A couple of years ago some Taiwanese visitors from Debra’s international Buddhist studies group were staying at my house. When the conversation somehow led to Debra mentioning that our Grandmaster was Ch’ang Dung Sheng, one of the gentlemen suddenly became very excited and declared that he knew all about Ch’ang Dung Sheng and wanted to tell a story about him.

Small world that it is, it turned out that this gentleman had a close friend back in high school who had been fortunate enough to become a student of Ch’ang. This gentleman remembered the name Ch’ang Dung Sheng well because his young friend often spoke about Ch’ang and his seemingly odd training requirements.

Ch’ang would have his friend do class after class of just stance training, and even required that he go home and eat his meals while holding his horse stance. But he never taught this young student any of his famed shuai-chiao techniques.

Then one day, after a year or so of this routine, a challenger came to Ch’ang’s school (which was not at all unusual, particularly since Ch’ang was Taiwan’s most famous martial arts master). Lo and behold, Ch’ang selected the young student to take on the challenger.

The student was dumbfounded: How could Ch’ang be crazy enough to select him when he hadn't taught him any fighting tech-
niques? The young student protested (in as much as you could protest against a no-nonsense master like Ch’ang) but Ch’ang would hear none of it. Ch’ang simply said, “You’ve been doing stance training – get in there and knock him on his ass.”

And so the student confronted the challenger, and much to his astonishment, knocked him on his ass and decidedly won the fight.

**IT’S ALL ABOUT THE BASICS**

Based on the age of our guest who told the above story it would have taken place sometime in the 1960s, a time when traditional training was already transitioning to the modern. Few young people were still willing to endure the tedium and difficulty of intensive stance training and related fundamentals – they wanted to move right on to the “real” stuff of strikes, locks and throws. Ch’ang apparently had confidence in his young student because he knew the challenger had likely foregone the very fundamentals that distinguish success from failure.

Ch’ang of course understood what the “real” stuff really was – namely the fundamentals and basics themselves. During the times I was fortunate enough to train under Ch’ang when he visited Grandmaster’s class in New York, one of the phrases I heard him repeat over and over was, “Jee Ben Dung Zwo,” which roughly translates as basics. He admonished us not to neglect our basics.

In fact, Ch’ang famously said, “The only difference between the master and the beginner is basics.” What he meant is that a master doesn’t win the fight because of secret techniques or special advanced material – the master wins because his basics are sound, whereas the beginner’s are flawed. This principle obviously isn’t limited to martial arts.

As you likely know, the term kung fu doesn’t really translate as martial arts – that’s simply an English misrepresentation. It actually refers to skill in any art, such as music or cooking, done with the high level of accomplishment born of hard work and strong fundamentals.

If we speak of the basics of kung fu in the English sense, it implies that we are speaking of the beginning levels in martial arts. But if we turn it around and speak of the kung fu of basics – then we are talking about the
real key to mastery in any endeavor: Work hard and develop a high level of skill by building strong fundamentals.

We are all tempted to learn more advanced material, and to learn it sooner. But the only regret many of us have as our training extends from years into decades is that we didn't dedicate enough time to our basics. Much like Grandmaster did with me, I teach the essential basics of stance training, breathing exercises, yogic stretching and meditation in the traditional way. But like my teacher, I’m modern and non-traditional in the sense that I don’t wait until you master your basics before teaching forms, techniques and sparring. I leave it to you to continually master your basics on your own.

I like to think that if Grandmaster had only taught me fundamentals for months and years, I would have stuck around and endured it. But I’ll never know. I only know that even as I moved on and learned my forms and techniques, I did continue to spend a fair amount of time working on my stances and other fundamentals, certainly more than the majority of my classmates and more than I saw most other martial artists do. And yet, I wish I had done more.

So my advice to you is simple: If you want to move beyond the basics of kung fu, discover the kung fu of basics.

**EXERCISE**

Make a list of what you consider to be the most essential “basics” training for your chosen art(s).

**ASSIGNMENT**

Create and send me a copy of what you would consider to be an ideal schedule of “basics” practice for the next month. Do you feel that you routinely follow this kind of schedule? Send your thoughts to me at lessons@thepeacefuldragon.com. Please put “Lesson 42” in the subject line.
RECOMMENDED READING

The Essential Vince Lombardi
By Vince Lombardi, Jr.

The late Vince Lombardi was one of the most successful coaches and leaders of all time, leading the Packers to two Super Bowl victories. In this book his son distills much of the philosophy and many of the principles that made his father so successful, predominantly using a huge collection of quotes by his father to do so.

Like our Great Grandmaster Ch’ang, Lombardi emphasized basics and fundamentals drilled to perfection. In the chapter on Fundamentals, Lombardi is quoted as saying, “Every game boils down to doing the things you do best, and doing them over and over again.” And he clearly stated, “Fundamentals win it.”

If you want to maximize your level of success in your training and in other aspects of your life, you’ll find a lot of value in this book.

Every month a book or article will be suggested by Master Sbarge. Reading about topics related to the arts you are training in will help you get the most out of your practice. Just remember that reading can never replace your practice! Each month’s recommended reading is purely optional, though Master Sbarge may on rare occasion ask that you do read a particular book.

For additional reading suggestions by Master Sbarge, go to http://www.thepeacefuldragon.com/books.shtml.

Note: All Peaceful Dragon students are urged to complete monthly assignments because they are important for you to fully benefit from your training. Master Sbarge reads every single student's lesson responses every month, and will periodically respond or comment on them.