Introduction

There are an infinite number of ways to strengthen and develop your internal energy power, just as there are an infinite number of ways to bulk up your physical muscles. One interesting group of energy methods uses tools or weapons for training awareness, intensity, and control of internal energy. This article describes a set of long staff drills used for this purpose.

I have practiced and taught traditional Xingyiquan for decades. I have also briefly but intensely explored many related martial arts, including a modern descendant of Xingyiquan called Yiquan (意拳), which is well known in Japan under the alternative name Tai Ki Ken (太氣拳). The core concepts and practices of both the Chinese and Japanese versions of this modern martial art come from the same source and are largely similar. But long staff drills tend to receive lesser attention in both Yiquan and Tai Ki Ken.

I have trained Yi Quan intensively in Beijing under the tutelage of one of the most senior Chinese masters of the art, Yao Chengguang (姚成光). Master Yao is a superb fighter, and a martial arts genius, comparable in combative power to Bruce Lee. The training program is very rigorous, including a vast curriculum of special stances, arm and body movement drills, kicks and leg work, push hands, heavy bag striking, cotton ball striking, sparring and much more. For 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for several strenuous months in Beijing, I trained under Master Yao’s personal guidance, together with his small group of dedicated young students. It was a fascinating experience, but this art is huge and takes a lifetime to even begin to explore. Here I can only present one limited and specialized aspect of the program – the long staff drills.

Background

Yi Quan is historically derived from Xingyiquan, which I have trained in and taught for many years. Traditional Xingyiquan includes a full set of long staff training drills, for both internal energy and battlefield applications.
A typical Xingyiquan staff training drill, which involves a fast 360-degree full body spin, ending with a low drop to dragon-step (龍步) and an instantaneous shoot-out of the full length of the staff to barely touch a high, pre-designated tree-leaf target. In Xingyiquan, the energy vector originates from the grounded rear leg and lower body (arrow).

The physical and energetic power line of Xingyi staff techniques originates from the rear foot, and runs straight through the dantian, along the single unified vector of the arrow in the photo. This is a typical Xingyiquan drill for laser precision in energetic projection, the kind of training which produced my teacher's incredible fly-flattening ability mentioned in my book Radical Xingyi Energetics (JXE).

The Yiquan long staff work is different, and not as well known. In this article, I will describe the physical and energetic dynamics of Yiquan staff training for internal energy. For this training, it’s best to use a Chinese-style pole, tapered at one end, of length 6 to 8 feet.
This is only the briefest introduction and smallest sample of the richness of these methods. For immersion in the full depths of Yiquan fundamentals, you should arrange for intensive training at one of the several excellent Yi Quan academies in China.

**Technique: Feet**

In the most basic drill set, there are three different striking techniques and they all begin with the same lower body ‘rear’ position, and all move to the same lower body ‘forward’ position. In the starting (rear) position, your rear foot has 70% of your weight. Your front foot has 39% of you weight and your front heel is raised a bit off the floor, not flat on the floor. Both knees are well bent. You will transition with the strike from this rear-loaded 70-30 weight distribution into more centered 50-50 distribution, which I will call the forward position. From the rear position, you simply straighten both legs and move forward. This moves your body forward and distributes your weight as 50-50 on both feet. It’s an unusual stance in martial arts, particular to Yiquan. You’ll basically end standing straight up, but your front heel remains slightly elevated off the floor. In all the techniques, you will move from the starting/rear position to the end/front position and then return, on each rep.
The center-weighted forward stance is unusual but it is one of the fundamentals across all Yiquan striking techniques, not only long staff.

Master Yao Chengguang demonstrates to the author the forward 50-50 stance for a punching technique in Beijing.

**Technique: Grips**

The hand positions are the same for the three techniques. You support the end of the staff against the heel of the palm in the center of the rear hand. Then you wrap three fingers and your thumb around the staff. Finally your index finger extends straight and close along the top edge of the staff. With every technique, you begin with the rear hand back, close to your hip. You then extend the staff with clockwise rotation, while maintaining the same grip. You rotate back counter-clockwise as you return.
Rear hand grip with clockwise rotation on extension, counter-clockwise rotation on retraction for right hand, reverse rotation directions when practicing other side.

The forward handgrip is also invariant for every technique. You extend your thumb straight alongside the staff. Leave the top of the staff open and uncovered by your fingers, in a half-open grip. As you extend the staff into any technique you will rotate the grip clockwise until you have turned your hand over, then rotate counter clockwise in the return phase back to the starting position (reverse for opposite side practice). In all techniques the forward arm straightens completely at the farthest extension of the move.

Forward hand grip and rotation with clockwise rotation on extension, counter-clockwise rotation on retraction for left hand, reverse rotation directions when practicing other side.

The key thing is to grip softly. A tense or hard grip will kill your energy. Kendo masters grip the shinai softly, and for this drill you should do the same, using no more strength than necessary to hold the staff in position. Imagine that the staff is a living thing that you don’t want to crush or drop.

**Technique: Motion**

There are four axes of movement in these techniques. The primary three directions are: back and forth; left and right; and up and down (the staff rotation using forearm and wrist adds a fourth). These primary directions correlate to the three techniques: *crushing*, *splitting*, and *crossing*. (These are
my names derived from Xingyiquan, not the official terms of the Yiquan curriculum).

In mechanical terms, you can see that these techniques are developing power along all possible vectors. This is the omni-dimensional power (混元力 or 全面力) of Yiquan. The forces can be visualized as a sphere with major power dimensions specified. Beginning with the three major vectors, the student eventually learns to project force to and from any point on the surface of the sphere in which he is centered.

The basic dimensions of omni-directional power (混元力). All dimensions are present in every technique. For left-foot forward, reverse.
Crush (left foot forward) begins in position REAR/up/left, is extended to FRONT/down/right, and returns to REAR/up/left. For right foot forward, reverse left/right dimension.

The major vector for CRUSH is rear-front.

Split (left foot forward) begins in position UP/rear/left, is extended to DOWN/front/right, and returns to UP/rear/left. For right foot forward, reverse left/right dimension.

The major vector for SPLIT is up-down.

Cross (left foot forward) begins in position LEFT/up/rear, is extended to RIGHT/down/front, and returns to LEFT/up/rear. For right foot forward, reverse left/right dimension.

The major vector for CROSS is left-right (right-left when practicing other side).
The techniques are summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
<th>MAJOR DIMENSION</th>
<th>MINOR DIMENSION</th>
<th>MINOR DIMENSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stab (崩)</td>
<td>REAR/FRONT</td>
<td>up/down</td>
<td>left/right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crush (劈)</td>
<td>UP/DOWN</td>
<td>left/right</td>
<td>rear/front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross (衡)</td>
<td>LEFT/RIGHT</td>
<td>rear/front</td>
<td>up/down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The position before the divider ‘/’ is the start and finish position, the aspect after the ‘/’ is the extended position. The table directions are based on a left foot front beginning stance. For right foot front practice, the left/right dimension is reversed to right/left.

When you move the staff forward in any technique, you must rotate your whole body (legs, hips, shoulder) in the direction of the staff rotation, then reverse the whole-body rotation on the retraction. Your speed of movement should be slow and deliberate. Feel the alternating activation and relaxation of each nerve cell and muscle fiber as you extend and retract the staff. You should move slowly enough that you do not fall into a crude rhythm of breath, such as extension on exhale and retraction on inhale. This work is slower and more subtle than that – breathe freely and naturally.

**Purpose**

Your practice of these Yiquan staff drills should be followed by a few minutes of standing quietly upright, stilling your mind, relaxing yourself physically, and experiencing the the internal energy throughout your body that has been triggered. Over time, this quiet standing will become more and more powerful and pleasant. In daily life, you will feel that your hands are lighter and stronger, more sensitive in feeling and more precise in action.

Beyond those obvious benefits lies the really deep internal power (内勁). Yiquan is a descendant of Xingyiquan. The traditional Xingyiquan energies of 明勁, 暗勁, and 化勁 (as defined and taught by Guo Yunshen 郭雲深, the teacher of Yiquan founder Wang Xiangzhai 王薌齋) are tangible realities. With practice they will begin to pulse and reverberate throughout
your body, and you can learn to feel, strengthen, and use them. For example, practitioners of Chen Style Tai Chi will find that the intensity of spiral energy (纏絲勁) in their arms is greatly enhanced by the grounded, multi-dimensional extension and rotation in these Yiquan drills.

The Yiquan staff drills are one of many thousands of interesting methods that can be used as exploratory probes. However, you must keep in mind that this article is merely cherry-picking one extremely narrow slice of the vast discipline of Yiquan. If you are interested in pursuing the art fully, you will need to enroll in a professional training program, and hopefully you will experience its great benefits and devote your life to developing its fundamental skills. This article is like a wine-tasting session, giving you only a sip from the barrel.

In the present time, it is fashionable to re-define the powers of the internal martial arts using so-called realistic physiological terms such as fascia tissue, nerves, blood, glands, muscles, and bones; or else in mechanical terms such as alignment, posture and structure. But in fact internal power is just as real as those material things - but it is not those things.

Any style, whether Yiquan or any other, is simply one instrument for immersing ourselves in this universal internal experience, which is not limited to any one style or method. The great historical Xingyiquan master Che Yizhai (車毅齋) has written that there is a power that transcends all styles. Unification with that essence is always the ultimate goal, regardless of method or teacher:

 Martial arts starts from emptiness and returns to emptiness. When you understand this, the notions of Xingyi, Bagua, or Taiji all melt into vast waves and vibrations, a unified resonance where there is no more “Taiji” or “Xingyi” or “Bagua”. The power of the boxing arts does not lie in the postures, but only in the spirit and energy being fully rounded and without gaps.

– Che Yizhai (車毅齋)