TAN TUI KUNG FU
Back to Basics Routine

By Laurie Cahn

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Several months ago, I asked my teacher, Adam Hsu, what he first learned when he started practicing kung fu. He said that his father taught him a ten line tan tui routine. He explained that this was not a "family style" of tan tui. Because tan tui is well known, and widely practiced in China, even someone not serious about kung fu might well know tan tui.

Many Westerners have a difficult time pronouncing Chinese words correctly. There are so many different dialects. Tan tui (rhymes with RON to-A) is often mispronounced Tom Toy. This famous Mr. Tom or Mr. Toy is often thought to be a Shaolin monk, who developed the system that bears his name. But just as Tom Toy is not a real person, tan tui is not a system in and of itself, nor does it belong exclusively to the shaolin chang quan (long fist) system. Instead, tan tui, meaning "springing leg," is simply the first level training of the Islamic style chang quan. Perhaps people are attracted to romantic visions of monks endlessly training in beautiful, isolated temples, many chang quan systems are mistakenly called shaolin. Actually, shaolin is one of many branches in the large family tree of the chang quan system. The shaolin chang quan system was developed by the Han people of China, while jiao men chang quan (Islamic style long fist) was perfected by China's Muslim minorities. In China there is an old kung fu saying: "From Nanjing to Beijing, the best tan tui comes from hui style." (Hui refers to Islamic Chinese.) Because of this kind of saying, in China some people refer to tan tui as "huhui tan tui."

The practice of tan tui spread all over China. The provinces, especially famous for their skill in the art and for a great number of students, were in the North: Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Shanxi.

There are many ways to practice tan tui. In San Francisco, there are four completely different methods of tan tui being taught. Aside from this fact, the jing wu system tan tui (perhaps the most famous and well promoted of all) is taught by four instructors in four different versions.

Tan tui consists of a series of lines, that contain a set number of movements, repeated on the left and right sides. While there are a variety of ways of doing tan tui, usually it is organized into either a ten- or twelve-line routine. Probably the original way to practice tan tui was to learn one line per month. The final two months of the year, after the ten lines were learned, were devoted to polishing the form. Of course, one line of the twelve-line version was done during each month of the year.

Sifu Hsu spent nine months learning tan tui from his father. Then he became a student of Sifu Han Ching Tang and spent the entire year learning the jiao men chang quan system ten-line tan tui.

This dedication to practice to something as basic and simple as tan tui might seem unreasonable, or even impossible for some kung fu practitioners today. Is it worthwhile? In much of modern life the emphasis is on speed and convenience: fast cars, fast foods, fast airplanes, a fast life. You don't have time to cook dinner, so you rush to McDonald's and grab a Big Mac. Of course, it's true, you did eat something. It's also true that you didn't eat a well-balanced meal. It was convenient.

Unfortunately, there is no convenient way to learn kung fu. It requires time, patience and diligent practice--all items that can be learned from practicing tan tui. The humility and determination that can be acquired after practicing tan tui for a year could be valuable for most kung fu students. However, after several months of tan tui, many students are quite sure that they can do the form at least adequately. Many people believe tan tui is too basic and too boring to keep their attention. What many students fail to realize is that a year of practice can...
speed up their future development. Tan tui is good basic training; it builds an exceptionally strong foundation. Any student with good basics will find advanced techniques easier to pick up. A kung fu proverb cautions: "Do not look down on tan tui for its plain postures and simple tactics; you will find it a powerful weapon after persistent practice of kicking and stamping." The value of practicing tan tui has never been disputed by knowledgeable kung fu practitioners. The boredom factor is not a new issue. Tan tui is recognized as being so beneficial that it is adopted as part of basic training by many different kung fu systems. A tang lang teacher incorporated tan tui into his system, but he made his version fourteen lines. Another teacher added more techniques to another style of tan tui, creating sixteen lines. No one knows if this was done in an effort to sustain students' interest, or if the instructors felt more was better--more lines and/or more techniques.

All styles of martial arts became popular in China as more people began training. Instructors often began to add their own understanding and training techniques, improving and polishing the quality of the art. On the other hand, some instructors weakened the art, because they lacked proper understanding of kung fu.

Other recognizable differences in tan tui styles are between styles that use high kicks, such as jiao men chang quan, and those emphasizing low kicks, like the jing wu system. It isn't necessary to say which system is better. High kicks train students' balance and improve flexibility. Also, when a high kick is held at its apex, a student's leg strength is greatly increased. Low kicks, on the other hand, are more practical and more apt to be used in real fighting situations. Training for low kicks helps a student learn how to deliver power. It is important to note that even if the kicks in tan tui are done only one way, other basic training may be done to supplement a student's knowledge and ability to kick. For example, while students of Sifu Hsu learn the jiao men chang quan system with its high kicks, they are required to learn a series of low kicks too.

One of the most common differences seen among varieties of tan tui deals with the fist. Some use a vertical or standing fist, while others prefer the horizontal fist. Again, it is a waste of time to argue whether one way is better than the other; most likely the difference happened because of organization. In a single school, it's easier if everyone does the same techniques. One can imagine an instructor ordering his students to follow his methods. Of course, instructors might have sound reasoning, too. Some feel that turning the fist produces added power; others believe keeping the fist vertical forces a student to use his entire body to gain power.

Tan tui is used in most schools as an integral part of basic training to build up a student's foundation, but there is more than one way to do it. In the beginning, each technique is done in a single movement. For example, punch, pause, block, pause, punch, pause, block, pause, and kick, pause. After a student becomes more adept, then he or she may begin to combine some of the movements. Instead of blocking and holding the block and then kicking, the blocking movement would be combined with the kick, so the student begins to learn to block and kick simultaneously. Sifu Hsu has added tou bu (pulling step) for advanced students. Adding tou bu not only teaches the students to adjust the distance between themselves and their opponents, but it also facilitates the proper way to issue power by simultaneously combining body movement with the step.

In addition to practicing tan tui alone, the student also must have some two-person training in order to really understand the practical application of tan tui. This doesn't really teach the student to fight, but it does begin to condition the arms and legs, giving a feel for contact. Of course, much more training will be necessary if the student wants to learn "real" kung fu usage.

What are the basic techniques that can be learned from tan tui? First, it teaches the basic postures: bow and arrow, horse, twisted, low, stretching leg,
40-60 and so on. It shows each position statically, and it teaches the student how to change smoothly from one stance to the next.

Next, tan tui uses all basic punching and blocking movements. Again, these movements are learned individually, and then in combinations. For instance, line one separates the punch and the block, while line two begins by simultaneously punching and blocking.

Tan tui doesn't just teach a number of disparate movements that are linked together in sequence; it teaches the student how to use the whole body as one piece. It shows a student how to bring the power up from the feet and legs, engaging the entire body in delivering power, rather than simply using the arm or upper body. Sifu Hsu always likes to remind his students that "the whole body is a fist." What he means is that even though a movement may appear to be a punch, in reality you may never get to deliver the punch; your opponent may interrupt your punch as you attack and instead you must be ready to use another part of your body, such as the elbow, hip, or shoulder, to complete your attack.

Tan tui trains the legs--this is why it is called the springing leg routine. As a foundation for the whole body, the legs must be strong for students to improve. The constant repetition of holding postures, especially holding a kick at the point of climax, gives students ample opportunity to strengthen their legs. The saying, "The hands are like two doors, but it is the legs that deliver the power," shows why so many generations of kung fu practitioners have spent endless hours doing tan tui.

Tan tui training is not just for the body: it builds the spirit, too. The willpower that it takes to force yourself to repeat a not-so-fancy series of movements is good mental training. But it is not enough to just repeat the movements; they must be done with an eye that is looking for constant refinement. If the movements are simply repeated by rote then practice will never cause improvement. Students must put their souls into each movement, and perform each routine with the wide-open, expansive flavor that is the trademark of the long fist system. In addition to building the spirit, tan tui is a place where a student can begin to learn to control qi.

What is qi? Some people call it internal energy, some just call it breathing, and still others call it the life force; probably any and all of these definitions are correct given that the concept of qi is very Chinese and difficult to translate into precise English. When practicing tan tui, or any martial art for that matter, it is essential to keep qi down--the area about two to three inches below the navel. As the student works out more vigorously, and becomes more fatigued, it becomes more difficult, and more important, to keep qi down. One way to learn to control qi is to count your breaths while holding each posture. This also aids concentration, keeping the mind from wandering during practice. Instead of thinking about what errands you have to do after practice, or the fight you had with a friend--you force yourself to count the number of breaths, and try to keep them slow, regular, and very deep. This kind of training assures a student of building a foundation like a pyramid: the head and upper body form the top, while the legs make up the sturdy base of the triangle.

The Ten Lines of Jiao Men Tan Tui

To describe a tan tui routine more specifically, I wanted to give a brief synopsis of the ten line tan tui set of the jiao men chang quan system. When Sifu Hsu said that he had an old poem that had been handed down to him by Sifu Han Ching Tang, I asked if I could use it. Sifu Hsu explained that he thought the poem might confuse me more than it would help me to really understand anything about tan tui. He told me that many old poems or manuscripts are passed off as some kind of incredible Bible that contains the real secrets of a certain style. Many old kung fu masters were not scholars or intellectuals, and many times their ability to write even rudimentary Chinese was limited at best; this rendered many old written texts almost completely useless. After watching a classmate of mine, who is getting his masters degree in Chinese language, struggle for two weeks to sensibly translate the poem, I began to appreciate why Sifu Hsu had said that, "...even Confucius would have a hard time translating this poem."

Having abandoned my idea to have the poem translated, I will summarize the ten lines of the jiao men chang quan. When it is possible, I will include excerpts from the poem that are understandable. The opening and closing to the poem are somewhat translatable, so I have included those sections.

"The Kun Lun, grand immortal, teaches to the world. Called tan tui [the techniques] contained
within, know no bounds."

**Line one:** This is the most basic of all the lines, showing the basic forward thrusting punch in a bow and arrow stance. The poem uses the image of a yoke to describe this line, possibly because the arms are outstretched as if they were supporting a yoke.

**Line two:** In this line, the student learns to punch and block at the same time—left kick, right punch and so on. The poem talks about a pulling and pushing motion referring to the way the right side of the body twists forward with the punch while the opposite side retracts.

**Line three:** Line three begins like line one but immediately covers and blocks to the rear while punching. It introduces the long arms, or windmill motion, the backfist, and blocking by using the whole side of the arm and body.

**Line four:** This line begins with a change of direction on the 45-degree angle. It introduces a number of new stances: the low stretching leg, the twisted, and the 40-60. It also shows the chang shou, the technique of "wiping the arms or hands."

**Line five:** This one is fairly straightforward: simultaneously upward block and punch, double strike (or block) down, and toe kick.

**Line six:** Line six begins like line four except on a straight line. It introduces a finger strike, and block that uses the arm in concert with turning the body and dropping the center of gravity into the low, stretching leg stance.
**Line seven:** Line seven starts like line two with a simultaneous block and punch. It then introduces a new kind of overhead circular arm blocking and trapping movement combined with the twisted stance. The roundhouse kick is done for the first time, rising out of the twisted stance and simultaneously blocking.

**Line eight:** This is the longest and most complex of all the lines. It includes three different kicks: toe, heel, and the side kick, and two of these are executed from low, coiled stances. Line eight links together several of the techniques that have appeared previously.

**Line nine:** Line nine is done on two opposite 45-degree angles. It uses a low, blocking movement to lead into a flying double jump kick, combined with a wide-open arm movement.

**Line ten:** This line begins with a small circular block (and step) that the poem describes as "picking a flower." Another step is initiated by the rear leg; then the body coils inward and both arms shoot out in opposite directions as the student executes a flying double jump kick. The poem describes this as springing outward like an arrow.

Sifu Hsu says, "People, don't just look at what seem to be simple movements. Kick a lot, practice a lot. This is the foundation and roots (of your martial arts training)."

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