

Newsletter Autumn 2003

The last few months have been eventful ones overshadowed by the loss of Master Instructor Ian Cassettari. Although I had only known Ian for less than two decades I felt as if I had known him all my life. He came to Zhong Ding already an experienced and hardened Judo player and he applied the same grit and determination to his study of taijiquan as he did to all other areas of his life. During the last five years Ian matured in his practice to the level where I would gladly call him Master. His ongoing research continued into his final illness and even without any muscle to speak of, and with every breath a laboured effort Ian practised his fa jing lying on the bed. On one of the last occasions that I saw him, he showed me, saying that now he had absolutely no physical strength to rely on, he felt he was getting close to understanding the real nature of fa jing. Even when he was unable to move around easily he still continued to teach and share his knowledge. One time I had been struggling to teach a tricky staff move to a student with Ian watching. Unable to get across exactly how to perform this move I was on the verge of tearing out what little is left of my hair. Ian stood up and proceeded to show the student how to do it in a few easy steps. What can you say?

Ian's skill as an exponent and his teaching gift ensured that he was able to pass the art to many, many students, some of whom are well on their own way down the road to mastery.

Every one whose life was touched by Ian has their own Ian story; in fact as I sit here writing they come flooding back. I remember one frenzied evening when after a day of hard training and a couple of hours of liquid refreshment, six or seven of us earnestly lined up in John Higginson's small living room and very seriously attempted to dance a la Night Fever. There was Ian at one end of the line and me at the other; what structural damage was done that night I can only guess at.

In Malaysia I saw Ian train so hard that he nearly passed out, putting his whole heart and soul into what he did and insisting on continuing even though his body was on the verge of giving up.

Wherever his taijiquan career took him Ian studied, pondered and trained. He never sought the limelight, content only to be near the Masters quietly learning what he could. It is telling that in the film of Bill Nelson's Cheng Man Ching Forum in France Ian can quite often be seen Zelig-like in the background, always busy, always watching, always learning.

I looked forward to coming over to England to see Ian and to hear about the latest developments in his taijiquan training. The insights he was gleaming he would always present to me, asking whether I thought he was on the right track. I could only reassure him that the very fact that he was constantly researching and constantly seeking to improve proved that he was indeed on course.

Ian felt very strongly that for too many years taijiquan had been the exclusive property of the middle class and, if he had a mission other than his own self-cultivation, it was to spread the art to those who had previously not had access to it. He was successful in that mission and his work is being carried on by his students.

Ian loved Malaysia and visited here on numerous occasions. I can remember him saying to me on more than one occasion that who would have thought that an ex-miner from Sutton-in-Ashfield would be here in "Malaya". I have walked the alleys and streets of many a Malaysian town, big and small, with Ian, looking for the perfect coffee or a cool Guinness and once comfortably ensconced in some small coffee shop we would inevitably pass the time discussing taijiquan. Not only did Malaysia have an effect upon Ian but he also had an effect on the Malaysian taijiquan Masters that he met and trained with. All remember him with fondness and respect. Indeed at our recent 15th Anniversary Celebrations here in Penang, Master Koh Ah

Tee insisted on a period of silence at the beginning of his seminar and spoke with warmth and respect of lan. I was moved, we all were.

Ian was a warrior in the truest sense of the word and he would go out of his way to help a friend but he didn't suffer fools gladly and at times he brought me up short and made me think about my words when running off at the mouth. I listened to what he said and learnt. He was that kind of man.

So now we are left with Ian's legacy - hard training constant research and uncompromising honesty. It is up to us to see that his work goes on. To help this process on Zhong Ding has established an annual award The Ian Cassettari Martial Spirit Award, which will be awarded to the student who most exemplifies Ian's spirit. This year the award was made in Malaysia and given to Adam Lammiman of London Zhong Ding, with special recognition also being given to Douglas Graham-Merrett of South-West Zhong Ding and Ian's own student Junior Mead of East Midlands Zhong Ding. All three of these exponents showed traits that Ian would be proud of.

Ian may have gone on to pastures new and I am sure that he is continuing to work on perfecting his art, but his spirit remains in our hearts as a shining example and one that I shall certainly strive to follow.

Zhong Ding 15th Anniversary Celebrations Penang Malaysia September 2003

For two hectic and training-filled weeks, sixteen members of Zhong Ding International celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of our Association. From the moment that they arrived, jet-lagged and travel-stained, to the day that they left tired and a little bit more tanned, their days and nights were filled with a succession of seminars, dinners, demonstrations and training.

Thanks to the gracious hosting of Mr. Tan Jian Xing, founder and CEO of the Oriental Wushu Training Centre, the Zhong Ding party were able to train with Master Zhao Wei Dong and to attend the third anniversary celebrations of the OWTC. The OWTC also hosted our own celebration dinner and provided stalwart support in the form of some excellent demonstrations of martial skill.

Among the technical advisers and martial arts experts who attended the celebrations were Master Liang He Qing, Master Lau Kim Hong, Master Koh Ah Tee, Master Ho Ah San, Master Fu Chiang Hui and guest Master Zhu Xiang Qian from the Chen Family Village.

Every morning the participants trained with Master Zhao Wei Dong, learning the San Feng Taijiquan Short Form. In the afternoon there were training sessions in White Crane Staff with Master Liang He Qing and Taiji Tuishou with Master Lau Kim Hong. Master Koh Ah Tee taught two seminars on Taijiquan form explaining in great detail the Dao of Cheng Man Ching's taijiquan and demonstrating his form which is now so sublimely song as to be almost formless.

Master Lee Bian Lei, although unable to attend the main festivities, put in an appearance at the beginning of the two weeks and gave a brief demonstration of pushing hands.

Among the highlights of the two weeks of celebration was a visit to Master Phang Zai Qing's Hod Khar Pai Shaolin Training Hall. Here some of our Zhong Ding stalwarts were able to try their pushing hands skills against the Shaolin students. Although a few came away with bruises generally we were able to leave with our heads held high, although Junior Mead was one dreadlock short and Doug Graham-Merrett had a new nickname (Dim-Mak Doug or Death Touch Doug as he is known to his friends).

In the midst of all this activity Adam Lammiman, Ian Sinclair and Doug Graham-Merrett took part in seven days of intensive training, which saw them often practising for ten hours a day. Their day started at five am on the beach and ended at ten or eleven at night. These three can proudly say that they were the first participants in The Seven. Plans are afoot at this moment to hold the next Seven in sunny Ireland, hosted by Zhong Ding Ireland's Gerry Kennedy. Gerry not only trained excessively hard while in Penang but also supervised the "activities" of her "better half" Gavin, who although not a taijiquan exponent earned

everyone's love and respect for the way he demonstrated the "real spirit" of Zhong Ding. Indeed he and I were often seen in the same company discussing the highest levels of formlessness over a glass or two of the local beverage.

On the 21st of September the Zhong Ding crew took part in a special International Friendly Competition with the students from the OWTC. Everybody did extremely well and I am very proud to say that we swept the board in pushing hands.

It is at this point that I must express how proud I am that in our fifteenth year Zhong Ding members are now able to perform side by side with their Chinese counterparts and not only do as well as them but in some cases surpass them. It is not enough to be able to do pretty or "correct" forms, application and usage must follow. Instructors and Junior Instructors such as Adam Lammiman, Junior Mead and Tony Morris showed that they have a real grasp of their art. Furthermore John Higginson demonstrated a degree of mastery that earned the full and unbridled respect of the Chinese Masters who saw him perform and push hands. Indeed a better ambassador for Zhong Ding I could not think of.

I would like to express my deepest thanks to all those who took part and helped to make this such a successful event. Furthermore I hope that as many of you as possible will be able to attend our UK celebrations in Blidworth in November.

The Martial Arts Path

By Nigel Sutton

I am now entering my fourth decade of study of the Oriental martial arts and as I write am on the eve of flying to Beijing to meet my baguazhang Master, Gao Jiwu. I first met Master Gao in 1984 and after learning the first line of bagua's 64 palms with his father the late Master Gao Ziyong, I was entrusted to the care of Master Gao Jiwu. From him I learnt not only the rest of the 64 palms but also Dinshi Ba Zhang, Youshen baguazhang, Lianhuan baguazhang, Baxing baguazhang and xingyiquan.

Master Gao was my first authentic Chinese master. But then I lost contact with him and for the last seventeen years I have been the worst of students; one who makes no contact and shows no gratitude to his teacher. Finally in the last few months I obtained master Gao's phone number and contact was reestablished. The Chinese say that a teacher for a day is a teacher for life and the same is obviously true for a student for within hours of my telling Master Gao of my plans to go to Beijing he had found and booked a hotel opposite his house.

So for the next few weeks I expect to be walking dusty circles in Beijing parks, breath frosting on the cool Autumn air. I will also be trying to make up for my years of neglect! Contemplating this reunion I am forced to reflect on my own martial arts path. I can still remember surreptitiously reading Kung Fu Monthly or Dragon under my desk at school. Perhaps that's why I failed Physics O Level? Even now I still feel that familiar tingling thrill as I meet another Master or even watch Enter the Dragon for the umpteenth time.

During the years since I settled here in Asia I have had a myriad of opportunities to train in numerous arts from the Royal Malay Keris, to Silat Lian Padukan, from the brutally effective Shaolin Five Ancestors to the deepest levels of the arcane Chinese internal arts. I have walked the path of Hongquan's famed Wong Fei Hong and stamped the straight trail of Xingyiquan.

Critics have accused me of being a jack-of-all-trades, a dabbler and a dilettante but I can only say that I have been guided by the constant admonition of Master Liang He Qing to have the Spirit of Jing Wu; martial arts are for everybody and all styles have value. I have been fortunate enough to reach levels usually inaccessible to westerners. I have attained instructor status in not one but two styles of silat and all while still remaining a kafir (non-believer) despite rumours to the contrary! Furthermore as those who have visited Malaysia will attest I have also gained a degree of respect in the chauvinistic world of Chinese Martial Society.

Throughout all this my experience and that of my teachers has given me the firm conviction that religiously studying one style to the exclusion of all others is not the right martial arts path. I would be the first, however, to point out that you must first establish a deep understanding and firm foundation in one style before using this knowledge to inform and illuminate your study of other styles.

The man who is most commonly accounted the founder of baguazhang, Dong Haichuan, taught only students who were already accomplished in other styles. This has caused many baguazhang exponents to assert that baguazhang is not so much a style as an approach which may be applied to other styles. This is a view which seems to hold a lot of water. In fact I would be so bold as to say that taijiquan may also be viewed in the same way.

So what does all this mean to you, the keen Zhong Dinger? I would say that if you have been researching the taijiquan path for several years and are already a junior or full instructor that you should be looking at other styles, reading, researching, attending seminars and all the time measuring what you are learning against your study of taijiquan. In this way you will get the most out of your art and ensure that the martial path you are walking is a lifelong one and one filled with joy. Work hard and keep training.

A Tribute to Ian Cassettari

Written in Malaysia by Tan mew Hong Sutton 14th Oct 2003

Twelve or thirteen years ago it was the very first time that I met Ian, and I never noticed much about him except his strong and large body. Time flies and I feel as if I had known him for two or three decades.

Ian came and visited Malaysia three times over the past few years and we had a good time together. He was a gentleman and he was very down to earth although his Taiji skill was highly recognized by the Masters here in Malaysia. Ian Laughed and joked a lot and all you could hear was his deep strong Midlands accent and all you could see from his face was his wrinkles and his golden front tooth. To be quite honest with you the funny thing about it was most of the time I could hardly understand his jokes. English jokes are rather difficult for a Chinese like me to understand even though I am married to one (Editor's note: an Englishman not a joke!) and spent more than twelve years in the UK. Nigel said with a laugh that it didn't matter as none of them could understand Ian's jokes either.

Ian was a happy chap who filled our lives with joy. I recall the first time he was introduced to my dad in my hometown Batu Pahat, Johore in the south of Malaysia, He called my dad "Father" following the rest of my family. As for my dad, in fact, he was 22 years older than Ian. He thought it was funny but also nice of him to be so polite and respectful to the elderly therefore my dad wasn't shy to accept his way of addressing him.

All of the Masters and people he met in Malaysia remember Ian very well. They regarded him as Mr Nice Man. We were all pleased that he was planning to visit Malaysia again and he wanted to come with Margaret too, two years ago, but in vain as world events interfered as it was just after September 11th.

I remember when Lian was about two we drove some kilometers away from Muar and stopped by a Chinese temple, Ian and the rest were attracted and fascinated by the live Chinese opera and the decoration of this particular temple. We went into the temple and there sat a half naked man with a pair of yellow trousers on in front of the statue. He was the Spirit Medium. Ian wanted to ask some questions out of curiosity but it ended up with after the very first two questions that was asked by the Spirit Medium, first his name and second date of birth(of course including the year he was born) that the Spirit Medium told him all the sad and good things that had happened to him and his family in the past. Those sad memories made him cry and so did we. It was the first and the last time to see Ian cry.

Once my father-in-law taught me two French phrases, "merci beaucoup" and "bonjour" and I can never forget that unfortunately he passed away two years later. Ian also taught me a phrase that is to be used in his part of the Midlands when they meet, that is "Hey up, me duck" ..Every time I saw Ian I automatically said out loud "Hey up me duck" and every time I said it he laughed and now this phrase is always with me when I think of him. Don, Carol, Nigel and myself went and visited him and Margaret on the 10th August.that was in fact the last time that we were together. We sat in his living room and talked for hours. We didn't want to leave too soon though Don had a class on that night, so they left us there and Carol came back for us hours later. Deep down I truly appreciated this favour offered by Carol as I wasn't too sure if I would be able to see him next summer so that extra few hours were really precious for me.

We took some photos together in Darren's back garden and although Ian couldn't do taiji anymore but by watching he knew what went wrong in Don's pole form and stood up and showed him how. (Editor's note: whoops now we know who the student was in my account) We all laughed together and gave him a round of applause. Despite his illness he was nevertheless a real Master of Taijiquan.

ZHONG DING 15th ANNIVERSARY TRAINING WEEKEND

November 29th-30th

Venue: Blidworth, Nottinghamshire

Exact venue and accommodation details available from Don Harradine (or see the events section!)

A weekend of intensive training in the Cheng Man Ching style taijiquan form, pushing hands, fast form and straight sword. This weekend is suitable for taijiquan exponents of all levels. Taught by Nigel Sutton and Master Liang He Qing this is an unparalleled opportunity to deepen your study of the art.

The course will incorporate an instructor level grading for those eligible.

Fees:

Two days Members 75 pounds

Non-members 100 pounds

Individual days Members 50 pounds

Non-members 75 pounds