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THE ART OF LEARNING

An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance

Josh Waitzkin

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For my mom,
my hero,
Bonnie Waitzkin

CONTENTS

Introduction ix

I
THE FOUNDATION

1. Innocent Moves 3
2. Losing to Win 15
3. Two Approaches to Learning 29
4. Loving the Game 41
5. The Soft Zone 51
6. The Downward Spiral 61
7. Changing Voice 69
8. Breaking Stallions 79

II
MY SECOND ART

9. Beginner's Mind 93
10. Investment in Loss 103
11. Making Smaller Circles 115
12. Using Adversity 125

13. Slowing Down Time 135
14. The Illusion of the Mystical 149

III
BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

15. The Power of Presence 167
16. Searching for the Zone 173
17. Building Your Trigger 185
18. Making Sandals 199
19. Bringing It All Together 217
20. Taiwan 233

Afterword 261
Acknowledgments 263
About the Author 265

INTRODUCTION

> One has to investigate the principle in one thing or one event exhaustively . . . Things and the self are governed by the same principle. If you understand one, you understand the other, for the truth within and the truth without are identical.
>
> —Er Cheng Yishu, 11th century*

Finals: Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands World Championships
Hsinchuang Stadium, Taipei, Taiwan
December 5, 2004

Forty seconds before round two, and I'm lying on my back trying to breathe. Pain all through me. Deep breath. Let it go. I won't be able to lift my shoulder tomorrow, it won't heal for over a year, but now it pulses, alive, and I feel the air vibrating around me, the stadium shaking with chants, in Mandarin, not for me. My teammates are kneeling above me, looking worried. They rub my arms, my shoulders, my legs. The bell rings. I hear my dad's voice in the stands,

*William Theodore de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition,* Vol. 1, 2nd ed., Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 696.

'C'mon Josh!' Gotta get up. I watch my opponent run to the center of the ring. He screams, pounds his chest. The fans explode. They call him Buffalo. Bigger than me, stronger, quick as a cat. But I can take him—if I make it to the middle of the ring without falling over. I have to dig deep, bring it up from somewhere right now. Our wrists touch, the bell rings, and he hits me like a Mack truck.

Who could have guessed it would come to this? Just a few years earlier I had been competing around the world in elite chess tournaments. Since I was eight years old, I had consistently been the highest rated player for my age in the United States, and my life was dominated by competitions and training regimens designed to bring me into peak form for the next national or world championship. I had spent the years between ages fifteen and eighteen in the maelstrom of American media following the release of the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer,* which was based on my dad's book about my early chess life. I was known as America's great young chess player and was told that it was my destiny to follow in the footsteps of immortals like Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov, to be world champion.

But there were problems. After the movie came out I couldn't go to a tournament without being surrounded by fans asking for autographs. Instead of focusing on chess positions, I was pulled into the image of myself as a celebrity. Since childhood I had treasured the sublime study of chess, the swim through ever-deepening layers of complexity. I could spend hours at a chessboard and stand up from the experience on fire with insight about chess, basketball, the ocean, psychology, love, art. The game was exhilarating and also spiritually calming. It centered me. Chess was my friend. Then, suddenly, the game became alien and disquieting.

I recall one tournament in Las Vegas: I was a young International Master in a field of a thousand competitors including twenty-six strong Grandmasters from around the world. As an up-and-coming player, I had huge respect for the great sages around me. I had studied their masterpieces for hundreds of hours and was awed by the artistry of these men. Before first-round play began I was seated at my board, deep in thought about my opening preparation, when the public address system announced that the subject of *Searching for Bobby Fischer* was at the event. A tournament director placed a poster of the movie next to my table, and immediately a sea of fans surged around the ropes separating the top boards from the audience. As the games progressed, when I rose to clear my mind young girls gave me their phone numbers and asked me to autograph their stomachs or legs.

This might sound like a dream for a seventeen-year-old boy, and I won't deny enjoying the attention, but professionally it was a nightmare. My game began to unravel. I caught myself thinking about how I looked thinking instead of losing myself in thought. The Grandmasters, my elders, were ignored and scowled at me. Some of them treated me like a pariah. I had won eight national championships and had more fans, public support and recognition than I could dream of, but none of this was helping my search for excellence, let alone for happiness.

At a young age I came to know that there is something profoundly hollow about the nature of fame. I had spent my life devoted to artistic growth and was used to the sweaty-palmed sense of contentment one gets after many hours of intense reflection. This peaceful feeling had nothing to do with external adulation, and I yearned for a return to that innocent, fertile time. I missed just being a student of the

game, but there was no escaping the spotlight. I found myself dreading chess, miserable before leaving for tournaments. I played without inspiration and was invited to appear on television shows. I smiled.

Then when I was eighteen years old I stumbled upon a little book called the *Tao Te Ching,* and my life took a turn. I was moved by the book's natural wisdom and I started delving into other Buddhist and Taoist philosophical texts. I recognized that being at the pinnacle in other people's eyes had nothing to do with quality of life, and I was drawn to the potential for inner tranquility.

On October 5, 1998, I walked into William C. C. Chen's Tai Chi Chuan studio in downtown Manhattan and found myself surrounded by peacefully concentrating men and women floating through a choreographed set of movements. I was used to driven chess players cultivating tunnel vision in order to win the big game, but now the focus was on bodily awareness, as if there were some inner bliss that resulted from mindfully moving slowly in strange ways.

I began taking classes and after a few weeks I found myself practicing the meditative movements for hours at home. Given the complicated nature of my chess life, it was beautifully liberating to be learning in an environment in which I was simply one of the beginners—and something felt right about this art. I was amazed by the way my body pulsed with life when flowing through the ancient steps, as if I were tapping into a primal alignment.

My teacher, the world-renowned Grandmaster William C. C. Chen, spent months with me in beginner classes, patiently correcting my movements. In a room with fifteen new students, Chen would look into my eyes from twenty feet away, quietly assume my posture, and relax his elbow a half

inch one way or another. I would follow his subtle instruction and suddenly my hand would come alive with throbbing energy as if he had plugged me into a soothing electrical current. His insight into body mechanics seemed magical, but perhaps equally impressive was Chen's humility. Here was a man thought by many to be the greatest living Tai Chi Master in the world, and he patiently taught first-day novices with the same loving attention he gave his senior students.

I learned quickly, and became fascinated with the growth that I was experiencing. Since I was twelve years old I had kept journals of my chess study, making psychological observations along the way—now I was doing the same with Tai Chi.

After about six months of refining my form (the choreographed movements that are the heart of Tai Chi Chuan), Master Chen invited me to join the Push Hands class. This was very exciting, my baby steps toward the martial side of the art. In my first session, my teacher and I stood facing each other, each of us with our right leg forward and the backs of our right wrists touching. He told me to push into him, but when I did he wasn't there anymore. I felt sucked forward, as if by a vacuum. I stumbled and scratched my head. Next, he gently pushed into me and I tried to get out of the way but didn't know where to go. Finally I fell back on old instincts, tried to resist the incoming force, and with barely any contact Chen sent me flying into the air.

Over time, Master Chen taught me the body mechanics of nonresistance. As my training became more vigorous, I learned to dissolve away from attacks while staying rooted to the ground. I found myself calculating less and feeling more, and as I internalized the physical techniques all the

little movements of the Tai Chi meditative form started to come alive to me in Push Hands practice. I remember one time, in the middle of a sparring session I sensed a hole in my partner's structure and suddenly he seemed to leap away from me. He looked shocked and told me that he had been pushed away, but he hadn't noticed any explosive movement on my part. I had no idea what to make of this, but slowly I began to realize the martial power of my living room meditation sessions. After thousands of slow-motion, ever-refined repetitions of certain movements, my body could become that shape instinctively. Somehow in Tai Chi the mind needed little physical action to have great physical effect.

This type of learning experience was familiar to me from chess. My whole life I had studied techniques, principles, and theory until they were integrated into the unconscious. From the outside Tai Chi and chess couldn't be more different, but they began to converge in my mind. I started to translate my chess ideas into Tai Chi language, as if the two arts were linked by an essential connecting ground. Every day I noticed more and more similarities, until I began to feel as if I were studying chess when I was studying Tai Chi. Once I was giving a forty-board simultaneous chess exhibition in Memphis and I realized halfway through that I had been playing all the games as Tai Chi. I wasn't calculating with chess notation or thinking about opening variations . . . I was feeling flow, filling space left behind, riding waves like I do at sea or in martial arts. This was wild! *I was winning chess games without playing chess.*

Similarly, I would be in a Push Hands competition and time would seem to slow down enough to allow me to methodically take apart my opponent's structure and uncover his vulnerability, as in a chess game. My fascination with

consciousness, study of chess and Tai Chi, love for literature and the ocean, for meditation and philosophy, all coalesced around the theme of tapping into the mind's potential via complete immersion into one and all activities. My growth became defined by *barrierlessness.* Pure concentration didn't allow thoughts or false constructions to impede my awareness, and I observed clear connections between different life experiences through the common mode of consciousness by which they were perceived.

As I cultivated openness to these connections, my life became flooded with intense learning experiences. I remember sitting on a Bermuda cliff one stormy afternoon, watching waves pound into the rocks. I was focused on the water trickling back out to sea and suddenly knew the answer to a chess problem I had been wrestling with for weeks. Another time, after completely immersing myself in the analysis of a chess position for eight hours, I had a breakthrough in my Tai Chi and successfully tested it in class that night. Great literature inspired chess growth, shooting jump shots on a New York City blacktop gave me insight about fluidity that applied to Tai Chi, becoming at peace holding my breath seventy feet underwater as a free-diver helped me in the time pressure of world championship chess or martial arts competitions. Training in the ability to quickly lower my heart rate after intense physical strain helped me recover between periods of exhausting concentration in chess tournaments. After several years of cloudiness, I was flying free, devouring information, completely in love with learning.

* * *

Before I began to conceive of this book, I was content to understand my growth in the martial arts in a very abstract

manner. I related to my experience with language like *parallel learning* and *translation of level.* I felt as though I had transferred the essence of my chess understanding into my Tai Chi practice. But this didn't make much sense, especially outside of my own head. What does *essence* really mean anyway? And how does one transfer it from a mental to a physical discipline?

These questions became the central preoccupation in my life after I won my first Push Hands National Championship in November 2000. At the time I was studying philosophy at Columbia University and was especially drawn to Asian thought. I discovered some interesting foundations for my experience in ancient Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Greek texts—Upanishadic *essence,* Taoist *receptivity,* Neo-Confucian *principle,* Buddhist *nonduality,* and the Platonic *forms* all seemed to be a bizarre cross-cultural trace of what I was searching for. Whenever I had an idea, I would test it against some brilliant professor who usually disagreed with my conclusions. Academic minds tend to be impatient with abstract language—when I spoke about *intuition,* one philosophy professor rolled her eyes and told me the term had no meaning. The need for precision forced me to think about these ideas more concretely. I had to come to a deeper sense of concepts like *essence, quality, principle, intuition,* and *wisdom* in order to understand my own experience, let alone have any chance of communicating it.

As I struggled for a more precise grasp of my own learning process, I was forced to retrace my steps and remember what had been internalized and forgotten. In both my chess and martial arts lives, there is a method of study that has been critical to my growth. I sometimes refer to it as the study of *numbers to leave numbers,* or *form to leave form.* A basic example

of this process, which applies to any discipline, can easily be illustrated through chess: A chess student must initially become immersed in the fundamentals in order to have any potential to reach a high level of skill. He or she will learn the principles of endgame, middlegame, and opening play. Initially one or two critical themes will be considered at once, but over time the intuition learns to integrate more and more principles into a sense of flow. Eventually the foundation is so deeply internalized that it is no longer consciously considered, but is lived. This process continuously cycles along as deeper layers of the art are soaked in.

Very strong chess players will rarely speak of the fundamentals, but these beacons are the building blocks of their mastery. Similarly, a great pianist or violinist does not think about individual notes, but hits them all perfectly in a virtuoso performance. In fact, thinking about a "C" while playing Beethoven's 5th Symphony could be a real hitch because the flow might be lost. The problem is that if you want to write an instructional chess book for beginners, you have to dig up all the stuff that is buried in your unconscious—I had this issue when I wrote my first book, *Attacking Chess.* In order to write for beginners, I had to break down my chess knowledge incrementally, whereas for years I had been cultivating a seamless integration of the critical information.

The same pattern can be seen when the art of learning is analyzed: themes can be internalized, lived by, and forgotten. I figured out how to learn efficiently in the brutally competitive world of chess, where a moment without growth spells a front-row seat to rivals mercilessly passing you by. Then I intuitively applied my hard-earned lessons to the martial arts. I avoided the pitfalls and tempting divergences that a

learner is confronted with, but I didn't really think about them because the road map was deep inside me—just like the chess principles.

Since I decided to write this book, I have analyzed myself, taken my knowledge apart, and rigorously investigated my own experience. Speaking to corporate and academic audiences about my learning experience has also challenged me to make my ideas more accessible. Whenever there was a concept or learning technique that I related to in a manner too abstract to convey, I forced myself to break it down into the incremental steps with which I got there. Over time I began to see the principles that have been silently guiding me, and a systematic methodology of learning emerged.

My chess life began in Washington Square Park in New York's Greenwich Village, and took me on a sixteen-year-roller-coaster ride, through world championships in America, Romania, Germany, Hungary, Brazil, and India, through every kind of heartache and ecstasy a competitor can imagine. In recent years, my Tai Chi life has become a dance of meditation and intense martial competition, of pure growth and the observation, testing, and exploration of that learning process. I have currently won thirteen Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands National Championship titles, placed third in the 2002 World Championship in Taiwan, and in 2004 I won the Chung Hwa Cup International in Taiwan, the World Championship of Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands.

A lifetime of competition has not cooled my ardor to win, but I have grown to love the study and training above all else. After so many years of big games, performing under pressure has become a way of life. Presence under fire hardly

feels different from the presence I feel sitting at my computer, typing these sentences. What I have realized is that what I am best at is not Tai Chi, and it is not chess—what I am best at is the art of learning. This book is the story of my method.

PART I

THE FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

Innocent Moves

I remember the cold late winter afternoon in downtown New York City, my mother and I holding hands while walking to the playground in Washington Square Park. I was six years old, a rough-and-tumble kid with a passion for Spider-Man, sharks, dinosaurs, sports, and driving my parents crazy with mischief. "Too much boy," my mom says. I constantly pestered my dad to throw around a football or baseball or to wrestle in the living room. My friends called me "waste skin" because my knees were often raw from taking spills in the playground or diving for catches. I had an early attraction to the edge, using scraps of wood and cinder blocks from a construction site next door to set up makeshift jump courses for my bike. I refused to wear a helmet until one gorgeous twist ended with a face plant and my mom vowed to no longer wear her headgear when horseback riding unless I followed suit.

We had taken this walk dozens of times. I loved to swing around on the monkey bars and become Tarzan, the world my jungle. But now something felt different. I looked over my shoulder, and was transfixed by mysterious figurines set up on a marble chessboard. I remember feeling like I was

looking into a forest. The pieces were animals, filled with strange potential, as if something dangerous and magical were about to leap from the board. Two park hustlers sat across the table taunting each other. The air was thick with tension, and then the pieces exploded into action, nimble fingers moving with lightning speed and precision, white and black figures darting all over the board, creating patterns. I was pulled into the battlefield, enraptured; something felt familiar about this game, it made sense. Then a crowd gathered around the table and I couldn't see anymore. My mom called me, gently pulled on my hand, and we moved on to the playground.

A few days later my mom and I were walking through the same corner of the park when I broke away from her and ran up to an old man with a grey beard who was setting up plastic pieces on one of the marble boards. That day I had watched a couple of kids playing chess at school and I thought I could do it—"Wanna play?" The old man looked at me suspiciously over his spectacles. My mom apologized, explained that I didn't know how to play chess, but the old man said that it was okay, he had children, and he had a little time to kill. My mom tells me that when the game began my tongue was out and resting on my upper lip, a sure sign I was either stuffed up or concentrating. I remember the strange sensation of discovering a lost memory. As we moved the pieces, I felt like I had done this before. There was a harmony to this game, like a good song. The old man read a newspaper while I thought about my moves, but after a few minutes he got angry and snapped at my mom, accused her of hustling him. Apparently I was playing well.

I had generated an attack by coordinating a few of my pieces and the old man had to buckle down to fight it off.

After a little while a crowd gathered around the board—people were whispering something about "Young Fischer." My mom was confused, a little concerned about what had come over her boy. I was in my own world. Eventually the old man won the game. We shook hands and he asked me my name. He wrote it on his newspaper and said "Josh Waitzkin, I'm gonna read about you in the paper someday."

From that day forward, Washington Square Park became a second home to me. And chess became my first love. After school, instead of hungering for soccer or baseball, I insisted on heading to the park. I'd plop down against some scary-looking dude, put my game face on, and go to war. I loved the thrill of battle, and some days I would play countless speed chess games, hour after hour staring through the jungle of pieces, figuring things out, throwing mental grenades back and forth in a sweat. I would go home with chess pieces flying through my mind, and then I would ask my dad to take down his dusty wooden set and play with me.

Over time, as I became a trusted part of the park scene, the guys took me under their wings, showed me their tricks, taught me how to generate devastating attacks and get into the head of my opponent. I became a protégé of the street, hard to rattle, a feisty competitor. It was a bizarre school for a child, a rough crowd of alcoholics, homeless geniuses, wealthy gamblers hooked on the game, junkies, eccentric artists—all diamonds in the rough, brilliant, beat men, lives in shambles, aflame with a passion for chess.

Every day, unless it poured or snowed, the nineteen marble tables in the southwest corner of Washington Square would fill up with this motley crew. And most days I was there, knocking chessmen over with my short arms, chewing gum, learning the game. Of course my parents thought

long and hard before allowing me to hang out in the park, but I was adamant and the guys cleaned up their acts when I came to play. The cigarettes and joints were put out, the language was cleaned up, few deals went down. I would sit across from one of my buddies, immediately sweating and focused. My mom told me she saw her little boy become an old man when I played chess. I concentrated so hard, she thought her hand would burn if she put it in front of my eyes. It is difficult for me to explain the seriousness I had about chess as a young boy. I guess it was a calling, though I'm still not sure what that means.

After a few months I could already beat a number of the guys who had been playing for decades. When I lost a game, one of my friends would give me a piece of advice—"Josh, you laid back too long, he got comfortable, you gotta go after 'em, make 'em scared" or "Josh, my man, sometimes you gotta castle, get your king to safety, check yourself before you wreck yourself." Then I would hit the clock, buckle down, and try again. Each loss was a lesson, each win a thrill. Every day pieces of the puzzle fell together.

Whenever I showed up to play, big crowds would gather around the table. I was a star in this little world, and while all the attention was exciting for a child, it was also a challenge. I learned quickly that when I thought about the people watching, I played badly. It was hard for a six-year-old ham to ignore throngs of adults talking about him, but when well focused, I seemed to hover in an in-between state where the intensity of the chess position mixed with the rumble of voices, traffic noises, ambulance sirens, all in an inspiring swirl that fueled my mind. Some days I could concentrate more purely in the chaos of Washington Square than in the quiet of my family's living room. Other days I