



Newsletter August 2008

20 Years... and the story continues.

The Zhong Ding Association, like so many other martial arts groups was born out of the negative and has grown into something that I am happy to say has played a positive role in the lives and experiences of many.

Back in 1987 Fong and I went through a traumatic "separation" from our then teacher. Since at that time I had already met and become a disciple of Master Tan Ching Ngee we naturally sought his advice. He gave us a list of names from which he suggested we choose one to name our fledgling taijiquan class and we picked the name Zhong Ding. At first Zhong Ding consisted of twelve students who practiced twice a week in the hall of a school in West London. Then as time passed in addition to such eminent early members of the London group as John Gardiner and Dave Spencer, I met John Fowler and John Higginson and the seed began to grow into a sprig and then a sapling – you get the idea and I don't want to push the seed to tree metaphor too far lest I expose the vast gaps in my biological education.

My initial desire in teaching this art was to pass on the knowledge that I was receiving from my teachers in Malaysia and Singapore, which, at that time, was not widely known amongst taijiquan exponents in the West. Then, as the years passed, and Zhong Ding grew, so did I become more aware that my role as teacher was to act as custodian and guardian of knowledge that, in some cases, was being lost in its place of origin.

At some point during my journey on the martial path I became aware that no one could own the art, no one could say it was theirs. The most that can be said is that those of us who have been chosen to pass on these arts, are guardians who preserve what we have been taught and pass it on to the next generation. As such we are conduits down which the knowledge flows. It then is our duty to ensure that we carefully learn and preserve the essence of these arts. Sometimes the outer shape or form changes but the essence should always remain the same. Now I am not advocating that we should change forms or add or delete techniques just for the sake of change or "innovation"; what I am saying is that a slavish devotion to the outer structure, at the expense of the inner principles upon which any given art is based, leads to an inevitable watering down of the art.

All of the above should point to the importance of two things. First, that as diligent students of the art we should do our best to try to really get to the essence of our chosen system, and, secondly that we should ensure that we keep our "conduit" clean and not muddy the waters of our knowledge with ideas which might not have served the same test of time and practical application. It is no good adding your own ideas of what works in a fight if you have never had a fight!

The "essence" of taijiquan is there in plain sight, for all to see, contained in the theory and principles which are all described and expounded upon in the "classic" writings. Reading them, however, is very far from enough. They have to be grasped in practical terms, put into practice, applied in the chaos of conflict; for all martial arts are an attempt to impose some kind of order on the chaos of violence.

To return to my original theme, however, that of the role of Zhong Ding and its instructors as conduits of this knowledge, with the passing of Master Liang I became very aware of how fragile this legacy of knowledge can be. Aside from myself, Fong and the other Zhong Ding students who were privileged enough to have the opportunity to learn from him, there are few if any who can claim that they have studied in depth with him.

Master Liang, himself, knew and practiced more than twenty different forms, some of which Fong and I did not learn and of his Malaysian students I can safely say there are none who are teaching the essence of his art, insofar as they concentrate on one or two forms rather than looking at the larger picture. Indeed it is

precisely this larger picture which represents the “essence” of Master Liang’s art. He did not believe in artificial distinctions between styles; he did not believe in a distinction between internal and external styles. What Master Liang did believe in was hard yet intelligent work, whereby each student takes the responsibility to explore each form that they learn, striving to discover what the creator of that form was trying to emphasise. At the same time they should dissect the form, practicing the skills it develops in application with partners who are non-compliant and using real force. But he was always at great pains to stress that training gong fu is not an intellectual exercise; true understanding comes from going out everyday and “feeling” the form, that is working on it, sweating at it putting in all the necessary time and hard work.

One thing that Zhong Ding instructors share is their willingness to work at their art; to sweat and strain until some measure of understanding comes. And it does come, even if it sometimes comes in the form of the realization that what is needed is less effort rather than more! As such they are worthy inheritors of Master Liang’s legacy.

Another shining example is Master Lau Kim Hong, who, throughout his more than five decades of martial arts study has never stopped, analyzing, researching and learning. He draws his knowledge not only from other taijiquan teachers and other martial artists, but also from experts in Chinese philosophy, medical doctors, and experts from a wide range of professions. Furthermore he is always willing to put his research to the test; whether it be on students, his martial arts peers or interested parties from other styles. Even though he is in his seventies Master Lau still travels as far as China to further his training and extend his knowledge.

Each of the teachers that I train with has not only mastered the essence of their art but through their own research and experience has made the art truly their own. This means that when they pass it on, they are also passing on not only the skills and expertise of their antecedents but also their own. In time, as we make these arts our own we will also be doing the same thus the art remains alive and relevant. At the risk of repeating, myself, however, I must stress that this process of making the art your own does not mean leaving out the bits you don’t like, don’t understand or simply believe to be irrelevant. Rather it is a long process of wrestling with the concepts, theories and practical techniques of the art; it is the daily struggle to not just understand the art intellectually but to actually “embody” it, make it a living, breathing part of you. In doing so the art becomes infused with your own character and physicality. If the art is one with a living tradition then it will have some parts that “speak” to you, that are directly relevant to the way that you understand and practice the art. There will be other parts that do not seem to resonate in the same way but this does not mean that they should be discarded and ignored for who knows how they will “speak” to the students to whom you pass the art.

If we take our own Zhengzi taijiquan as an example, it is worth noting that Zheng Manqing was the only one of Yang Cheng Fu’s students who went on record as stating that Master Yang constantly emphasized the concept of “song”. Indeed if you look at Yang Cheng Fu’s Ten essential of Taijiquan, there is only one reference to “song” and that is in regard to the waist. What this suggests to me is that “song” was what Master Zheng required the most! Now in his teachings Zheng Manqing emphasized “song” and that has left us with a legacy of knowledge and practice which develops a very useful taijiquan skill.

If we continue our research into Master Zheng’s teachings we find that in the US he did not emphasise rooting, instead his teachings focused on yielding without neutralizing. We can speculate as to why this might have been so. I feel that the argument that this was what he felt his Western students most needed, is a valid one. Robert Chukrow, who not only trained with Master Zheng but also with his student William Chen and then with a mainstream Yang style teacher, discusses this in his *The Tai Chi Book* (ISBN: 1-886969-64-7) published by YMAA. This was not what he taught to his students in Taiwan nor was it the way he taught. This is not to suggest that Master Zheng was holding back from his students in the US but rather that he was adjusting his teachings to what was appropriate in their specific social and cultural context.

The practical ramifications of this for those of us who are trying to get to the essence of Master Zheng's art is that we have to look at where it came from and where it went to "across the board" not just in one specific, localized area. It is fair to say that almost all of the study and training I have done during the past twenty years has been directed by this aim. On the way I have explored a number of different style or approaches to taijiquan, several different Shaolin arts, wrestling arts, weapons-based arts and arts unique to the Nanyang region where our Malaysian Zhengzi taijiquan reached its maturity.

Our Twentieth Anniversary Celebrations here in Malaysia this year are a good reflection of this search, with seminars and daily training in Malaysian Zhengzi Taijiquan, Wudang Sanfeng Arts, Southern Shaolin, Okinawan Goju Ryu, Eskrima, Thai Krabi Krabong and Silat Tua and related arts. In addition for this occasion we have tried to reflect our involvement in the local martial arts community by including opportunities to meet and interact with local exponents of Malay, Chinese and other Asian arts.

Now after 20 years Zhong Ding has also passed another milestone – we have our very own full-time training centre. It is not huge but there is there enough room for four full-time students and more over short periods. As I have said to recent visitors, this centre belongs to all of us; it is a place to work hard, to learn, and also a place of refuge. As those who have already been there will tell you it is worth a visit and on the 6th of September, as a part of the 20th Anniversary celebrations it will be officially opened. On the 13th of September Scot Baston who has trained extensively at Birmingham and Manchester Zhong Ding, as well as training in Malaysia, and who now resides in London, will be representing Zhong Ding UK in a match against a Malay representative of Silat Tua International. This event has attracted a lot of interest over here and we are expecting quite a crowd. The bout will take place at the Zhong Ding 20th Anniversary celebrations at the Shaolin Temple of Master Wong Jing Hui.

Back in Europe we will celebrate the 20th Anniversary on the weekend of September 27th/28th. Details will be announced later.

Zhong Ding Espana will be celebrating the first weekend of October and I hope that there will be contingents from the UK and other groups in Europe to join in the fun. I shall be there and further details may be obtained from John Higginson.

I hope that as many as possible of you will be there to share in these celebrations.

Until next time train hard and have fun!

Instructor Courses

In the near future your area will be starting a new series of Instructor courses following the example of Master Instructor John Higginson in the Northwest.

These courses will be modular in nature so you can choose from a range of courses, earning credit for them which can be added up to amount to an instructor grade. Course modules will include such core components as Form Corrections, Theory and Principles of Taijiquan and Pushing Hands and Two-Person Practices. Other modules will cover, Taijiquan as a Fighting Art, Weapons Training, Qigong Instructor Certification and Introductions to Other Martial Arts.

If you are interested in these courses ask your instructor for details!

Phil Longhurst

It is difficult to write about Phil, to express what I feel in my heart, he was a martial arts brother, friend and true example of a Gentleman. He has passed on and I believe now will be able to once again practice his beloved art.

Phil was not only incredibly hard-working both as a student and a teacher but also always ready to lend a helping hand. A loving husband and father, he embodied the virtues to which we as martial artists are supposed to aspire.

I will always remember Phil's midnight calmness as our eight storey apartment building shook in the throes of an earthquake. Even in these extreme circumstances he was clear-headed and poised even joking as we clattered down eight flights of stairs and out into the street.

In the martial arts tradition that I follow it is believed that every act that we perform that is inspired by the example of a teacher who has passed on, grants them merits as they go on with their journey of being. Phil was a teacher to us all so I hope that everyone will take the time to perform some forms with Phil's favourite weapon, the jian (straight sword) as a tribute and a gift to him.

At this difficult time our thoughts and love are with Phil's family as he continues on his path.

Walk on Phil, walk on.