts outside these defined boundaries, the effect is again a destabilisation of the opponent's mental processes. For example, if you are being threatened and suddenly scream "I'm going to vomit" this should cause a reaction - which could give you the upper hand in initiating and finishing the fight. Also, techniques and movements that seem unorthodox can destabilise a person's mental equilibrium. As an example, one of my instructors was telling me a story about his instructor - the instructor asked him to attack and he did, but before he'd got there, his instructor had already ducked lightly out of the way, and while he was wondering where he'd gone, had picked up a hand full of pine needles, had twisted back around and threw them in his face.

Environmental and Situational factors

Another obvious factor that dictates how you will act in a combat situation is the environment and the surroundings in which you find yourself. Are you alone or with friends? Is there someone with you whom you need to protect (such as a child)? Are you on an open football field or in a crowded bar? All of these considerations will have an effect on how you react in a street self defence situation.

In my opinion, there are three different stages in the assessment of environmental and situational factors in street combat, the first is simple environmental awareness, the second is pre-combat assessment, the third is environmental feeling - sensitivity.

The first stage of simple environmental awareness, just means that you are aware of whatever surroundings you are in. If you are indoors, where are the exits? Who is around you? Does anyone look threatening? Who are you with? Are people drinking and therefore more likely to act irrationally? These are just some of the possible questions you may ask yourself, whenever you have a change of environment.

The second stage occurs when a threatening situation has been initiated, but before combat occurs. This is the time when conflict has arisen and often the antagonist is posturing and threatening you. At this time, the assessment becomes less general, and relates more to what might happen if you get into a fight. Who am I standing near? Are they friend or foe? Does my opponent have back-up? Do I have back-up? Are there objects which might impede me or my opponent? Does my opponent have a weapon? This stage of assessment relates directly to the possibility of combat and what advantages and disadvantages you may have if combat is initiated. This stage may not occur at all if an opponent catches you unawares and the fight is initiated without the benefit of time to evaluate the environment.

The third stage occurs when combat has already been initiated. This is where you let your reflexes and feeling of equilibrium take over. For example, if you move backwards and feel an object behind you that may disturb your balance, you can very quickly adjust to this situation by remaining relaxed and mobile. Or, as another example, if you see that a friend of your opponent is joining the fight, you will be able to again react quickly and adjust to this situation. Again, these are just a couple of examples of the myriad of ways in which you might react to your surroundings in a combat situation

Cross Training

As I've indicated above, my view is that martial arts in general aim for the same sort of result, which is combat effectiveness in a wide variety of circumstances. Obviously, there are stylistic and philosophical differences between different schools, but the aim still remains the same.

If we wish, within ourselves, to become as proficient as possible, we should be able to deliver power from a wide variety of angles and in a variety of directions, and be able to direct this power into a target that will effectively disable an opponent in whatever way is necessary in order to prevent personal injury and further violence. There are almost infinite ways of achieving these two objectives and, because everyone has different physical and mental characteristics, the way to best go about achieving this objectives will differ vastly from person to person. Therefore I believe that cross-training in martial arts is an invaluable tool for broadening the base a upon which a person can react to a threatening situation.

Cross-training can also help an individual to understand the various paradigms and concepts that are presented in martial arts as a whole. Each instructor will approach explaining the concepts in various different ways, and various different styles will approach the understanding of these different concepts in vastly different ways. Therefore, the student is not always presented with one kind of thought or explanation, and will therefore be better equipped to understand the conceptual base underlying particular systems or styles. As an analogy, if we were to try and explain what a computer is to someone who'd never seen one and had no idea of the concept, someone might say it has a keyboard, someone else might say it is used to calculate things, and yet someone else may say it runs on electricity etc. Each of these things alone does not explain what a computer is but, when put together, will help to pass along the idea of what it is.

Another positive aspect of cross-training is that it helps you to think conceptually about why some techniques work and some don't and discard those that don't. If you train in just one style often, obviously, the training regimen is based upon the assumption that the techniques work. Based on that assumption, people in that style will tend to act in manner that ensures that those techniques do work. For example, (with no offence intended to Tae Kwon do practitioners), the various simple blocks used in Tae Kwon Do will work against a straight punch delivered in a Tae Kwon do way, but are almost useless when used against a big street-fighting haymaker. Once you gain a conceptual understanding of why techniques work, or don't work, this gives you the opportunity to refine your physical expression to a more fluid and natural state

Conclusion

As is obvious from the length of this essay, the concept of Wuwei in martial arts is a complex one. A person needs to be as natural and fluid in their expression of power and technique to be properly combat effective. I hope that this essay is instructive in the understanding of how Wuwei relates to street self-defence and also the massive importance of the sense of equilibrium in bringing about power in techniques as well as fluidity and naturalness in delivering those techniques. To me, these are the key concepts in becoming combat effective. Any ideas about learning the one thousand and one techniques that will make you invincible or the one style that can defeat all the rest should be discarded. In reality, if you refine your body to be able to deliver power effectively, and as freely as possible, despite circumstance, then you will have reached the core of martial training.