



# SIERRA NEVADA INTERNAL ARTS

*Vertical Axis Tai Chi • Spinal Energy Pa Kua • Energy Body Qigong*

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## *Combat in the Classroom*

**Keeping at-risk teens in school with the martial arts**

*by Steve Buck*

**I** HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO TRY TEACHING martial arts to students with emotional problems. After all, it was Chinese martial arts that allowed me to recover from my own emotional problems following the mess at Kent State in 1970 that left me depressed, angry, and isolated. Martial arts helped me focus on the here and now—the physical reality of life.

I ended up being incredibly happy most of the time. Why not try it with disturbed kids?

Why not, indeed? Schools are terrified of lawsuits, violence is out of fashion in the more politically correct communities, and there are those who might ponder the advisability of teaching crazy kids to fight.

Nonetheless, when I got a teaching job at Ukiah High School I got the green light from the administration, a sort of a ‘don’t ask and don’t tell’ kind of go ahead. I would have to handle the fallout if anything went wrong. As a new teacher in the system working in an unpopular division (SED) of an unpopular profession—special education—I was on shaky ground before we started working out, and as we got started I had visions of being run out of town.

I started working out with Sam Edwards/ Redwood Coast Tai Chi and Sierra Nevada Internal Arts about a year prior to that. Sam helped me take the edge off. I had learned martial arts in the context of real, personal rage. Sam’s approach to Tai Chi was direct and streamlined.

I had been working with chi for years in Southern Shao Lin/Chi Gung for the purpose of

**“I can’t do push hands with grownups,” he explained. It reminded him of past boyfriends of his mom who had cuffed him when he was too small to do anything about it.**

**“Yeah, but you work out with me,” I explained. “I’m an adult, aren’t I?”**

building the juice to tear somebody in half; that kind of thing. Sam told me, after we had worked out a couple of months, that I had come in on the first day with “that look.”

Sam helped me experience the value of surrendering to chi. It made me feel healthier, I felt more connected to people, and, as if that weren’t

enough, Sam's approach worked as a means to improve the reflex portion of my training.

From the moment of first contact with one's opponent, the body can use reflex arcs to reprogram attacks for every subtle shift in the opponent's intent. Presto! I had a new level to work with. Since Tai Chi had helped me so much with my emotions it seemed like a good thing to try with kids.

What could go wrong?

## *Rickey*

I remember doing push hands with Rickey, a 16-year-old from a home where drug use was such a normal part of things that dad-of-the-month had the kid pushing speed for him. I had to drive Rickey to school and back because some of these deals had gone bad and he was afraid of reprisals.

Rickey was also incredibly paranoid. Even when somebody wasn't out to get him, he was quite capable of creating a situation with his mixed-up communication and hostile signals.

After a couple of weeks of doing basics and push hands, he came unglued and really went after me, with everything he had, for about forty minutes. Then, exhausted and unable to stand, he collapsed into my arms. I hoisted him to the nearest chair and eased him down. He didn't seem to know that I was there anymore.

The next day, apropos of nothing, Rickey came up to me after one of our day classes and said that he now remembered being molested. It was matter of fact by then. The memory—the feel of it—had come back to him while we were doing push hands the night before.

It was a breakthrough for him, the kind of kid unable to benefit from the verbal therapeutic route because the barefoot-on-drugs-and-socialize-with-the-stray-cat upbringing had made it almost

impossible for him to connect with others through speech. His attempts to communicate always came out as a tangle of affected personas he had learned talking to stoners and watching Beavis and Butthead.

He was better after that 40-minute explosion, but I wasn't. I had fevers and felt weak. I noticed a tendency to be just on the edge of wistful tears for what seemed to be no reason. I wasn't handling the contact well.

Steve Rose, one of Sam's workout partners had developed a "letting it pass into the ground through your feet" approach while teaching Tai Chi to kids in the juvenile justice system. His suggestion worked for me, partly because Sam's Tai Chi group and my workout partner, Frank Broadhead, were becoming more comfortable with chi experimentation. Miraculous events were becoming everyday events that we learned to take in stride. We were all getting better at working out the subtle kinks in the energy body. Feeling the discharged rage and pain without turning off became just

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another kink to work out.

Rickey's exposure to drugs started with the speed in his mother's bloodstream while he was still in the uterus. Like other speed babies I have met, his nervous system was hot-wired for good. Even without taking drugs himself, he was overly excited, driven by passions, and probably well above average in intelligence.

Working out permitted him to work with these differences as possibilities rather than disabilities. He made new realizations about himself by feeling the chi and understanding his own sensations. He made friends and eventually started venturing out of the classroom, step by step, until he felt fairly comfortable on campus.



One weekend I took him to meet some of the people in Sam's school, then in Fort Bragg. We started with a round of push hands, and within a few minutes I noticed that Rickey was nowhere to be seen. I found him hiding under the boughs of a redwood next to the clearing we were using.

"What are you doing back here?" I asked.

"I can't do push hands with grownups," he explained. It reminded him of past boyfriends of his mom who had cuffed him when he was too small to do anything about it.

"Yeah, but you work out with me," I explained. "I'm an adult, aren't I?"

He had to think about it for a moment.

"Yeah, but I'm used to you. I just can't do it with grownups."

Ricky spent most of his junior high years at home with mom. He just said "no" to everyone and refused to leave. Even hospitalization ended in a standoff. Ricky got the upper hand and manipulated his way back to his bedroom.

When I met him he was stiff to the point of looking like a piece of deadwood ready to snap at

the slightest jarring. He was deathly pale from staying up all night, night after night, summoning exciting visions from his imagination that ended up terrifying him. But being terrified was better than being empty and dead inside.

He was ego defended to such an extent that he couldn't talk to anyone. Any point being made, any skill shown by anyone was a potential threat to his fragile shell of self-admiration. Without really killing himself, he was a living suicide.

Tai Chi was the first thing outside the home that really moved and motivated Ricky. He loved the feeling and the relaxed approach. After a few months of being fragile and tentative, he took on one of the Southern Shao Lin programs to develop his endurance and became snappy and athletic.

His affect did a 180. He bubbled over constantly with enthusiasm and joy. Picking him up to drive him to school in the morning was like having a second cup of coffee.



way he was the object, the cause of it all, the failed marriage, the slide into welfare and the house piled with refuse.

Now, as a teenager he was safe only when he was in his private world of daydreams. As we approached Christmas break his mood grew darker with the season. He developed a lost, distant look and became listless. I was desperate to find some mechanism to keep him from killing himself. County Mental Health managed to get him a PRN scrip for emergencies that his mom could give him if she felt it was necessary.

He got through the dark, sleepwalking days somehow, and we started working out just after the break. Ricky had seen me break a paving block and thought that might impress Kim and get him interested in doing something physical.

Physical? Kim?

Ricky handed the block to Kim and showed him how to hold it in front of him. I hit it and Kim rolled back. I told him to steady it, hold his ground, and I hit it again. This time Kim tumbled to the ground in a heap, the perfect metaphor of his inhibited life.

Despite the rough start we talked him into it and he progressed, although more slowly than Ricky, and with various halts and pauses. Being in his body was a new thing, and some days he just didn't have the oomph to make it out of his head and into life—but he never had a suicidal winter again.

After two years he was beaming, happy, head up, face visible. He is going to college now, writing in his spare time, and is one of the more cheerful and kind people on the planet. He was always kind—perhaps because he felt that he had to be—but now he has a choice.

People don't jeer at him anymore.

## *Kim*

I had not yet started teaching Tai Chi to the kids when Kim wandered into my classroom one day looking lost and confused, which was a habitual expression for him in those days. He used his long hair as a screen to hide from the world. People jeered him as he went from class to class. He had been sent to juvenile hall on one occasion for tearing up his room in a fit of rage that he was afraid to vent directly at his mother.

When he was still a toddler, Mom used to take out her disappointments on Kim. As she slipped toward the edge, she used to pummel him. In some

## *Li*

Day one, plopped down in my class against her will, Li fumed inwardly, like a malcontent on leave from prison just waiting for the guard to turn so she can bury the ice pick in his back. Deciding that she had been lied to about the freedom to go to real school, and that I was really a counselor, she hated me at first sight. Later she explained that she hated counselors because they used her for their own gratification and didn't love her in return.

I have never disagreed with her analysis.

She was another speed baby, abnormally intelligent, but her muscles were taught to the point of tearing. Her body was a balled fist shaking in anger. The group homes she had been kept in from age 13—she was 17 when I saw her that day—were violent places that made her feel the need to be on her

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guard physically.

Even before that, she had been forcibly masculinized by the orphanage where she spent the first 10 years of her life. She inhabited a boy's body. With shoulders lifted, she swaggered slightly as she walked. Her idea of feminine clothing was something like “Barbarella Goes to the Leather Planet.” All of which would have been fine if it was a choice, but nothing in her life was chosen by her.

She was driven by one force after another. Her thought processes were an enraged, paranoid cycling that got nowhere—a gerbil on amphetamines wearing out a treadmill. As if her native disposition were not enough, she loved speed, and had one of the more profound addictions I've ever seen. She needed to get high as much as most people need to breathe. Later she forgave me and told me that on that first day she thought I was a fat, yuppie, therapist. It wounded me to think that I looked like a therapist.

She started working out with us too. She was in too much pain to do the more active things, but she

liked sitting meditation and standing meditation and learned more from it more quickly than a hyper teenager had any right to do.

One day I was in a meeting when she came in from her job where some interaction had disturbed her. She began a paranoid rant that was impossible to decipher. I had to go back to the meeting, but I didn't like leaving her there fulminating in the foyer. I told her to put her coat on the floor and meditate there. By the time the meeting was over she was happy and had the problem all sorted out.

Meditation provided her with the capacity to interrupt the cycles of thought, restore calm, and then move on.

Despite her lack of interest in our “rough and tumble” activities, she developed internal power. She was fooling around at PAL with one of my

other students, watching one of their martial arts instructors try to break those easy tiles. He hurt his hand. She walked over and slapped it in two with a relaxed arm.

Today she is level, balanced, intelligent, going to college, happy as a clam, and completely uninterested in drugs. She has developed a quiet, reserved, and

self-valuing feminine persona, which is for the first time a mask of her own choosing. She says she likes being a woman and you can see from the twinkle in her eye that life from that vantage in amusing for her.

## *Dave*

I expected to see Dave delivered on our doorstep in a wire cage like the Tasmanian devil in the Warner Brothers cartoons. For months before Dave arrived, our psychologist kept going over his file and shaking his head.

This kid was angry! He had not been in public school for four years. He had made some progress, and the residential school was vouching for him to move on.

Actually Dave only attacked me three or four times that I can remember, and it was all in good fun. Of course he doesn't feel pain like normal folks and this meant that our scraps were probably more painful for me.

He had a history of circulatory problems so extreme that I was supposed to call an ambulance if his fingers turned blue, something that happened to him from time to time. After a few months of Tai Chi he brought his circulation under control and has not had a repeat occurrence of the problem.

Dave's parents were Tai Kwan Do teachers, and I expected there to be some jealousy when Dave started working with me. Instead they were very supportive and kind. They had tried teaching him in their school but found him uncontrollable. By the time he met me, Dave had had it with martial arts. It was old stuff for him.

One afternoon I asked him to hit me as hard as he could. He was surprised that it didn't hurt me. He had been in karate for years. Why didn't it work? I talked to him about internal power, relaxing, and chi. He was hooked and we started playing.

Dave didn't immediately learn what the rest of us would think of as self-control, but then, Sam never has and that doesn't stop him, does it? He had a need to hurt people that he couldn't quite bring under control at first. I worked with him as a workout partner most of the time because none of the kids could stand it.

When we visited the Coast, he jumped Al (another of Sam's students) with no preliminaries, and they wrestled each other to the ground. It's a good thing Al has a sense of humor.

As he became more powerful, Dave gradually developed a new gentleness. Contact, even push hands, is human contact after all. His mother told me that he had begun to show some affection for her at home. This was something he had always been unwilling to do. Contact had been unpleasant. Now he was feeling the life on the other end of the line and feeling some thin connection through his personal isolation.

Dave now has a very powerful punch. He went to a karate tournament on the Coast and beat everyone in his class by knocking them down with "ward off, right," or some variation on this simple theme. I think he was pleased by the change in his ability.

The karate instructor was fuming. He called Sam and complained about our rudeness. I guess

my students and I were laughing a lot during the tournament. The laughter was not something that we were particularly conscious of. It was just high spirits and good humor. I was surprised that it was noticed. We did think the Karate histrionics were a bit humorous.

Dave is in his senior year now, making good grades and making friends. He had a brush with drugs that frightened him. Although he would hate to admit it, he is a kind and loving person who provides help for others even though he espouses no social responsibilities.

This year he is training my younger students and doing a good job of it. One of the friends he brought in has turned into a happy, whopping monster in no time.

I am waiting to see what he will make of life beyond high school. Growing up in these times is difficult. There is so much hostility and so little reason for anyone to get along with anyone. There is no community. People like Dave and the others I have described have to make up their own social world to some extent.

## *James*

James is our first second-generation student to make it through a year with the older kids as his trainers. In junior high his foster parents had to take turns coming to school every afternoon to get him through the day.

He was heavily medicated and still had violent episodes. Last year, when he started working out with us, he was in tears nearly every day. Physical

**For most of his life, James was having a bad day, and it was definitely the world's fault. We now alternate repetitions of the exercise with bringing the chi down in standing meditation and body drumming on the lower abdomen.**

conflict reminded him of being beaten as a toddler. Any pain, any hint of anger, and he was back in the primal situation. But he faced his fears and came back day after day.

He was a real whiner when it came to dealing with schoolwork and responsibilities. He flunked a few classes, did poorly in the rest, and we had long

arguments just to keep him cooperating with his teachers.

None of this shows this year. He is a bright-eyed, intelligent-looking young man who gets his work done on time and plans to go to college. If he gets hit in the face, he is still reminded of the past but recovers quickly. Most of the time he is pleasantly in control of himself and enjoying life.

His new-found self-awareness takes me by surprise sometimes. This winter our group has been working on No Lik Kuen, a strength form that pumps up the hormones. Within a few days he told me that it was making him lose his temper. Most kids don't notice that kind of change. When they drift into a surly mood they think they're fine. It's the world that sucks.

For most of his life, James was having a bad day, and it was definitely the world's fault. We now alternate repetitions of the exercise with bringing the chi down in standing meditation and body drumming on the lower abdomen.

**T**HERE IS A THIRD GENERATION OF KIDS THIS YEAR who fell into working out with us so readily that it is hard to imagine that they were ever bad kids in any sense of the word— even though the last teacher who worked with them as a group resigned after one year.

They are a joy to be with. They just completed a final for me that was 400 questions long and took some of them eight hours to finish. We laugh about their past experiences driving teachers to drink, and tussling with counselors who promoted the politically-correct formula of thinking of themselves as crazy and helpless when they were really angry, intelligent kids who just wanted to do something real.

Mark, one of the new ones, told me that one of his counselors back in grade school pestered him day after day with the anatomically correct doll to get him to admit a molestation that never happened.

Finally he pulled the penis off the doll and threw it at her.

I think these kids will be all right too. ☺

**A video companion to this article, in which Steve works first hand with his students, is available from our website: [www.eurekainternalarts.com](http://www.eurekainternalarts.com).**

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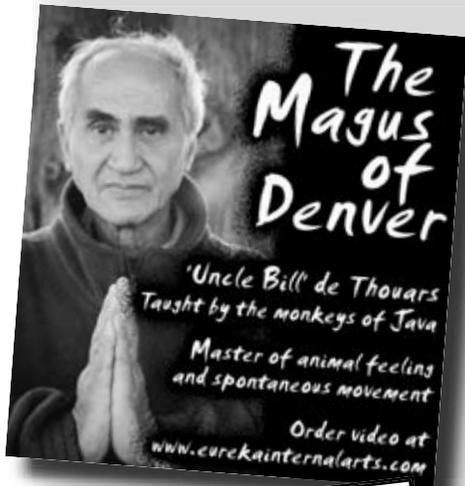
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