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From: Chip Ellis  
Subject: Hao style training

As I understand it from Dong Zeng Chen, the [Hao style] set is called the "Hard Set" because the internal energy is supposed to be essentially "hard" throughout the set. Even the "in" movements are only a little bit in, not a lot in. With only a few exceptions we were taught to bring the internal energy to the outside perimeter of the body (in all directions) and keep it there. While I can't explain it very well with words, this technique is very different from using external strength.

One of our students, when he was first learning this set, became very ill. When he was first practicing he had misinterpreted the explanation of "hard" and had been practicing using a lot of external power. Kind of like doing an extended version of isometric exercises (not a very good explanation, but perhaps you get the idea...). Anyway, that practice made him sick. When he finally learned how to do it correctly with internal energy the problem was corrected.

Initially when we did the set we learned it with fingers somewhat stretched and with the wrist bent a lot. As we improved, Dong then had us keep the fingers full of energy, but not stretch them so much. Also, he does not have us exaggerate the wrist bend as much any more. One of the stories he told us was that Hao was a short stubby guy who figured out that he could get a couple of extra inches in reach if he used his finger tips instead of his palms. That's why the fingers are straight with the energy on the finger tips in some moves. Makes sense to me...

At our present level of skill, Dong is now telling us not to stretch the fingers or wrists so that they are physically tight. The concept is full, not tight.

As far as a method of conditioning is concerned, I consider it to be similar to any other form of isolated stretching, a way to be able to get into a position and stay loose.

Here is an exercise I learned a long time ago that relates to this concept. I think it came from a yoga practice: Start with your hands in very tight fists. Slowly uncurl your fingers so that they end up stretched open to the maximum. This process should be a continuous slow process which takes at least five minutes to go from closed to open. Then take the same amount of time to return to the closed position.

A variation which I think is helpful in the practice to taijiquan is to start with the fist, take the fingers to the fully extended position, then relax them to a straight but loose position. At that point your fingers will be very straight, but not tight.

Aloha,

Chip