

CHENG HSIN

- An Open Invitation -



„All these things are difficult to form into words.
If a person gives a name to something and then holds fast to that name, he will miss the real meaning. Yet if no name is given, then he floats about in empty space and does not attain awareness.“

– Chozan Shissai - Master Swordsman, Japan 1728

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ORIENTATION

Zen Consciousness and The Art of Effortless Power

Cheng Hsin was created by world-class martial artist Peter Ralston, and is basically about two things: consciousness and skill.

These two domains of study complement each other -- one offers insight and breakthrough, the other provides grounded feedback and powerful opportunities for training perceptive ability as well as physical skill. Deep immersion in this balanced and thorough training of mind and body begins a ripple effect that can transform every facet of self and life.

The goal of our consciousness work is to experientially penetrate to the heart of mind, self, and life. The goals of the martial work are oriented around developing the Cheng Hsin Body-Being and mastering The Art of Effortless Power - the ability to effectively interact using intelligent sensitivity rather than reactive brute strength.

Whatever the practice, and whether the focus is consciousness or relational skill, all the work of Cheng Hsin is aimed at discovering what is true and what is effective.

True innovators are, by definition, ahead of their time. Therefore, they remain largely unrecognized, except by a few. How many of us wished we had met Bruce Lee, sat in a session with Carl Jung, or walked around Walden pond with Thoreau?

Too late for that, but not too late to take notice of Peter Ralston. His creativity, commitment, and clarity shine through his teachings as he articulates higher principles based on direct experience and piercing insight.

A superlative martial artist and caring teacher, he has been to the mountaintop and bathed in the underground spring of Being. His insights speak to us all.

Dan Millman - Author, Way of the Peaceful Warrior

What is Cheng Hsin?



The Chinese characters cheng and hsin (pronounced "cheng shin") offer us images which communicate the nature of "truth" and "being" -- an appropriate title for a body of work that involves increasing consciousness on all levels of "being."

Cheng Hsin was founded by Peter Ralston in 1975 and is grounded in both the practical study of martial interaction and the open-ended inquiry that contemplative disciplines offer. After making deep breakthroughs in Consciousness, Ralston entered and won the full-contact World Tournament in China, becoming the first non-Asian ever to win that tournament.

His goal was to create powerful evidence for the effectiveness of what he has been teaching and sharing ever since--the unique body of work known as Cheng Hsin, which unifies the studies of consciousness with studies of martial arts, ability, skill and mastery.

Zen Consciousness directs our focus beyond the reality that we take for granted, while Martial Disciplines offer new possibilities for developing power and skill and applying it in a diverse range

of activities.

The steady background objective is to learn about ourselves and life; to observe how our minds, emotions, and bodies currently operate; and to discover new, more effective and freeing possibilities in how to think, feel, move, and interact.

When we take on this consideration as a whole, we are speaking of the entire event in which we appear and live. To approach and study such a primary and inclusive consideration, we need a purposeful and multi-dimensional investigation, grounded in what is at hand and yet open to possibilities beyond our convictions and assumptions. This is the Cheng Hsin endeavor.

Because we don't want to leave out any vital aspect of the event that we are, nor deny the obvious range in which we appear and live, several distinct domains of study have been developed.

Each area and method of study or work of Cheng Hsin is designed to be an integral part of the whole investigation. Each empowers the others, allowing growth and breakthroughs in areas that are just not possible within only one limited concern, approach, or development.

In the Body-Being Studies we address body awareness, structure and design, moving towards becoming effortlessly effective.

In the Relational and Martial Arts Studies we address ability and functional relationship, interaction and the principles on which these are founded.

In the Consciousness Studies we consider "mind" and our mental-emotional makeup, and the principles or nature of "mind" and the entire event of Being.

We look into metaphysics, psyche, movement, ontology, principles and design - any avenue that empowers our investigation into what is truly going on here.

In the decades since its inception a considerable body of communication and work has emerged. All of it shares a unique depth and character, which we do our best to communicate with this site. Check out Cornerstone Principles, Spirit and Essence for a sense of the character and depth of this work. Check out Pursuits and Goals for an overview of the specific practices.

Cornerstone Principles

In this work there are at least four basic distinctions upon which we stand. These are neither moral nor arbitrary. They seem to reflect what is simply so and embody the heart of what we are up to in the Spirit and Essence, and Pursuits and Goals of Cheng Hsin.

These four fundamental distinctions set the stage for true inquiry. They are all actually distinctions within the very same movement or pursuit, and so act as cornerstones for this endeavor - Honesty, Not-Knowing and Questioning, Grounded Openness, and Direct and Authentic Experience

Honesty

Honesty is telling the truth, not only to others but to ourselves.

This distinction goes beyond the conventional use of the word to a profound and real experience of being as "rock bottom" honest as we can manage. In this distinction we find that our normal tendency is not one of such powerful honesty -- we manipulate our own thinking and feeling, and our experience is so influenced by our beliefs, fears and ambitions that we cannot trust it to represent the "truth" without challenge. We must

maintain a diligent probing into the truth of anything that arises -- from our ideas on how something works to the nature of relationship and communication. It appears that direct and honest communication leads to powerful interactions and relationships. What is actually occurring is already so, we begin to participate in this when we are honest with ourselves and others.

Not-Knowing and Questioning

Paradox and Confusion are the guardians of the truth.

The truth is often found in unexpected places. How can we experience the truth if we are not open to every possibility? How can we question or wonder without first allowing ourselves an experience of not-knowing? Without the power of questioning, there is only knowing. With only knowing, there is no question and so no growth, no mystery, no learning, no discovery, no insight, and no experience of the authenticity of simply "being."

Grounded Openness

These are two fundamental principles that we strive to keep in balance.

To be grounded is to be real, to be committed to something, to be clear and standing on solid and authentic insights and effective distinctions.

To be open is to be free, fresh, unstuck, creative, to make breakthroughs, to entertain radical possibilities, to embrace paradox.

The dangers of groundedness without openness tend to be:

- an inability to learn
- becoming dogmatic or closed-minded
- becoming or remaining stuck in a belief system
- never challenging one's own opinions
- not being able to detect one's own lies
- having no breakthroughs
- no transformation

The dangers of openness without groundedness tend to be:

- becoming superficial
- being abstract, over-intellectualizing
- adopting fantasies or good ideas as if they are true or as if you have experienced them as real
- not being able to demonstrate or manifest what you are talking about
- not being able to "live" your philosophy
- merely believing in things rather than proving them for yourself
- getting confused or flighty, having nowhere to stand
- not being committed to anything.

As you can plainly see, the issue of balancing groundedness with openness comes up in every form and dimension of our living and our pursuits. The purpose for maintaining such a vigil in these distinctions is to empower our investigations in being as real and as far-reaching as possible.

Direct and Authentic Experience

We are open to the possibility that we can directly experience something.

This is the possibility that we can -- without belief, knowledge, conjecture, interpretation, or hearsay -- experience the truth of something, beyond subjectivity.

Consistent with our commitment to become directly conscious of whatever is true, we do our best to have the most authentic and genuine experience that we can for ourselves -- as opposed to merely believing something or having an idea that it "may" or even "must" be some way.

Since openness and questioning are always at hand in any true inquiry, this distinction represents a "direction" in which to go rather than a "place" at which to stop. However, it also suggests that we are standing at the furthest point possible in our experience at this time, in other words, the most honest and authentic experience we can have in this moment.

It's important to remember that none of this is meant to be presented as factual to be believed or not. The purpose here is to offer directions and possibilities for your own exploration and investigation. Remember, the pursuit is to question and discover for yourself what is actually so in the matter.

Spirit and Essence

The Spirit of Cheng Hsin

The spirit of the Cheng Hsin work is to continually move toward a more "real," direct and present experience of self and life. To "take on" Cheng Hsin is to move in the direction of experiencing the truth of what is occurring -- in this moment or in any matter.

„I don't want to present Cheng Hsin as a "right" way of being, but simply as a commitment to uncovering the truth of being. “

– Peter Ralston

Using open investigation, personal experimentation, contemplation, and questioning we pursue transformation, effectiveness, and a direct experience of the nature of Being.

We ground our pursuit in being real and effective, in mastering an art, and interacting with life more consciously. Discovering the principles that govern or design any event, as well as making the distinctions that enable us to relate more effectively to that event, are fundamental to the Cheng Hsin work.

The objective is not to believe or disbelieve something (not even our own beliefs); rather it is to directly and authentically experience for ourselves the truth.

This work is not about proselytizing a belief system, adhering to dogma, or following a set of rituals. It is not about defending itself against differing ideas, or engaging in idle speculations. It is not intended to be an exclusive club. The intent is to challenge ourselves, our actions, and our abilities openly and honestly -- this often means challenging our existing beliefs.

„The veils that shroud a direct experience of the truth can be stripped away by committed questioning. “

- Doug Chambers, Cheng Hsin Apprentice

Cheng Hsin supports direct and honest investigation, experimentation, communication, clarity of purpose, empowerment, and a commitment to authenticity and integrity in all endeavors and interactions.

It could be said that the purpose of Cheng Hsin is to provide or create for people a doorway into the nature of Being, as well as being effective. This endeavor is open to everyone no matter what their pursuits, as long as their commitment is to directly experience for themselves what is actually so in what they are doing.

The Essence of Cheng Hsin

The scope of the consideration of Cheng Hsin is so wide and multi-dimensional that one kind of class or workshop cannot cover it, nor would it be useful to restrict its study to one method or area of interest.

"The essence of Cheng Hsin is found in questioning our own event. We're striving to honestly investigate our actions, emotions, beliefs, relationships, and experience. It seems that in grasping the truth of any matter, the possibility arises of becoming more powerful, effective, and balanced in relation to that matter."

– Peter Ralston

Yet in every method or area where it arises, the aim of Cheng Hsin is to explore and examine the nature and event of Being, and to create a more open, authentic and grounded encounter of ourselves and reality.

In every case, the core matter under consideration is the event of "being," but not Being as an abstract or exclusive concept. It is the wonderment of the event that we are, the nature of our very existence. The core consideration is: What am I? What is Reality? What is Being in all and every form in which Being appears?

We seem to "be" this person, yet somehow also seem abstracted or removed from a consciousness of our own authentic nature.

What we observe about ourselves are various forms manifesting as "being."

Being appears as:

- some "thing" -- a body, which appears as functionally and purposefully directed, as alive.
- consciousness -- the foundation and origin of self and awareness.
- "mind" -- appearing as thoughts and emotions.
- relational and interactive.
- Creative.
- capable and ignorant, limited and open possibility

The objective is not to believe or disbelieve something (not even our own beliefs); rather it is to

directly and authentically experience for ourselves the truth.

Pursuits and Goals

*The Principle is without form.
Its function derives from the instrument.
Without the instrument, the Principle is unrecognizable.*

–Chozan Shissai - Master Swordsman, Japan 1728

The Design of the Cheng Hsin Studies

Cheng Hsin was designed to be an instrument for discovery and training, and it was created for people like yourself.

The design of the Cheng Hsin communication and studies is non-random. It was designed consciously, to follow, express and articulate the founding principles of each domain of study, to make them visible through practice and action, and the development of real skill.

Over time, and through working with thousands of people, Peter has refined and adapted the communication to accommodate human abilities (and in-abilities) to listen and learn outside of what is already known to them. (In and of itself, the study of this aspect of Cheng Hsin alone would be a very powerful study of the nature of learning, communication and facilitation.)

In each of several domains of study, distinct pursuits and practices have emerged to express and reveal the principles upon which they are founded. As we've mentioned, the Cornerstone Principles found the inquiry as a whole. The Zen Body-Being work and book emerged to support the expression and learning of the Principles of Effortlessly Effective Body-Being, The Art of Effortless Power to support the expression and learning of the Principles of Effective Interaction, and so forth.

Here we'll give you an overview of several domains of study that are growing today, and point you in the direction of further opportunities for study, practice and transformation.

An optimal training ground

„Thus it is important to teach men how to acquire discretion, great insight, forthright conviction, and an honest Heart. To teach them to acquire a personal awareness and self-discipline and thereby place them on the solid ground of practice. “

– Chozan Shissai - Master Swordsman, Japan 1728

The studies of Cheng Hsin have been developed and refined over decades to become an integrated set of Arts of great depth and power, an optimized training ground where the principles can be discovered, trained and mastered.

Peter created The Cheng Hsin Center to host intense workshops and provide support for the focus and effort that longer term training requires to master the depths of the Art. The coursework offered there is the best opportunity to make it real. The Cheng Hsin Retreat in the spring and The Fall Workshop Series are the best opportunities to get started with or immersed in the work.

Working with the Body

Cheng Hsin is pursued through a study of the body. We study its design, function, movement, awareness; and the pursuit of an effortlessly effective, fully functional and integrated body-being.

We work on learning, training and incorporating the Principles of an Effortlessly Effective Body-Being, the principles upon which effective use of the body depends.

The Principles of An Effortlessly Effective Body-Being

- **Centering:**
locating and being able to focus mind and feeling-attention, as well as move the whole body from, the bodies center.
- **Grounding:**
developing a stronger connection and feeling-association with the ground - drawing power from the ground.
- **Being Whole and Unified:**
being capable of feeling every cubic inch of the entire body and learning to unify this whole in awareness and action.
- **Relaxing:**
being able to let go of the mind and muscles and allow the body to attain a natural, open, and unused state.
- **Being Calm:**
learning to allow the mind and attention to be undisturbed by circumstance, and to refrain from creating negative or inappropriate thoughts and reactions.

The goals are oriented around developing the qualities and functional skill inherent in the Cheng Hsin Body-Being.

We work on developing and increasing a feeling-awareness of the whole body and body-mind which is responsible for skill, health, and the effective use of the body for any purpose.

We investigate the principles that make up an effortlessly effective use of body structure, moment, and power.

We work to uncover, explore and train Intrinsic Strength: using an inherent power of the body-mind to create effortless results.

We work on developing 7 basic structural points for more effective and correct mechanical use of the body (see the book: "Zen Body-Being").

Interaction, Relationship, Skill and Martial Arts

Cheng Hsin is pursued through the study of interaction. We explore the principles of interaction, relationship and ability. How is interaction constructed? What determines effective interaction? How is ability or skill created?

The Principles of Effective Interaction ground our work here.

The Principles of Effective Interaction

- **Listening:**
Accurately perceiving what's happening in every moment.
- **Outreaching:**
Making a feeling-connection with what's there.
- **Neutralizing**
Nullifying any disruptive force. Developing the skills of yielding.
- **Joining:**
Blending with another's actions to produce your own results. Joining the other's actions allows us to use their actions to accomplish our own ends without conflict.
- **Leading**
Instead of just yielding we actually move so as to lead their actions and take control.

There are many other sophisticated interactive principles not mentioned here.

The Art of Effortless Power is the main arena for this work.

"I would like to see martial arts turned into a place for the development of human beings, and of honesty. A place where we can see what it is that we do in life that really makes us suffer and hurt, or be ineffective and incomplete.

Martial arts are an excellent place to see that, if done right. Otherwise -- and ninety percent of the time it is otherwise -- it is done like everything else, just to add to our survival and protection, our "rightness." It's the same approach we have to everything else, and only ends up increasing resistance and separation.

I'd like to see these arts become as functional as they can be. A very valuable tool, the way of a Warrior, not the way of pretense and struggle. A tool for growth, not self-deceit.

When the words "martial arts" are mentioned, people generally think of something very crude or limited. Cheng Hsin is so much more than that. However, when talking to a publisher of a "consciousness" magazine and mentioning consciousness in fighting, his response was, "What does fighting have to do with consciousness?" I'd like to answer that question."

- Peter Ralston, 1978

Goals for Interaction, Skill and Martial Arts

- Developing an Effortless Power learning to produce results without having to use strength to do so.
- Relaxing deeply and being able to stay relaxed while in action, even within competitive interactions.
- Real yielding for us goes beyond a passive state to a very intelligent and effective way of handling aggression without strength.
- Our focus is on developing calm balanced skill rather than reactive brute strength.

- We use an experiential intelligence which is more than intellect, it is a wisdom that comes from developing a deeper body and relational consciousness, as well as insight into the nature of interaction, perception, mind, and the principles that govern effectiveness.
- In the martial aspect of Cheng Hsin we develop effortless and effective skills, and a centered and powerful mind and body.
- Learning and incorporating the Principles of Effective Interaction through understanding the principles upon which interaction takes place.

We move our mind and perception beyond a simple and gross relationship with what is happening to a very conscious and sensitive awareness of every action as it occurs within an interaction. This provides us with a heightened and accurate perception of what is happening, empowering our ability to handle it.

It is possible to develop a reflective response that can accurately and immediately relate to what another is doing, rather than being caught in a reaction or stuck in the intellect.

The more we can include in our awareness and mind, the more skill we have.

We consider the nature of interaction, relationship, and skill for the purpose of discovering the nature of interaction and the principles of relating effectively.

Working with Consciousness

Cheng Hsin is pursued through the study of Being and Consciousness, also called ontology. We ask as directly and authentically as we can "What am I?" "What is Mind?" "What is the nature of Being?" Looking beyond morality, cultural conventions, limitations in our own thinking and perception, we ask, "What are the dynamics and principles in which we exist?", and "what is the truth of our own nature and event"?

In the ontological aspect of Cheng Hsin we learn about our self-mind down to the bone, and work to become conscious of the true nature of "being" and existence.

We make new distinctions: recognizing something unseen in one's experience, perception, or mind.

Here we also consider the nature of interaction, relationship, communication, and skill, for the purpose of discovering the nature of interaction and the principles of relating effectively.

We study the self, mind, perception, and experience -- to experience what they are and why they exist.

We learn to perceive things the way they are rather than how they relate to us, providing us with a new and alive experience of reality, self, and others.

We work to directly experience who we are, and ultimately to directly experiencing the true nature of being and existence.

Investigating Mind

Discovering that the self-mind dominates all that we perceive creates the possibility that we can set out to experience beyond this limitation.

Penetrating the unconscious mind mechanisms that determine our sense of self, our perceptions and

interpretations, and the impulses that direct our actions, reveals what stands in the way of inner freedom and clarity. Through introspection and insight we are able to discover and dismantle the programs that run us.

Getting beyond judgment and self serving perceptions allows us to create real communication where one's experience is actually gotten by another or theirs by ourselves.

Becoming responsible for how the mind works and what goes on in our own minds, even at an unconscious level, allows us to create new relationships to things.

Developing a Zen Consciousness through Contemplation

Contemplation is a powerful ability that can be learned and developed, and which provides us with access to the inner workings of our own minds as well as to the possibility of discovering the true nature of self, mind, reality, or anything else.

There is a difference between experiencing yourself in the way that you normally do, and experiencing the true nature of existence. Our goal here is to directly and consciously experience the true nature of the existence of ourselves.

Our main goal is to become directly Conscious of the Nature of Being.

Some of the Goals in our Ontological Pursuits

- Learn about ourselves and the world around us.
- Become free of the domination of our own self and mind.
- Dig out from our unconscious mind the assumptions and programs that interfere with being fully healthy and effective.
- To be unaffected by or non-reactive to what we encounter so that we are no longer dominated by our past programming and knee-jerk egoic concerns, and can more powerfully experience and relate to what is actually there.
- Be able to experience things for themselves rather than how they affect us.
- Learn to stop habitually judging others and things, so that we can see them for what they are and more effectively interact with them.
- Develop our ability to really communicate -- to get our experience fully across to another, as well as be able to fully grasp what another's experience is that they are communicating to us.
- Develop our ability to powerfully contemplate so that we can become personally conscious of the truth of any matter.
- Learn to make new and effective distinctions -- recognizing something in our experience that we haven't yet perceived.
- Directly experience the true nature of our own Being and the nature of reality and existence.

This life-changing exploration is advanced by participation in the ontology workshops. Find out more here.

Personal Transformation

Cheng Hsin is pursued through demonstrative personal transformation. We work to create a powerful and "free" human being.

By addressing obstacles and ineffective patterns of thinking and emotion, and embracing a shift in the mind and body toward what is effective, free, and whole, we transform our experience and our selves.

Peter also works personally with advanced students on their skills in teaching and facilitation.

Cheng Hsin work supports personal transformation in all of its facets and pursuits. The pinnacle of this work, however, and worth pointing out, is the Apprentice Program. The Three Month Training Program also supports dedicated, personally motivated students.

Open to New Possibilities

Cheng Hsin is an open-ended endeavor open to the discovery and exploration of Cheng Hsin principles, and the creation and development of new pursuits and practices as well. Learning, facilitation, communication, and instrumental artistry of many kinds are all worthy fields of endeavor, just to name a few.

Working together, Zen Consciousness, Body-Being Skills and the Art of Effortless Power begin to transform the whole human being. Mind, body, skill, and every other dimension in which you find yourself is empowered, becoming more awake and effective.

You might say that Cheng Hsin provides a kind of "Renaissance" development, since we aim for a well-rounded transformation, and not just intellectual or physical improvements. The very principles that found such a transformation can be uncovered by you in an authentic and direct manner in Ontology Work of Cheng Hsin.

All of these pursuits, and more, are founded upon the same essential principle. However, transferring functional understanding from one domain to another is not easy. Development of that level of skill requires a fundamental and authentic experience of the principles involved such that they can be recognized in any form.

All of these pursuits are in fact specifically designed to facilitate just this sort of fundamental and authentic experience.

The Founder

Who is Peter Ralston?



Peter Ralston was raised in Asia and began studying martial arts at the age of 9. By the age of 19 he was a black belt in Judo and Jujitsu (Nidan), black belt in Karate (Shodan), had been Sumo champion at his high school in Japan, Judo and fencing champion at UC Berkeley, and had demonstrated proficiency in Kempo, Ch'uan Fa and Northern Sil Lum Kung Fu. At age 19, a growing interest in the "internal" martial arts lead him to study T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Hsing I Ch'uan, and Pa Kua Chang.

Ralston has pursued this endeavor with a passionate determination for more than 35 years. He sought out and studied with the world's most demonstrably skilled teachers, broadening his study with such arts as Aikido, Japanese and Chinese fencing, western boxing, Muay Thai (Thai boxing), and new levels of his own investigations into all of these arts.

Exceptional commitment (often practicing for more than eight hours a day) and depth of study, intense meditation and open inquiry led to profound levels of skill and understanding.

Consistent with Zen studies, his investigation into martial arts also came to include a questioning of reality. Long periods of intense contemplation resulted in many enlightenment experiences regarding the nature of self and reality, which greatly influenced his study.

To communicate his understanding, Ralston founded the Cheng Hsin School in 1975. In 1977 he opened a center called "The Cheng Hsin School of Internal Martial Arts and Center for Ontological Research" in Oakland, California.

Intent on revealing the depth and power of this work, in 1978 he became the first non-Asian ever to win the World Championship full-contact martial arts tournament held in the Republic of China.

Ralston's main focus in his teaching has been to uncover and communicate the principles behind any subject matter; frequently it is about being effortlessly effective.

His main focus in his facilitation work is to uncover the truth of things, to break through assumptions and beliefs, and to assist others in having a direct, authentic, and experiential increase in Consciousness.

He has trained staff or conducted workshops for numerous groups, including various t'ai chi, aikido, and other martial arts associations, as well as human transformation organizations such as Lifesprings, Institute of Self Actualization (ISA), Robbins Research Institute (NLP), Actualizations, and the Institute for Empowerment.

He is a highly trained and insightful facilitator, openly teaching what he has learned from decades of training, insight and direct experience.

Origins Interview, 1978

The following is adapted from a 1978 interview in which Peter Ralston spoke about some significant events in his history.

Beginnings

"I first started martial arts in Singapore when I was nine, I started Judo with some friends, but at that time it was simply another form of play. I didn't really get serious about it until I was almost sixteen.

As I progressed in my studies of martial arts, I isolated myself more and more from the rest of the world. My point was never to blindly believe something somebody said, never to adopt someone else's structure or beliefs. My point was simply to be good.

As a teenager I wanted to be the best fighter in the world, an attitude that I think was very important to my success. A lot of people want to learn something, so they simply study from someone who tells them what to do, and that's legitimate. It's good to be open, however, to the fact that the teacher may not be accurate, and often is simply teaching what he has heard or learned or believes. In any case, I wanted to make the art mine. In order for it to be mine, "I" had to have the ability. I had to discover and understand it. It didn't do me any good if somebody said something and I believed it; only if I understood it, only when it became my experience and ability, was it useful."

A New Direction

"I read the Tao Te Ching and got into Zen for the same reason: to further my study in martial arts. Then, by and by, it turned around and my martial arts furthered my study of that - of discovery. Essentially, I was into understanding the fundamental nature of my own event; I just turned it around so that instead of studying my own event for the sake of martial arts, I began to use martial arts to study my event."

A Few Years Later

"One day I was playing with a friend and I said to myself, "This is it! This is what has been missing." It wasn't even in words. It was something communicated about the real play and the real relationship. It was in that situation where I first learned to drop fear. Not the fear of getting hurt, but the fear of losing. It had never occurred to me. I fought so often, and out of a hundred blows exchanged with anybody, they would always hit me at least a few times, and I didn't like that. I wanted to be perfect. I didn't want any blows in and I was striving for that. This time, however, I noticed that if I wasn't afraid of getting hit, or of winning or losing, it was easy. I wouldn't get hit! That was the first time I was able to never get hit, 100% -- because I didn't care. What that did was open up my perception to what was really happening, because I didn't have any investment in it.

I had several black belts in different arts and had studied sword, staff, fencing at the University, tournament judo, aikido, western boxing, muay thai, and others. Around my early twenties I really started to isolate myself, so I didn't accomplish more "badges" of any kind. I didn't care about that anymore and I pulled myself away. I didn't care if anybody knew what I knew. I didn't realize at the time, however, that later on this would create a gap between me and my communication to others.

Around that time I was living in a shack, studying. Although I had taught for a while, even when I was a teenager, I had given up teaching at this point. Looking back, I can see that I had a great deal of what people would call discipline. I can only see it by looking back because it was all I knew then, and it was simply normal life for me. There was an incredible amount of time, concentration, and energy put into my study that most people never know. I worked day and night on it, not just physically, but through contemplation and writing. I wrote because it served me in my study, not writing to anybody in particular, or maybe to somebody, someday. I was just writing what I learned day-to-day, my insights and realizations.

I would physically train for a minimum of five hours a day, and then I would sometimes teach on

top of that. The rest of the time, my friends and I would hang out, practicing in the courtyard, studying and talking. Later I would write and contemplate. The good part about this isolation was the amount of discipline, contemplation, and concentration on my work. While I was doing that, I didn't notice that it was anything not to be done. It was just simply what I did."

Breakthrough

"One day I was sitting in my back yard and a man came up to me. He had run into somebody who knew me and said that he would like me to teach him martial arts. I told him that I wasn't doing that any more, but he was really persistent, so I began to teach again. Later he said he really wanted me to do some intensive contemplation work. I was twenty one. He said, "I can see that you're ready and I really want you to do this." I said no. At the time, I couldn't see how anything significant could be brought about in only three days of intensive contemplation.

However, I realized that some of my decision not to participate was a result of cowardice. Overcoming this barrier, I later went with him to a five-day contemplation Intensive held in Santa Rosa. I sat right down, working on the question "Who am I?" and on the first day, the first exercise, what I was getting just blew me away. I didn't have a direct experience of the truth right then, but I did encounter the type of phenomena common to intense contemplation. The room changed. It got bright, I saw colors, and the sense of myself was quite different. I felt expanded somehow. Just working on this question, a whole different thing started to happen for me.

At the end of five days, I felt more joy than I had ever felt in my life. I was really happy - I hadn't noticed that I hadn't been. It was beautiful. Two weeks later, I went up to a place in the mountains and did my second Intensive, working on "What am I?"

I spent the entire time willfully and dynamically going for a direct experience of the very nature of my being. I threw everything I had into it for three solid days, every moment. I didn't let up - I didn't notice I let up, anyway. I did it like I did most other things at the time: with just so much drive, so much energy, so much attention in every moment. Thinking back, I don't know if I could do it like that anymore.

Even so, I didn't "get" it -- I didn't directly experience my true nature. I didn't have an enlightenment experience. I thought that I never failed at these things! It can not happen! It hadn't even dawned on me that it might not happen. Three days and I didn't have a direct experience of the nature of my own Being.

I had to wait for a ride back with the man who brought me, so I stayed overnight and hung around the next day. It was really nice, we were in no hurry. He was talking with some people, and so I found a copy of Jonathan Livingston Seagull and read it that morning. I was hanging out doing things like sitting in the loft at the top of a ladder, trying to get to the bottom without moving my body. I was trying to do the Livingston Seagull thing, right? I was really trying to do it! I still didn't believe that I couldn't do anything.

Late that afternoon, I was sitting up against a wall in an L-shaped room. Some people were around the corner talking. I was just sitting there feeling good, not doing anything, not contemplating in particular, and I had an enlightenment experience of the nature of my being. It was a major breakthrough, the nature of which was completely outside of my previous experience. It was somehow not of the domain of "experience" and, at the same time, absolutely transformed my experience. It was profoundly and perfectly the case. It changed my whole life and the structure in which I held reality. It was fabulous!

Suddenly, I was aware that I was Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I directly experienced my true nature, not as thingness in any way, shape or form. The possibility that I wasn't any thing had not

existed for me. Through the whole Intensive I had been every thing, every conceptualization, every movement, every sense, every effort. It had never occurred to me that I wasn't anything. In the enlightenment, I was just . . . no thing, no where, no substance whatsoever. No intellectual understanding of the matter can ever come close to a direct enlightenment. Although I had several others later, this first was probably the most significant enlightenment experience I ever had.

At home a week later, I had an enlightenment experience of the nature of an other. I became conscious that what others are is exactly the same as what I am. I am nothing and I occupy no space, no location. Given that I don't occupy a location and they don't occupy a location, I became conscious that we are not separate -- we are the same one."

New Abilities

"It was after those enlightenment experiences that abilities like being able to read someone's disposition accurately started to come. I was able to see what people were going to do before they did it. As a result, when somebody was going to hit me, I would finish the situation before they were able to, and that was it.

Sometimes in class people would ask, "How would you deal with a situation where someone is going to hit you?" I'd say, "Hit me." And the moment they would think to hit me and start to motivate their body, I'd stop them. That's it. Handled. I suppose in one sense you could say I noticed their mind. I was seeing where they were coming from, the source of where the action arose. Seeing the bottom of the motivation of their thought and actions through knowing what I am and what they are. I knew where they were coming from and would watch them spring from there: that appeared to me, not visually, but it touched me before their body moved. Since it's a process for them in which they have to manifest intent, and then turn that into action, I can act before they arrive at their action.

I was just dealing with the situation in a more real sense, dealing with what was true. That ability happened because it is aligned to what is true. I hadn't noticed that the ability was something I could develop, or was something that somebody didn't have but could develop. At that time, Cheng Hsin was still on the horizon, and I was just beginning to clarify what was later to be known as the Principles of Body-Being, an alignment to which allows for great functional capacity."

More Contemplation

"Sometime later I did a 14-Day Intensive led by Charles Berner. A lot of interesting people and a lot of "old hands" were there. It was incredibly tough sometimes, and yet it was very powerful. On the fourteenth day, I hadn't gotten it. I was working on "What is Life?" or more accurately, "What is Existence?" On the last exercise of the last day, during the last ten minutes, I had an enlightenment experience. The first enlightenment experience I had was the most significant, but this one was the deepest or most profound.

It was the last exercise, and I thought if I hadn't gotten it in fourteen days what difference could this one exercise make? So, I was just enjoying myself. For some reason, I decided to go up out the top of my head a distance that felt like several feet above me. It felt like I would go up there and meet my diad partner, Neil, like we joined up there. And then, quite to my surprise, I had an experience of what the Zen people call the Void. That of Absolute Existence. There was no distance, no time, no space . . . nothing.

I guess my appearance changed dramatically at the time, since, after we were done with the exercise, Neil started jumping up and down and pointing, exclaiming how different my face looked, saying, "You should look in a mirror!" I hadn't looked in a mirror for fourteen days. When I got home, I walked up to a full-length mirror and looked at myself and it was a deep shock to my body.

It was a shock because I saw a body that I had known before, and it wasn't me! Not that my appearance had changed. The familiarity is what shocked me. In some sense, I had forgotten that I had a body. It's like the body reflected my history, my character, my ideas, my personality, all the things I had thought I was. All the things I had been being. Without thinking about it, I guess I really expected my reflection not to show up.

I recognize now that I didn't have a context in which to hold that experience. I had experienced the Absolute Nature of existence, yet when I was back in "life," I just noticed that everybody lied. That everything said and everything done was a lie. It was not the truth, and it started to become intolerable. Then I noticed that everything I said was a lie. That I wasn't able to speak the Truth. I started to go crazy, so I isolated myself for two weeks and wouldn't speak. I didn't know what to do with it. I realized it would be valuable to have a context in which to hold such an enlightenment experience. This realization was one of my motivations for creating much of the Cheng Hsin work that was to come."

More New Abilities

"New abilities started to arise. I told you of the ability to read someone before they moved. This one started to arise: I didn't have to be cognizant of any movement on their part, psychic or otherwise, to know what to do - I just knew. It blew me away. I didn't have to perceive a thing. The former ability had been perceiving the beginning. With this I wasn't perceiving anything!"

The World Tournament

"After all of that, the World Championship was easy. I did that because . . . well, for one thing, I had given up martial arts in a sense, and I'd never been recognized for what I had accomplished. I knew I was good. This World Tournament was the second and possibly the last. In 1928, the first big tournament was held in mainland China. It was very dangerous; lots of people were killed or injured. The officials finally stopped the 1928 Nanking Tournament at the last thirteen people because they didn't want them to kill themselves off. There have been others since then. For a time there was an annual tradition called the Asian Martial Arts tournament, though I suppose anyone could have entered. Finally, they called it the World Tournament and invited all countries to participate. When I was there in 1978, there were Japanese, Thais, French, Saudi Arabians, Australians, other people from the United States and many other countries, but most were Chinese and it was usually won by Chinese. I was the first non-Asian ever to win.

I did it for two reasons. One was to complete something for me. I was no longer going to be involved with the competitive aspect of martial arts and I wanted recognition. The other fundamental reason that I did it is that I'm quite radically different in the world of martial arts; I ask people to do "uncommon" things, to take on apparently unrelated inquiries, and I demand a very deep level of understanding. I want people to listen to me, to open up to what I'm saying. Winning this World tournament was done so that I could say: "I did it. What I'm teaching you is functional. It works." Now they'll consider it. People listen to me now who wouldn't have before, although I'm saying the same thing."

A Simple Message

"One evening around 1973, I came up with a phrase. I was standing out in my back yard in the pine trees. I had walked out there with an uneasy sense that somebody was around. It was very dark, and I had some apprehension, wondering, "Am I going to have to fight somebody, a burglar or something?" As I was standing there in the yard, I truly opened up to the possibility of that event, and suddenly everything became safe. I guess that's the only way I can say it. The realization at the

time - what I said aloud into the yard was: There is no such thing as a fight. There never was and there never will be.

This level of understanding is very difficult to reach without some ontological work (by that I mean contemplative or in-depth considerations into the nature of "being"). It occurred to me that I first had to make it clear to others that fighting is a relationship. People just didn't understand that. Simply establish an appropriate and responsive relationship with the opponent in every moment. I have had martial artists - kung fu people, boxers, karate people, internal martial artists and others -- come and play with me and say that I'm good; and I think: it's not good, it's just simple. And they simply don't understand."

The Arts of Cheng Hsin

The Art of Being a Body

„Posture is a tool for understanding function.

Function is a tool for understanding itself. “

- Peter Ralston
The Principles of Effortless Power

One of the principal areas of focus in Cheng Hsin is the body, or more precisely the body-being.

In the early days of teaching, I created the term "body-being" because there was no such inclusive word in our language. Using an unfamiliar term also helps a student's mind remain open to possibilities that are not immediately apparent.

Consider that within the basic nature of any living body, awareness is inherent and an entity is implied. We cannot successfully address a body's condition, healing, or transformation without becoming conscious of the role that the mind -- perception, thought, emotion, memory, association -- has in every bodily activity.

The term "body-being" helps remind us that we're not dealing exclusively with a physical component, but also and always with the beingness that is both body and consciousness. Whether we name it or not, body-being is where our training actually takes place.

You may have noticed that I speak a great deal about feeling-awareness, feeling-intelligence, feeling-perception, and feeling-attention. Why do I create a hyphenated word, always attaching some mind function to feeling? Because what I'm talking about isn't just feeling, and we have no words for finer distinctions in this realm.

In each case, there is another ingredient to the feeling-state or perceptive ability that sets it apart from being a mere "feeling" in the usual sense of the word, which basically means either sensation or emotion. At the heart of all these hyphenated feeling-words is consciousness, and where sensation and consciousness intersect is our main area of study -- hence, the hyphens.

The approach that Cheng Hsin offers is not to follow a dogmatic set of beliefs about how one should use their body, or a system of rules as to what to do and how to be. Instead, we study what makes up an effortlessly effective body.

Over decades of investigation and training, insight and breakthrough, trial and error, Peter Ralston has developed an extraordinary mastery of martial skill and relationship.

From this perspective of mastery he shares his understanding clearly and directly. He clearly articulates and demonstrates the principles at work in making the user of the body not only effective, but effortlessly so.

"Working with Peter changed the way I move my body. I exercise, dance, and live differently. It's not only a powerful way to live in a body but a powerful way to live. His knowledge and application of body mechanics is more relevant than anything I learned in seven years of medical education."

- Katie McQueen, MD Clinical Assistant Professor,
Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, UTHSC

Like all of the Cheng Hsin work, it is rooted in actual experience-it-for-yourself learning. Ralston offers many unique and effective exercises to make the experience real for you, whether you are a workshop student or a reader of his books.

Five fundamental principles stand out as a foundation to a natural and powerful body.

The Principles of an Effortlessly Effective Body-Being

- **Centering:**
locating and being able to focus mind and feeling-attention, as well as move the whole body from, the bodies center.
- **Grounding:**
developing a stronger connection and feeling-association with the ground - drawing power from the ground.
- **Being Whole and Unified:**
being capable of feeling every cubic inch of the entire body and learning to unify this whole in awareness and action.
- **Relaxing:**
being able to let go of the mind and muscles and allow the body to attain a natural, open, and unused state.
- **Being Calm:**
learning to allow the mind and attention to be undisturbed by circumstance, and to refrain from creating negative or inappropriate thoughts and reactions.

Each principle opens up an entire field of study in itself. Together they open for us a extraordinary pathway to a more authentic, powerful and effective way of using the body and being alive.

The principles of body-being are an integral part of all Cheng Hsin Arts. During the second week of the Cheng Hsin Retreat we put special attention on this facet. Participants receive a complete course on the Body-Being work. You will train in the mechanics and energies of the Cheng Hsin Body-Being. You will learn all of the principles, structural mechanics, dynamics, and mental states of an effortlessly effective body-being.

You can get a look at some of the body principles in An Introduction to the Arts of Cheng Hsin dvd, as well as the Fight-Play-Demo dvd.

Zen Body-Being

The book Zen Body-Being is a comprehensive guide to applying these principles to every area of your life. The following description provides a glimpse into the content and spirit of this book.

In this inspirational guide, Peter Ralston presents a program of "psycho-physical education" for anyone interested in body improvement. Using simple, clear language to demystify the Zen mindset, he draws on more than three decades of experience teaching students and apprentices worldwide who have applied his body-being approach.

Zen Body-Being explains how to create a state of mental control, enhanced feeling-awareness, correct structural alignment, increased spatial acuity, and a greater interactive presence. Exercises are simple, often involving feeling-imagery and meditative awareness, which have a profound and

sometimes instantaneous effect. Where similar guides teach readers what to do, this book teaches readers how to be.

While one of Peter Ralston's previous books (*The Principles of Effortless Power*) is already a martial arts classic, in *Zen Body-Being*, he shifts his scope to create a sort of "physical education" for anyone interested in body improvement. This new work draws from Peter's experience with more than three decades of students and apprentices worldwide, who have applied his body-being work to everything from playing pro sports to playing a horn. By demystifying the Eastern philosophy behind "internal power," Peter has created what amounts to a handbook for body-mind learning, whether the goal is simply efficient movement with structural integrity, or the total mastery of an art.

Most instructional books give us something to do -- Peter teaches us how to be. Instead of handing us a set of techniques to memorize, Peter cuts to the chase with basic universal principles, the very qualities that make up physical skill. Since the principles and qualities behind all effectiveness -- mental control, feeling-awareness, structural alignment, spatial acuity, interactive presence -- remain consistent no matter what the activity, a variety of teaching methods can lead to skill. Most teachers, however, tend to overlook foundation principles in favor of specific training that may or may not help cultivate the qualities needed for skill. By contrast, *Zen Body-Being* addresses the principles of effectiveness directly.

Peter teaches us to learn on an experiential level, offering simple, but potentially very powerful tools. We learn to use a Zen "mindset" to increase and clarify the perception of our experience, whether that's feeling our feet or managing the complexities of interaction. Again and again, Peter draws our attention to something we take for granted, shows it to us in a clear light, and gives us a new way of seeing that changes how we use our bodies or think about "self" from then on.

Body-Being eCourse

There is a year-long eCourse *The Principles of Effortlessly Effective Body-Being* in which you are invited to study and train this body transformative practice as you live your daily life and in whatever activities and discipline you take on.

The Art of Effortless Power

I wanted to create an art based on fundamental observations of physics, perception, intent, impulse, and energy -- an art that gears itself to meet any situation because it is founded on understanding the principles in which interaction takes place.

I wanted an art that would be adaptable and well-designed, forged through training and techniques but designed to teach something beyond the form.

The Art of Effortless Power is such an art.



—Peter Ralston



The Art of Effortless Power is the most wide-ranging domain of martial arts study within Cheng Hsin. It is within the context of this wonderful Art -- a dynamic interaction of sufficient power, complexity and clarity -- that we are able to study interaction and ability in a grounded and real way.

The Art is one of throwing and uprooting rooted in three traditional arts: T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Aikido, and Pa Kua Ch'ang, with influence from arts such as Judo, Jujitsu, boxing and others. The student of The Art learns to neutralize aggression, blend with forces, and disrupt the balance and power of attackers by projecting them through space or throwing them to the ground.

Designed to reveal the intrinsic nature and source of power

The Art initially omits the "boxing" arts or arts of striking; it is, however, designed by a master boxer with mastery of boxing in mind. What this means is that the skills have been designed to be fully transferable to a striking context, and habits developed in this practice which accord with the Principles of the Art will greatly enhance one's abilities in any striking art.

The Art also incorporates ground-breaking explorations of perception, feeling-awareness, balance, relationship and others, which have distinguished the teachings of Grandmaster Peter Ralston.

This feedback into the structure and restrictions of our "self" can provide insight into the fundamental nature of our own event of being.

Oriented towards Mastery

In The Art we frequently practice the techniques in a ritualized form. This allows an opportunity to more fully understand every aspect of the technique and the training, and draws attention to the fact that the activity taking place is a ritual of process. The more we understand what process is, the greater our capacity to masterfully engage in process.

Done for fun

On the other hand, in order to empower an understanding of the principles of interaction and the requirements for creating spontaneous interactive process, The Art also includes the practice of various forms of freeplay. These are non-ritualistic and freeform except for the framework or parameters in which they are played.

Most of these games involve spontaneous and creative interactive play, so as to train an alignment with life as it comes to us. Since roles in life are ever-shifting, I believe a practice should include a forum for confronting that fact.

Making Progress

Our starting point is most frequently an introduction of body-being basics, learning to relax and let go, and then we move on quickly to learn effective yielding. We also begin our study of intrinsic strength early on, to begin the develop an effortless power. We learn simple falling methods, and essential routines for leading and neutralizing, as well as basic uprooting and then throwing techniques.

As we progress through the Art, we go from simple, easy, interactive games and exercises to more complex and advanced games and freeplay. We learn more and more advanced techniques (around a 150 in all), and master many interactive principles such as joining, leading, complementing, changing, and many more. Through the integration of techniques, principles, and games an art is mastered and a person is transformed.

Advancement is achieved one step at a time through a degree system involving 30 sub-levels, or kyus, and 8 Certified Degrees.

Designed for deep and transformational learning

The real goal of The Art of Effortless Power is to understand deeply, bodily, the principles from which process, body-mechanics, interaction -- and so life itself -- manifest. Therefore, no matter how "good" one becomes, the study remains bigger than the individual.

Aimed directly at the Heart of It All.

The purpose for the practice is to "be" the principles, the event, the spirit. Pursuing the goal of effortless power leads us to see the limitations in which we live and think.

The Creation of Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou (The Art of Effortless Power), Interview

Peter Ralston on the spirit and essence of Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou

Peter Ralston, circa 1981

"Cheng Hsin T'ui Shou is inclusive and expansive. It's open. It's a great thing, not a mediocre thing. That's what I want it to be as a practice, and it won't become that, as a solid reality, until more process occurs in the world. I want it to be something that's not fixed. A practice that has lots of techniques, but I want the spirit to be heard overall.

"I want it to be heard as something that is pliable, that can and should change, that is adaptable. Many differing techniques can be created and still be consistent with Cheng Hsin t'ui shou. Discerning and responsible people can create new techniques - it doesn't have to remain a set group of techniques, and I don't want it to become a set group of techniques. It's a practice, an art, not a collection of techniques.

"On the other hand, I don't want people to hear it as fixed or as abstract, as airy fairy and superficial. That's why I keep going back and forth in my speaking. Like when I talk about it as a ritualized art and then invite people to look into what actually works. I don't want it to be heard as one or the other.

"I want it to be a place where people can get past being stuck in technique and form, as if it is something fixed and solid. On the other hand, I don't want them to hold it as something "individual," their own "style," making stuff up, or being limited to what the stretch of talent and intellect will allow easy access.

"If we say it's not just the techniques and it's pliable and open, so that new techniques can be created, then people will say: "Oh, I get to just make it up." Like a lot of modern-day new age pursuits: "art therapy," "go with your impulses," do what you feel. That's therapy. Cheng Hsin t'ui shou isn't therapy; it's a spiritual, mental, physical practice, a training. It's all right in therapy to go with your own expression and feelings. It's all right as an adolescent to figure out something that works on your friends. People want what they've already got, already believe. Cheng Hsin is not what people already believe; it is beyond belief, and by its very nature can only be grasped in this moment, so it is always new.

"It would horrify me if Cheng Hsin t'ui shou turned into people "doing their own thing." I'd prefer that it become a meaningless ritual rather than therapy or simply a reflection of one's own ego. Then at least some perceptive individual could possibly dig out the true meaning at a later time.

"I want Cheng Hsin to be -- by definition -- beyond where anybody is. If someone is really good at all the techniques, there is still more to open up to, because Cheng Hsin t'ui shou is beyond the

techniques. The techniques are fine, but they're a ground, an anchor, steps, a car, a telephone, the house. Without some form, life has no location in which to appear; it's not going to take place. If it doesn't take place in the telephone or house, it takes place in a tree, a bird, the grass, a worm. It occurs somewhere, and the techniques are a place for Cheng Hsin to take place. The life or spirit of Cheng Hsin needs to take place in the techniques just as life takes place in the telephone or house, otherwise there's really nothing occurring. It's just form.

"I want people to understand that Cheng Hsin t'ui shou is getting at fundamental principles in which life occurs. It's getting at principles in which interaction occurs; it's developing an understanding and insight into these principles.

"The real goal of Cheng Hsin is to understand deeply, bodily, the principles in which this event is taking place. I'm not just speaking of the t'ui shou event. Life takes place out of the principles in which life takes place. So it doesn't matter much that life takes place in a t'ui shou class, in the house, in music, or wherever. When life occurs, it is governed by the principles in which "life" takes place. Primarily we're talking about interaction, or simply "being alive."

"The purpose of Cheng Hsin t'ui shou is to understand the principles in which life and human interaction take place. As with a spiritual practice, people should understand that, no matter how good anybody is, t'ui shou still stands above. This must always be so, unless we actually "be" the principles in which life and interaction take place. This is the purpose -- if not necessarily an attainable goal -- for the practice.

"That's one of the reasons Cheng Hsin has to remain pliable. If it becomes rigid it won't be that kind of practice. But I don't want it then to flip over into some stupid mediocre practice, strutting of styles, eclectic garbage, or just learning techniques for self-defense.

"Through learning the techniques as a base, we strive to understand how each technique works, the physics, the psychology, the interaction, the energy, and the timing. We practice to understand it, grasp it, align with it. Eventually we start to understand something about the principles in which interaction takes place and life activity takes place. In getting closer to the principle, we can train hard and contemplate so that we have an insight into the principle. Then our training becomes a very different matter, and that's when we truly start training.

"It's not until then that we are really training. Before then, we are attempting to train, or practicing to train. We start this real training by working from the principles, by beginning the work of adapting the entire body-being to these principles. Although this is really difficult, it's also the good part.

"The work that occurs prior to insight, well, it's hard too. It's hard like a barrier, like you can't see anything. It's as if you're banging your head on a wall, trying to find the mechanics, the principle. But once found, it takes over. Most people think that's the end of the story. It's not. That's the new beginning, a big beginning. You begin a new phase of training.

"Once you've found the principle, and you have some bodily insights, you get it as a living event, not as a thought about something. You see it, feel it, hear it in operation. Once you get the principle, you have insight into it; yet that doesn't mean that you "be" it, that you are completely aligned to it. It doesn't mean that the forces of your thinking, your emotion, your bodily impulse, your tendency, your experience and perception are aligned with the principle in which they themselves occur.

"Once you get the principle, then the work begins in transforming all of the habits, impulses, thinking and emotions to align with the principle, and that's where the real training is. And while you're doing that, you're also training to understand more fully, to grasp the principle at a much deeper level.

"Once you have insight into the principle, you keep seeking it out in your actions, your emotions,

the techniques, freeplay. When you know it's there, you can work to train it, bring it out, align to it, rather than have it just become a philosophy.

"That's what happens to most practices. Something is understood about the principle of it, the spirit of the art, and somebody says something that sounds pretty or moral, and then it becomes pretty and moral. Often the person who says it doesn't fully grasp what's occurred, they say it as a place to stand on, and it comes out moral and philosophical. Then the art becomes something that is "accompanied by a philosophy" rather than "lived out of a principle."

"People are used to listening in this way. They've become accustomed and trained to hear everything said about an art as merely "accompanying philosophy," or as a technical description that requires no deep consideration.

"Then what happens? Good teachers are reduced to speaking in a cryptic manner so that they can say what they want to say. They have to keep it difficult to understand, in order to draw people to move towards something. And then of course, what they attempted to communicate eventually turns into some sort of philosophy or belief system for people.

"Beyond grasping these principles, Cheng Hsin t'ui shou is a great training ground for us to study ourselves. Emotions, ways of movement, patterns of thinking, all have to show up. How you are with sight, spatial geometry, physics, feeling impulse, body movement, people, aggression, emotion, forces, failure, winning, your psychology, how you take things, think things - all of that will be in the t'ui shou. It has to be there, because all of that IS there. So what better place to study how you are? To recognize how your own psychology is designed? To work on seeing where your psychology, your emotion, your way of seeing things, your whole experience, is locked or stuck, and how it came to be that way.

"Cheng Hsin t'ui shou gives us a goal - effortless power and appropriate interaction -- out of which we find many goals: whole and appropriate activity throughout a blend, for example; techniques that are effortless; smooth interaction in freeplay that is effective and balanced; a body-being that is centered, grounded, and relaxed, with a life force that is sensitive, powerful, responsive, and connected.

"Being "in touch" that's the hard part -- to be in touch with forces, with another, with motion that's ever-changing. We can't come from inflicting a standard set of techniques. We have to be in touch with the principles that are governing the action, the motion, our thinking, the opponent, ourselves, the entire interaction. It's an alive event!

"An alive event can never be held. An alive event cannot be held, it cannot be trapped. An alive event is always dying. In every moment it's falling away. You can't trap it, can't hold it in a technique, inflict something on it. You can try, but that's not an in-touchness; it's not being attuned to the alive event as it is occurring. Cheng Hsin t'ui shou is a training in an alive event because the goal is mastery of effortless interaction.

"When we fail, this practice reveals our position to things. Our emotions will show up when it doesn't work for us, as will our way of holding things. We get to see these things in our reactions to failure. If nothing else, we can learn by default. If our attempt at something doesn't work, something must be amiss in our efforts. I may think I'm doing it right, that I'm doing all I can with my thinking, my feeling, my body. I think I understand it, but it doesn't work and it's not satisfying, not effortless, so indeed whatever I'm doing can't be what's called for. Something else has to appear. Failure gives us the opportunity to discover and transform. That's training.

"Training leads us to understand the principle. In the training, the only way we can truly solve the problems or reach the goal is to understand the principle; and in understanding the principle, the contrast shows to us our psychology, our impulse, our habits, all the stuff that doesn't work. And

this reveals what we need to overcome or train.

"There's a danger here, however. Somebody could hear what I just said as a therapy. If it starts to fall into a therapy, it won't work. The art has to stand by itself, outside of therapy. That's why it's a "spiritual" practice, not a therapy. You won't get at a principle out of a therapy, you'll just get better. Therapy is to heal you, and will always digress into a certain process, operating out of a particular paradigm. Out of that paradigm, a process will proceed in which you may or may not get better, but you will not understand the paradigm's principle. That's fine, but not what this practice is about.

"Cheng Hsin t'ui shou must remain an art -- a functional art. Being an effective functional art needs to be its banner, the objective. The practice and contemplation has to remain true to this objective, otherwise it degrades into therapy or into a martial art that is nothing but a practice of ritual, and a mere belief system. The goal must be to deal with the forces as they are in the raw, and it also must remain beyond being human. Cheng Hsin t'ui shou must continue to be an ontological endeavor.

"Another difficulty here: this art has to remain an effective practice, while at the same time, continuing to be a practice beyond itself. You have to be a warrior with it, really trying to learn an art of flipping and throwing people. One that you can take into "battle."

"You've got to remain grounded like that, remain real, otherwise you'll deceive yourself. You'll come up with all sorts of philosophy and theories and none of it will actually be in your own body, your own actions, your thinking and feeling. It has to be real, otherwise you will deceive yourself. However, this "reality" must also go beyond your self. You're not learning the art as a self-defense, but you have to have real interaction, otherwise it won't be a real practice.

"Once you've mastered the art -- when it's real or grounded, and you understand the principles -- then an even harder demand arises: you must expand your study beyond the art. This work should not be trapped in the art; it must move into the rest of your life.

"We commonly hold that life is outside of the practice. Workshops, for example, are held as not "real life." This may come out of the position that we have no intention of doing "real life" like a training. Even so, our consideration must come to the whole event of being alive.

"The spirit and bigness of Cheng Hsin t'ui shou must be beyond us. Not unattainable, not inaccessible, but beyond us. Not like an ancient technique that lives in some other time. Not like a fact that lives somewhere else, beyond reach like inaccessible knowledge. Not like it's an encyclopedia and we can't read that much. Not beyond us like physics and we just can't understand it. Not like it's there but it's beyond us because it would take too much work to get at it. It's like "this here" but beyond our consciousness of this here.

"It has to remain in this very moment, in this very insight. Beyond us right now, like we're in it and it's beyond us at the same time. Like it's here, this is it, right here. This is my own event right here, and yet its scope is beyond me as an individual. So the practice is always reaching beyond where we're at as individuals.

"What is this thing that grips me when I start talking about it? What is that? Something grips me, takes over my body; I become a different person. Because I'm not just this process. There lies the greatness. It's something not speakable. I can't say anything about it. It's now, quiet, magnificent, nothing, love, God. I want the spirit of Cheng Hsin t'ui shou to lead to that.

"I'm trying to say something not just true, but to bridge the gap -- for myself and others -- so this is not heard as just a fantasy, a belief, or simply inspiration. We get inspired, but it doesn't change anything, it doesn't reach deep enough to transform wood into gold. I want Cheng Hsin t'ui shou to be a transfiguring and transforming practice."

Peter Ralston

Consciousness

Consciousness is at the source of everything we do and are. It is the first and most essential aspect of "being", and yet we seldom venture to look into the source of consciousness itself.

The beauty of working to increase the depth of our Consciousness is that it provides a means to investigate the very processes by which we perceive.

As we uncover a clearer and more authentic experience of being, we become open to whole new dimensions of our bodies, our studies in movement and interaction, and every other endeavor we engage.

Such openness often leads to insight, and insight leads to leaps in ability.

Cheng Hsin Consciousness is pursued through two powerful avenues: Contemplation, and Ontology, or Experiential Inquiry.

With contemplation we learn and develop the ability to focus our attention as well as open our minds for the purpose of becoming directly conscious of whatever question we are engaging - Who am I? What is life? What is communication? or any other question we might ask.

In our experiential inquiry we use facilitated dialogues, interactive exercises, diads, communication, guided meditations, contemplation, and other means to investigate, confront, study, and experience subjects ranging from the nature and purpose of a self or the design and structure of mind and perception, to effective communication, the nature of intention, or the absolute nature of Being. Our ontological approach is one of rolling up the sleeves and diving into our experience to investigate through a variety of methods and discover what it is all about.

The Founder - on Consciousness

Peter Ralston has pursued a direct consciousness of the truth with a passionate determination for more than 40 years. He sought out and studied with the world's most demonstrably skilled teachers. His exceptional commitment, intense meditation and open inquiry developed profound levels of skill and understanding. Intense contemplation resulted in many enlightenment experiences regarding the nature of self and reality which greatly influenced his study.

In the following interview Peter answers a few questions that may help shed some light on his background and perspective:

Q: How did you get involved in this kind of work?

A: From an early age I've had a passion for unearthing the truth of everything I encountered. I didn't want to take anything on hearsay. Fortunately, I was also very curious and willing to look into things on my own. In martial studies this translated into the drive to go past rote learning and look into the principles underlying movement and relationship. When greater levels of skill began to emerge, I knew I was on the right track. As my focus shifted from more from martial studies to consciousness, I realized that the most important pursuit for me was to have a personal experience of the essential nature of reality. I wasn't sure what that would look like, or how to achieve it,

but I was driven to investigate, contemplate, and experience for myself the truth of existence. You see, I held that it was really possible that somehow my consciousness could grasp, could awaken to the way things really are, the essential nature of "being."

Q: How did you know you weren't experiencing things the way they really are already?

A: Before anyone directly experiences something -- prior to what Zen people call an "enlightenment" experience where you become directly conscious of the true nature of Being -- it's possible to recognize that "Yes, this experience I'm having is indirect, I don't actually know what anything is. I don't know what I am. I don't know how I came to be. I don't know what being actually is." Of course, normally we are far more comfortable with the assumption that we're experiencing everything just the way it is. But if it never occurs to us that there is much we don't know, and that what we do know is somehow not the whole story, we would never even try to go deeper. When the possibility of a direct consciousness really comes up for us, that's when we recognize we aren't conscious of the true nature of anything.

Q: Talk about your first enlightenment experience.

A: I'd just finished several days of intense contemplation and I was still at the meditation hall the following morning. I was sitting contentedly against the wall in a sunlit loft when I had the most remarkable experience. Just as suddenly as a bubble bursting, my mind opened up to a new level of consciousness and I felt my familiar sense of self completely dissolve. It seemed like my awareness both expanded and merged with what had always been true: the very essence of "being." It was unlike anything I'd ever known, and no description could ever do justice to the experience. I was in that instant clearly and absolutely conscious of who and what I am.

In this moment a deep sense of peace came over me, and also an unexpected feeling of freedom. No joy I had experienced before could even remotely compare to this awakening. My mind was freed of burdens that I didn't know I'd had. Assumptions about reality and limitations in my awareness just dissolved. My sense of self was . . . open and without location. A sense of calm, lightness, and ease saturated my being and I felt I had at last become one with my real self. All inner turmoil evaporated. All doubt and struggle fell away. It was the most extraordinary moment of my life.

Q: It was just one moment that didn't last?

A: The reverberations from that moment never really stopped. The realizations of that one instant continued to permeate every part of my awareness -- my whole sense of self changed. Having so much assumption fall away in one moment had, in effect, recreated my consciousness as a blank slate. I was opened up as never before. Suddenly I had room to experience new insights that would previously have been overwhelmed by a lifelong accumulation of beliefs and conclusions. I could see that I had been trapped within my own perceptions, my own logic, my own knowledge and experience. The freedom I gained from this touched every aspect of my life.

Q: *In what ways?*

A :Well, for one thing, my ability to learn was completely transformed. Discovery became a real possibility - not something to be left to other people, but a joyful exercise to be taken on for myself. I investigated my intellect, awareness, perceptions, beliefs and assumptions. I explored my body, movement, interaction, and relationships. And from such investigation, many more insights arose. As time passed I began to find new abilities and ways of thinking that I'd never imagined possible.

Issues of self-esteem and self-image had become irrelevant. Because my experience was authentically based, I had, without effort, gained a natural authenticity. I didn't have to pretend anything or doubt myself. Limitations of self-doubt gave way to self-acceptance and an openness to whatever is true. Relationships turned from acting out patterns of behavior to seeking out an honest and real expression from myself and others. I was empowered to investigate and clearly see aspects of being human that had previously seemed beyond reach, except as hearsay or belief. I came to understand the nature of belief itself, and discovered that the very foundation of my sense of reality and life was but a collection of assumptions and misconceptions. Anytime I would get free of any of these proved to be very powerful.

The Art of Contemplation

"I have had many wonderful teachers, before and after working with Master Ralston, but none with the intense, diamond-like brilliance at directing pristine contemplation. His ability to create accurate distinctions in the activities of consciousness is unparalleled."

- John Robert Nieters, L.Ac., QME, DNBAO

In our culture we tend to think of contemplation as a mystical thing, or a strange practice done on occasion by either disciplined people or weird ones.

In the Cheng Hsin work, contemplation is an essential tool for consciousness. It is a skill or art that can be learned and improved. With such a tool we are empowered to penetrate the very nature of self and reality. We need to be able to create a powerful contemplation practice that occurs as naturally as breathing.

Contemplation is creating the possibility that something can be known outside of what is already known or knowable.

Since our pursuit of the truth demands we step beyond the limitations of what we "know," this is an essential possibility to have.

Contemplation begins at the limit of our observations. We use it to push out past what we can readily or immediately observe and into the unconscious regions of our minds. As well, contemplation is our only means to pursue a direct consciousness of the true nature of things.

The fundamental endeavor in Contemplation is to repeatedly set out to directly experience the true nature of whatever you are contemplating – most frequently this is your self, the nature of your own being. When contemplating your own nature it is best to keep your attention this very moment of your existence. As a result of such immediate contemplation -- in which you are opening up in this moment to experience yourself directly -- something will come up. By "come up" I mean that some thought, feeling, idea, sensation, memory, or some sort of experience will fill the space of that

openness. Or you will directly experience who you are.

Whatever comes up for you when you set out to directly experience yourself — no matter what it is — is allowed to be and accepted for what it is. You perceive it honestly, exactly as it is, and without judgment. You also let it go. This gives you the freedom and space to look into anything, without concern about its correctness, how good or bad it looks, or whether or not it will be judged. Letting go of whatever comes up, you once again set out to experience who you are, repeating this process until you end your period of contemplation.

When we contemplate, since our goal isn't to stop with what is immediately accessible to our understanding, there is no need to give meaning to whatever comes up, or to figure out what something is within our intellect. Our goal is not one of having good ideas or drawing new conclusions. Our goal is to have a direct conscious recognition of what's true.

Standing at the brink of the present experience of being is the place where contemplation steps out. We learn to keep our attention on the very threshold of our perception of this moment for the purpose of actually experiencing what something is. If you are in any way attempting to be conscious of the true nature of something, you are contemplating.

Contemplation can be taking place whenever you hear and see and question what is perceived, seeking out a deeper understanding rather than accepting a surface encounter. Questioning what anything is, attempting to grasp its real nature, can become an ongoing and fundamental aspect of human awareness.

Sometimes it is also useful to take time to do nothing but contemplate silently and without distraction. This should be seen as more of what you're already doing and as an opportunity to go beyond where you're at with what you're already doing. It should not be seen, however, as trying to experience hearsay or intellectual observations as the case. It should be a complete abandonment and commitment to experience whatever is true, whether it fits in with what's been heard or believed, or not.

The rather unique and direct approach of Cheng Hsin Zen Consciousness was founded by Peter Ralston. Who is Peter Ralston and why did he create such an approach?

For increased contact with Peter and more information about the ongoing work of Cheng Hsin, sign up for the free Founder's Newsletter.

The Art of Experiential Inquiry

You live your life as if you know what its all about, and yet something at the core of your being remains threatened by the possibility that your sense of reality and sense of self are somehow fabrications. Its true, they ARE.

In our culture we tend to think of contemplation as a mystical thing, or a strange practice done on occasion by either disciplined people or weird ones.

Conscious inquiry is founded on grounded investigations and open questioning directed at our own experience of self and life. Since we seek to discover the truth behind our very existence and the nature of reality, we often call this work ontological. If you look in the dictionary, you'll read that ontology is "the study of being, of existence." This is a deep and complex field, with various aspects frequently under debate by philosophers, scientists, and theologians.

The Cheng Hsin approach to ontology is not one of intellectual deliberation, but one of experiential inquiry. We explore the ways that perception creates our experience of self, other, and the world. We seek to move beyond the habits of perception that limit us in our abilities, our relationships, and our lives.

Cheng Hsin ontology work is not about acquiring knowledge.

In fact a good deal of it is about getting past acquired knowledge, getting to the "edge" of the known, in a manner of speaking, and creating openness and wonder in a very grounded way.

For it is where your understanding ends that you can begin to truly start asking questions. Getting to this "place", and moving into the unknown beyond it, is where Peter's mastery of the work becomes so apparent. With commitment, clarity and integrity, patience and gentleness, he serves as an invaluable guide, leading you out beyond the familiar to places where you can begin to experience beyond what you know, and then inviting you even further beyond that.

It is at this point that the fascinating ideas of ontology start to become real.

Explorations in the Ontological Workshops

- We are affected by everything we perceive. This is not a random activity nor is it caused by the thing perceived as we might think. It is a purposeful activity of the mind as it automatically relates everything to the self.
- Every action we take also relates from the self to serve some end, often an unconscious one.
- Our every perception and experience is dominated by the self-mind as the self-mind translates everything into a self serving perception. But in this way we do not experience the truth of anything. If we learn to experience things for themselves we are freed of much of the unconscious influence that separates us from the thing. Not only are we no longer reacting in relation to a self serving perception, but we get closer to an experience of what "is" there as itself.
- The mechanisms of mind that are responsible for relating everything to the self are complex and we are unaware of most of them. By learning to contemplate our experience we can uncover and free ourselves from the unconscious core beliefs and assumptions that are the foundation for our personal character and self identity.
- Habitually and automatically relating everything to ourselves also prevents us from having a genuine experience of anyone else. Learning to suspend judgments and open up to experience another being for themselves allows real communication and interaction to take place.
- By breaking down and becoming conscious of the nature of our awareness and the make up of our experience in ways everyone has overlooked, we are empowered to move beyond our limitations and understand the true nature of our own existence.

Personal Transformation

Magical powers are overrated. Changing one's own disposition is underrated.

– Peter Ralston, Zen Body-Being

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There are many opportunities for personal transformation available to you in Cheng Hsin. Our approach is a bit like that of the "Renaissance" human - developing the whole person and not just one aspect. We work to transform mind as well as body, increasing consciousness as well as skill.

Mastering self, mind, body, and skill is done through studying the Art of Effortless Power, and through contemplation and ontological work. You are invited to begin or continue your own transformation in any or all of the following areas by participating in any of these means of study:

Mind and Consciousness

The core of Cheng Hsin is found in understanding our minds, and increasing our consciousness of self and life, and everything within these two domains. Our most active and engaging investigation of self, mind, perception, and our most fundamental experience of existence and reality is done in facilitated dialogues, exercises, and meditations such as found in our central workshop: Experiencing the Nature of Being. We pursue insight and clarity through contemplation as found in the week-long Contemplation Intensive, where we spend all day in diads and contemplation focusing on who we are, or what life is, and other primary matters.

Body-Being and Skillful Relationship

As powerful as it is, we don't stop at simply creating clarity of mind or insight, we also use these abilities to investigate, develop and master both body and interactive skills. The opportunities that Cheng Hsin offers for transforming the body and body-mind into effortlessly effective movement, structure, and performance are unparalleled in their diversity, richness, clarity and depth. The Art of Being a Body is presented and investigated in depth in Peter's recent book, *Zen Body-Being, An Enlightened Approach to Physical Skill, Grace, and Power*". The Art of Effortless Power, like all Cheng Hsin Arts, is founded on and works towards a real transformation in the practitioners. If this sounds interesting at all to you, the principal opportunity to work on it all together is the Master's favorite, the Cheng Hsin Retreat, an annual, month-long series of workshops in both consciousness and martial arts.

Additionally, every other year, Peter offers The Three Month Training Program, which provides the longest live-in study of the arts of Cheng Hsin, short of the Apprenticeship.

The Apprenticeship Program

The strongest and most challenging avenue for personal transformation is clearly the Apprenticeship Program. For a well rounded development of both body and mind, and intense confrontation in personal growth, the seven-month, live-in residential Apprenticeship Program is unbeatable. In such a concentrated environment of continuous learning, the apprentices not only have the chance to investigate to a much greater depth, but also the effects of their study accumulate exponentially.

Other Avenues

Five eCourses offer at-home study that can be incorporated into your daily life for personal growth. Two of these focus on increasing Consciousness: the foundation eCourse: *Transforming Self - A Course in the Nature of Mind*, and the *Power of Contemplation*. Two more focus on improving relational skills, the *Principles of Effective Interaction* - about competitive skill, and *Transforming Your Experience of Relationship* - about partnership skill. And the last one, *An Effortlessly Effective Body-Being*, is a study of your body-being.

The book *"The Book of Not Knowing"* communicates the core and depth of all our consciousness work. The book *Ancient Wisdom, New Spirit*, offers an intriguing look into people like yourself,

working hard to understand themselves in live seminars or workshops. Reflections of Being provides a simple, thought-provoking look at life's overlooked obvious.

To see Peter speak about some of his views on the Arts, look at the DVD of an Interview done for the Discovery Channel.