

Newsletter September 2007

Greetings to all from not so sunny Penang.

At the moment the rainy season seems to be well and truly upon us. Work at the centre is now two thirds complete and training there has already started both with visitors and with local students.

Master Zhao Wei Dong, who formerly taught at the Oriental Martial Arts Centre, has returned to Penang for a short visit and Fong and I have been taking advantage of his presence both for revision and to learn some new skills.

Senior Instructor Ian Sinclair is currently visiting and enjoying training from dawn to dusk and beyond.

Plans are now well underway for the Master Liang He Qing Memorial Championships on December 1st and I hope that all of you around the country are training hard. Make sure that you pester your instructor to find out what events he or she has planned for you to take part in!

As well as the usual events, there will also be a demonstration competition in which each area will be eligible to enter a team with prizes going to those who best showcase the art. There is no limit in terms of age or ability in this event and I hope it will draw lots of participants.

A new event will be the weapon sparring competition, using padded weapons and safety equipment. There will be one category for sword length weapons and one for long weapons as well as an open category for the more "adventurous".

Until next month then, train hard and polish your priceless treasure!

Nigel

The Treasure without Price

A few weeks ago I was privileged to spend time with a martial arts teacher who is in his mid-seventies. As we sat in front of his wooden village house, eating fruit and drinking strong coffee, the conversation turned to the matter of his successors. He has two students who are at instructor level in his art and yet he freely admits that he has only taught them a fraction of what he knows. And the reason for this is that he does not feel that they are either ready or worthy to learn the real lessons that he has to teach. Looking straight at me he said,

"This art is a precious jewel and I have not found anyone who appreciates its real worth!"

I felt both humbled and also in total agreement with the old master for this is the way I feel about all the arts I have been privileged to learn and practice. They are priceless; no financial value matches their worth.

When we examine Chinese martial arts we find that ever since they began to be taught openly in the nineteenth century many teachers sought to put a financial value on these arts so that they could continue to make a living out of their skills which the advent of modern weapons had made obsolete for fighting and self-defence, in any but the most limited and low-key situations.

Finding that the wealthy sought to find ways of keeping fit, many masters opened classes or gained employment as private teachers to the rich and privileged. Whereas in the past disciples that had been accepted into the family and which the Master had supported, now became a valuable source of income.

Master Liang He Qing told me of how his first martial arts teacher never took any money anywhere with him; instead he relied on his students to feed and clothe him. Indeed when he died they also paid to bury him.

When I was first invited to become a disciple of Master Tan Ching Ngee, he informed me that the customary fee was US\$1080.00. Suffice to say I was on my honeymoon and did not have that kind of money with me. Master Tan finally agreed to a smaller sum in Singapore dollars.

In Zhong Ding we have never laid down a set amount for the discipleship red packet. I tell my students that it is a gift from the heart and the meaning they attach to it is more important than the amount. This is what I have been told by some of my masters.

When talking to my silat teacher, Guru Zainal Abidin he mentioned how the matter of payment was handled in the past in traditional Muay Thai camps. Youngsters were taken into the school at a very young age, sometimes as young as eight or nine and then basically became the property of the camp owner. He fed them, housed them and trained them. In return they remained his property until they had "repaid" him the debt they owed him. This entitled the owner to take all of his "protégé's" winnings until some, usually unspecified, time.

For many students of martial arts in the West the question of payment for training is a simple commercial exchange. For a specified fee the student is entitled to a specific amount of learning or training. In the East, however, it is different. No matter how much money you pay the teacher you are not "entitled" to anything. If the teacher feels that you are suitable to be his student then he will teach. When the teacher is sincere in his desire to pass on his skills he will not be influenced by the amount of money that you give him.

Once accepted by such a teacher it is your duty as a student to continue paying the teacher according to your means and situation. The amount is not important, the intent is. Thus you find that poorer students may pay by performing services for their teacher or giving goods. One of my silat teachers has a number of students who cannot afford to pay money so instead they bring cans of diet coke and tidbits that they know the teacher likes. Although they cannot afford money they give what they can with a good heart.

In Zhong Ding many of the senior instructors teach special classes for senior students. Often these take place in the instructor's home and students not only benefit from the actual time spent actively learning but also from the "down time" that usually follows such classes when they sit and discuss their training over a cup of tea. While some instructors inform their students that the correct way to show their gratitude for such sessions is to give a gift of money in a "lucky" red packet, others have no such expectations, but the fact of the matter is that this is still the correct thing to do. Consider that the average price for private lessons amongst Zhong Ding Instructors is 25 to 50 pounds per hour, consider what would be an appropriate amount for the man or woman who often shares many hours of their experience with you without asking for anything. If you are strapped for cash then consider other ways you can make payment.

In my position as a professional instructor I consider it essential that I continue to be a student and so I continue to pay money to my instructors. In addition, as a disciple of several masters, I continue to give red packets on birthdays, at Chinese New Year and at other times when I see my masters. I know that there is no way that I can repay the debt I owe these teachers. What they have taught, and they continue to teach me, is priceless.

On the other side of the equation I, and the other senior Zhong Ding instructors, would never turn away a student who has shown their sincerity and dedication, on the grounds that they could not afford to pay. This is what my teachers have taught me. This is what I teach my students.

So the next time that your teacher invites you round for some training outside class times, consider the gift they are giving you and what you can do in return. The gift is a priceless treasure.

Financial issues aside, how can the debt that we martial artists owe to our teachers be repaid. One way and one that is close to the heart of every master that I have trained with, is by being the best student that we

possibly can and by ensuring that their art continues to be passed on in the same way that it was passed to us.

One of Master Liang's greatest joys was in knowing that his legacy was being preserved and passed on in the West. I am grateful for the opportunity we have to do this and am proud of the efforts that so many of you are making to be the best students that you can be. Every day that you practice your art you are polishing and preserving this priceless treasure for future generations. Never forget that your teacher's role in preserving and passing on this treasure is also priceless, as also is your role in learning it to the best of your ability and then passing it on.

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