

## Taiji Staff

by Chip Ellis

Since I like this weapon a lot, I thought I'd dive in and share my thoughts. Please excuse my ignorance. I hope my remarks help you in your thinking about the staff.

Since many of you may not know who I am, allow me to introduce myself in the context of the staff. I learned this instrument from Dong Zeng Chen, he learned it from his uncle, who learned it from his father, Dong Ying Chieh, who was one of Yang Cheng Fu's senior disciples. Dong is one of the two people demonstrating the two person staff movements in Yang's book. With this background I assume that I have learned Yang style staff. At least that is what I have been told.

As I understand it, you learn the staff last. That is, it is the most difficult weapon to play so you learn it after the knife and the sword. Certainly the staff requires a great deal of internal power, not to mention a certain amount of strength, to manipulate correctly. One of the games we used to play was to see who could hold the staff at its very end with one hand and then lift the tip up so that the weapon was parallel to the floor. Of course, the longer and thicker the staff, the harder it is to lift.

### THE FEATURES OF THE STAFF

The pictures of Dong Ying Chieh show him demonstrating with a staff that appears to be about 8 or 9 feet long. Dong Hu Ling, his son, had two staffs in Honolulu that were about 1.5 inches in diameter and about 12 feet long. Dong Zeng Chen told me that the traditional length was about 14 to 18 feet. So you make up your own mind.

I prefer a staff that is about 10 feet long and almost 2 inches in diameter. In my initial training I used a rattan staff of roughly these dimensions. It was OK to start with, but it was a little like a wet noodle in that it would wiggle too easily. I hesitate to use the term vibrate because it was so sloppy. With a little practice you could generate a standing wave (if that is the right physics term, sorry about that) that was fairly easy to maintain by moving your waist.

Later we switched to fir "full rounds" which are commonly used to make the rods which hold clothes hangers in a closet. This staff was also 10 feet long and about 2 inches in diameter. The frequency of the material was quicker, because it was stiffer. But they kept breaking. With some training you could actually break one just by shaking it. It was even easier to break it when you hit it on your partner's staff.

We then tried Chinese wax wood. The only ones we could find were smaller, about 7 feet by 1.5 inches. These had a nice vibration feel, but they, too, broke upon impact.

Finally we settled on hardwood saplings. We used iron wood saplings. Since their grain was concentric around the center, and since they were of a hard wood, they were able to withstand hitting another object without breaking. Iron wood is so dense it does not float. This made for a staff that had a comparatively high frequency vibration. I would not recommend it to a beginner. But for someone with some training behind them I think it is quite satisfactory. It is quite possible to make it vibrate.

Needless to say such a staff is quite heavy. Again, not for the beginner. You need to work up both your internal and external strength to be able to handle something like this. The weight, however, does not affect the handling that much. Because of the nature of the staff movements, it is quite possible to move it quickly in the required directions. I like the feel of a heavier staff better than a light one. Personal preference I suppose.

I mentioned the long staffs of Dong Hu Ling. These were tipped with red cloth balls that had chalk inside. I never played with them, but I was told that you could use them to poke your opponent and leave a mark to

prove your hit. As an aside, I have also played with staffs with spear points on them. That is, a spear. I was told the movements were essentially the same. Sorry I don't remember the correct names (ask one of the list historians) but the story is that one of the Yang's accidentally killed his daughter while practicing with a spear. Since that time they have removed the spear point, hence the staff.

## TRAINING TECHNIQUES

When I began learning the staff I started with basic exercises. Initially I was trying to learn to move the staff using the waist. I would shake the weapon by rotating my waist along the horizontal plane, holding the staff with my right hand at the very end and my left hand at a comfortable distance apart. Since I am a little over six feet tall that is about three feet for me. My right foot was back and my left foot was front, with the weight more or less equally distributed between them.

My teacher told me to work up to 100 repetitions of the shaking. He then had me shake the staff in the vertical direction. This required a different kind of waist movement. Then I shook it in a low position. My body was low with the butt of the staff near the ground and the tip at a height of about 6 feet. Then the reverse, the butt over my head and the tip near the ground. Always I was told to use my waist to move the staff.

Sorry, I didn't mean to get into too much detail. I don't think it is practical to try to learn physical movement through the written word alone. You need a real teacher.

Anyway, the next step was to learn a basic 4 movement sequence that incorporated sequentially 1) a forward downward moving half circle, 2) a sideward moving low block, 3) the first move repeated, and 4) a step forward and poke. The moves were strung together to make a continuous flow. Then repeated many many times.

Once this was done I was paired with a partner and we learned basic two person movements. First came sensitivity. We would face each other and, as a linked pair, move forward and back. We were connected with the tips of our staffs. The connection was about 2 feet back from the tip. The connection was supposed to be light and sticky (not an easy thing to do). You knew if you were doing it correctly if there was no slipping between the two weapons.

We first moved with one person doing the forward downward half circle and the other person receiving the movement. Then the second person returned the movement. And we would go back and forth over and over again.

A note about the footwork: It is both light and full. At times it is very heavy and full, like when you are pressing down. At other times it is very light and agile, like when you are blocking or retreating. Dong's mom once told me she liked my footwork because it was so light.

Once the basic forward and backward movement was ingrained in us, we then added the low block and the poke. This also entailed the other person doing a low poke and a kind of retreating sliding block. Again, I won't try to give you a detailed explanation. The point is that we added other elements to the routine so that we ended up with a full range of movement.

Initially we moved in a step by step fashion, one move at a time. Once this became acceptable we then altered the sequence slightly and changed the energy. This approach was to work on a very smooth circular sticky kind of energy with the two weapons. Many more repetitions.

Next we worked on power. One person would attack in a predetermined manner, and the other would defend. There were several concepts at work here. One was to learn to stick to your opponent's staff and control it and move it. Another was to bounce it away with such force that the staff almost flew out of your

opponent's hands. Another was to hit it sharply so that it would sting your opponent's hands and cause him to drop it. There were many variations on the theme.

It was at this stage that we started breaking a lot of staffs.

At first we moved fairly slowly and carefully. Later the speed and power increased.

Finally we got to the stage where we would move without a predetermined direction. We could use any type of power, soft, sticky, hard, etc. This was a lot of fun, almost exhilarating. I don't think you should do such a thing with someone you haven't worked with for a long time and trust completely. It's too dangerous.

By the way, it quickly becomes apparent the level of a person's skill with the staff. You can't fake it. If you don't have the power, you can't shake it. If you don't have the sensitivity and control, you can't stick. If you are clumsy, you don't have the footwork.