

Newsletter Spring 2005

Letter from Nigel

It has been some time since the last newsletter and a lot of exciting things have happened. We have had a number of guests out here in Malaysia including Sussex Instructor Phil Longhurst and Manchester Instructor Pete Erlich. Both were fine representatives of their respective instructors and areas. Also visiting was Dave Craig from Sussex who proved to be a keen and dedicated student.

They joined Chris Sims, Hugh Crosland and Graham Lorraine who are out here on the year long course. A great deal of hard work took place as well as some serious fun. It was not all taijiquan and beer, however, they also found time to squeeze in a course in Silat Melayu Lok Sembilan with Guru Azlan Ghanie and Silat Setia Bakti with Guru Dahlan.

Most recently Master Lau Kim Hong has been visiting Penang and continues to impress with his ever-improving skills. At the age of 71 his progress is truly an inspiration.

Unfortunately due to personal commitments I shall not be attending Tai Chi Caledonia but I shall be over for the month of July. On the 9th of July I shall be teaching a joint course with Sensei Dave Hazard of Shotokan Karate and Sensei Dave Rubens of Yoshinkan Aikido at Nottingham Trent University. Sensei Hazard was the first Englishman to complete the Japan Karate Association Instructors course in Japan while Sensei Rubens is a graduate of the Yoshinkan full-time instructor's course. If you haven't read Robert Twigger's Angry White Pyjamas then you should have done! Sensei Rubens is featured in the book, which describes the course that he not only graduated from, but also taught on. I am very excited at the prospect of working with two such high level instructors and hope that as many Zhong Ding people as possible will take advantage of this opportunity.

Finally Zhong Ding International Headquarters (Malaysia) has been officially registered, something which is not easy but thanks to the help of Master Wong of Nan Bei Shaolin we have finally gained official recognition.

I hope to be seeing as many of you as possible on my next trip to the UK and until then carry on training and have fun.

Nigel

Silat Lian Padukan Grading

The first Silat Lian Padukan Instructor's Grading will be held on Sunday July 10th in the East Midlands (details of venue from Don Harradine). The course and grading will cover the entire Lian Padukan student syllabus.

Zhengzi Taijiquan Martial Skills Course

On my last visit to the UK I ran the Part One of the above course which is mandatory for all Zhong Ding Duan Grades. In July I shall be teaching the second part and conducting the certification examination for successful participants. Duan grades who have not done the Part One, look out for courses in your area in

July. The course covers all the martial material included in our syllabus. This course serves to give participants the opportunity to consolidate their knowledge in this area, as well as giving them a blueprint for further training and research in this area. Part one was successfully completed by participants of both genders and all ages from 20 to 60. Even if you have no interest in the martial aspects of the art, this course will give you the tools to teach your students what they need to know to apply the art effectively.

Material covered includes Master Lau's, Master Tan Ching Ngee's and Master Ho Ah San's fighting sets, a whole host of auxiliary training and conditioning exercises and, perhaps most importantly those exercises and practices which make the vital link between pushing hands and applications.

Since the Zheng Man Qing (Cheng Man Ching) tradition in Malaysia is so highly rated as an effective martial art it is essential that all our instructors have a detailed knowledge of this aspect of the art and that is what these courses are designed for. So I hope to see you all there earning your certificates!

The following is an extract from Nigel Sutton's forthcoming book "The Martial Skills of Zhengzi Taijiquan"

Taijiquan's Martial Skills

Beginnings

"In order to develop taijiquan fighting skills you must have ability in those skills specifically developed by the practice of pushing hands. These include ting jing, dong jing and jie jing. These skills are primarily acquired through practice of a wide range of pushing hands exercises. If these pushing hands exercises are to be effective in developing skills then your form must be correct. If you want your form to be correct then you must understand "song" and how to sink the qi to the dantian. All of your movements must be natural. The bottom half of the body must be very heavy and the top half light and comfortable. In this way qi can be stored in the dantian and then heated and spread throughout the body."

This advice was given to me by one of my teachers and despite its somewhat esoteric nature it does point to the interconnectedness of all the skills that a taijiquan student must develop to be an effective martial artist. Before you can really begin to achieve any useful skills from the exercises outlined in this book you must develop ting jing or tactical sensitivity, this will lead to dong jing, the skill of being able to determine the nature of your opponent's force and its direction. From there you will be able to acquire and utilize the skill of jie jing or intercepting skill whereby you are able to simultaneously neutralize, yield, and return the opponent's force in a fraction of a second.

At the same time the student will have developed the coordination of the whole body and the concomitant ability to deliver power from the whole body. This ability is further developed by following the classical advice to sink the qi to the dantian. The dantian corresponds to the body's physical centre of gravity thus concentration on that area ensures balanced movement. It also concentrates attention on the area of the body where the largest muscle groups are and mobilizes them in any movement you make. As the classical advice points out where the yi goes the qi follows and finally the physical strength arrives. This teaches that your mental intent takes your awareness to the point where you wish to exert strength. Thus seemingly esoteric advice has effective and practical applications.

All of the above skills are primarily trained, initially through correct practice of the solo form so a solid foundation in this is essential before you can really get the most out of your fighting training.

In order to be able to use taijiquan's martial skills you must ensure that your body mechanics conform to the principles required in correct form practice. The head must be suspended from above and the neck feel as if it is touching the collar. The eyes must be relaxed and making full use of peripheral vision. The tip of the tongue must be placed on the roof of the mouth. The joints of the shoulders, elbows and wrists must be relaxed. The hand must be held in the Fair Lady's Hand position. All movement must come from the dantian. The hips, knees and ankles must be relaxed. The feet must root into the floor. Substantial and insubstantial must be clearly distinguished.

Each of these requirements is of direct relevance to the use of the art in fighting. By keeping the head suspended and the neck touching the collar the neck muscles are held in a strong position and the jaw is held in to protect it. This means that when you are hit you are better able to absorb the force of the blow and less likely to receive a knockout blow. When you use your peripheral vision you are better able to respond to speedy attacks coming from all directions. Placement of the tip of the tongue prevents it from being bitten during a fight. By relaxing the joints of the arms and the legs the flow of power is able to move unimpeded through the body and into the opponent. The Fair Lady's Hand is the perfect hand position to achieve optimum sensitivity in the arms and also to strike with the hand. In Zheng Manqing taijiquan the majority of the strikes are done with the empty hand and when the fist is used you allow the resistance provided by the opponent's body to curl the fingers into a fist. By moving from the dantian as outlined above the large muscles of the body are utilized and whole body movement is ensured. The last two instructions relate to efficient use of the strength of the legs following the taiji principle of "borrowing the strength of the earth". This means that you align the muscles of the leg so that any incoming force is channeled down into the ground and then sent back out again.

Indeed one of the most important physical attributes trained by the form is strength of the legs. The constant contraction and expansion of the leg muscles enhances their function as large springs which are able to absorb incoming force and provide power for strikes and punches. In taijiquan the gong fu really is in the legs!

To summarize then the form trains softness which in line with taiji philosophy is used to create the greatest hardness. Form training lays the foundation for all of those areas which are of vital importance in fighting. Relaxation of the hips and waist trains the hips for power; emphasis on xi-si promotes speedy footwork; emphasis on the legs promotes the use of the ground for power development; and emphasis on the bottom of the body being full while the top half is empty trains the arms and upper body to follow the movements of the waist.

Having trained the form to acquire these vital skills the student must now make diligent efforts in the practice of pushing hands. From this the student learns to root; apply force against the opponent's weakest points; retain his own balance and position of strength while unbalancing the opponent; defend himself against attacks coming in from any direction; flow from one move to another; and perhaps most importantly how to apply force at only the moment required and in the appropriate measure.

The Essence

The essence of taijiquan in fighting is quite simple but its apparent simplicity is based on a foundation of strong basic skills.

Closing

Taijiquan is a close-quarter fighting art and the taijiquan exponent feels most comfortable when close to his opponent. This leaves him with one major problem, however, that is to close the distance between yourself and the opponent. In order to see how this is best achieved we only have to look to the classic advice: "He moves first, I arrive first." The problem is thus solved, we wait for the opponent to attack but once he is in motion we intercept him and make sure that our counter arrives before his initial attack. This relies on you "stealing the opponent's time and stealing his distance" or as it says in the classics, "Seize the moment and gain the advantage."

In order to cross this distance the taijiquan exponent's footwork must be agile and stable. The footwork exercises described in this book will enable you to maintain stability, a kind of moving root, while remaining agile. These exercises will teach you how to move at long, medium and close range always ensuring that you are in a position to "seize the opportunity and gain the advantage".

Control

Once you are in contact with your opponent then you must ensure that you take control. Initially this may not be possible because of the force or speed of his strikes in which case you will have to use taijiquan's jie

jing to redirect the force at the opponent. This is trained in Master Tan Ching Ngee's nine fighting methods. Once you have managed to break through to a point where you can control the opponent you must use your skills of sticking, adhering, connecting and following (zhan lian tie sui). In order to retain control you must use the skills of ting jing and dong jing, constantly feeling where the opponent's centre of balance is and then applying the appropriate pressure to keep him unbalanced.

Pressure

If you are able to do this combined with continuous footwork you will be able to apply pressure to the opponent keeping him continually off-balance.

Destroy

At the same time that you are controlling and unbalancing the opponent you use your free weapons to destroy the opponent. This entails constantly changing levels and angles of attack as well as alternating yin and yang, the controlling and the attacking elements, the soft and the hard, the fast and the slow.

This whole process may thus be summarized as advancing to contact, gaining the upper hand by controlling, unbalancing, pressurizing and, finally, using continuous and unrelenting attacks to destroy the opponent. Every time that contact is broken you must start the whole process again. This process is equally applicable to empty hand and weapons no matter whether broadsword, straight sword, long or short stick or spear.

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For more details and booking phone Don Harradine on 01623 798583