



Newsletter August 2007

Happy news for all senior Zhong Ding members: Steve Burns is getting married to Veni this month in Hong Kong. I am sure you will all join me in congratulating them.

The training centre is nearly complete now and the first students will be moving in this month. Remember the Centre exists for all members of the Zhong Ding family so please take advantage of it.

Next month Master Lau Kim Hong will be visiting us and conducting training there and we welcome him as the first of our Technical Advisers to bless the centre with his presence and teaching.

With the sad passing of Master Liang last month our thoughts have naturally turned to the great contribution he made to Zhong Ding; one which I trust will continue as we strive to follow his example and remain open-minded and diligent in our training.

In order to remember and celebrate Master Liang's life in martial arts, the Zhong Ding championships this year will be titled the Master Liang He Qing Memorial Festival, and as well as the usual competitive events will feature demonstrations of some of the forms Master Liang taught us, by members of Zhong Ding. The event will take place in the East Midlands on Saturday December 1st and I hope that many of you will attend, compete and give your support. Further details may be obtained from Don Harradine.

Thank you to all who wrote tributes to Master Liang and for those of you who knew him and have not yet done so please drop a few lines to Brian and he will put them up on the website.

So till next month train hard and enjoy your practice!

Nigel

What is Song?

In Zhengzi taijiquan song is the central concept, the key concept, the fundamental concept; you get my point, it is important. Yet it is extremely difficult to translate or define exactly what song means. I often duck the issue by using the term alert relaxation, which is sort of what it is, yet not all of it.

In this article I will attempt to clarify what song, as taught by my teachers, means to me; and in doing so I will have to talk about qi. For those of you who know me this will be surprising as I do not like to go there!

First of all it is worth exploring why song is so fundamental to the practice and understanding of Zhengzi taijiquan. My speculation, based on what I have learnt of Grandmaster Zheng's character from those Chinese who actually knew him, was that he was not the most song of men. Now this I can sympathise with, and I can equally see how his teacher, Yang Cheng Fu, identifying this negative trait in his disciple which would possibly prevent him from mastering the art, emphasized song above all else. So for Grandmaster Zheng song was fundamental, and perhaps in exploring the nature of song both through his study of taijiquan and the other arts he practiced, he realized the fundamental importance of this state of song in all things. From this realization it was a simple step to designing his taijiquan so as to train and develop this core concept. Hence we have yet another reason why Zhengzi taijiquan is not Yang style. Please note that I am not saying that Zhengzi is better than Yang style or more refined or ... I am simply saying that while appearing superficially similar it is inherently different. This emphasis on the concept of song, as trained and developed in Zhengzi taijiquan is one of the key things that makes it different. It is not that other styles of taijiquan, or even other martial styles and systems do not have song, it is all a matter of emphasis.

Having addressed where this emphasis might come from we now have to examine what song is. And the easiest way to do this is by first of all looking at what it is not. It is not the state of limpness akin to cooked spaghetti that some understand it to be. This is Chinese is called ruan or slackness and is so far from song as to come from another planet. In practice ruan also ensures that you will always get the stuffing knocked out of you when attempting to apply your art.

Many taijiquan exponents have had the experience of facing an opponent in freestyle pushing hands who seems to be boneless and who escapes from every attack by wiggling into a lower and lower stance. This is often a manifestation of ruan. And now here's a secret; if you follow them down until they can sink no further, guess what happens? Yes, that's right, they fall over. So we don't want ruan, we want song, but what is it?

At this point I usually point to the concept of softness, noting that the word used in Chinese is rou, which best translates as something like pliability. It is the same as the Japanese word ju, as in judo, and the founder of judo, Master Jigaro Kano, has much to say on the subject in his writings. (Go and look them up, I promise you it will be worth it!) Now the pliability we are seeking is that of the bamboo; it bends in the wind but if pushed too far it will snap back up. In my training area at home I have no less than two large wall hangings depicting bamboo covered in snow. They are there as a constant visual reminder of what I am seeking in my training. I also have a large painting of cranes flying through a snowy wood at night – puzzle the meaning of that out for yourself – my son has a picture of Eminem making an obscene gesture on his door. We are indeed a symbolic family.

So one key element of rou, as illustrated by the bamboo example, is that it has root; but it is not song, rather it encompasses song. You cannot be rou without being song! It seems that in attempting to explain what song is we are digging ourselves deeper and deeper into a linguistic and semantic hole.

In the teaching of Master Koh Ah Tee we find reference to not only the physical state of song, but also mental song and, although the two may not be separated, he does stress that mental song is far more difficult to attain.

But let's start with physical song. One important access point to an understanding of this state is the teaching of "the needle in the cotton". No matter how soft the outside is, there is always a very fine core of pure steel. This in turn leads us to the importance of structure. The physical body must be aligned in such a way that the body is as strong as nature allows. At the same time it must be pliable and this is achieved by allowing the joints and the muscles around them to be as relaxed, mobile and in the case of the muscles as elastic as possible. Now this paragraph alone contains enough to train, practice and work on for months if not years. But such practice alone will not guarantee song.

In order to get further to grips with song we have to, as Master Koh has already advised, address the mind. Now if you have not rushed off to explore the writings of Jigaro Kano, I will save you a bit of the trouble (It is still, however, worth doing your own research!). In an essay describing the origins of Jiu-jitsu, the mother art of Judo, Master Kano describes the mental state of the early exponents of the art known as Jiu:

(From Jiu Jutsu – The Old Samurai Art of Fighting Without Weapons By Jigaro Kano

Translated by Rev. T. Lindsay, April 18, 1888.

Submitted by Stan Hart)

- 1- Not to resist an opponent, but to gain victory by pliancy.
- 2- Not to aim at frequent victory.
- 3- Not to be led into scolding (bickering) by keeping the mind (empty) composed and calm.
- 4- Not to be disturbed by things.
- 5- Not to be agitated under any emergency, but to be tranquil.

The whole article may be found at <http://fightingarts.com/reading/article.php?id=414>

Here is a blueprint for the general mental state of the song martial artist. But how do we mentally train this song in relation to our everyday training?

The first step is awareness, and by that I mean total body awareness, from the soles of your feet to the top of your head, out to the very tips of your fingers and to the end of every hair on your body. Once you have achieved this (please let me know because I'm not sure I have yet) then your attention must go outwards so that you are aware of all around you. Have you ever had that experience where you are aware of the movement of the clouds across the sky, while at the same time being able to see the individual blades of grass around you and feeling the very turning of the earth? That is a taste of song; when you become nothing and at the same time everything.

Now this where I start to talk about qi, so take a seat and pay attention. To attain the physical and mental state of song you must be aware of the feeling of qi in your body (the energy of your living presence) and at the same time you must extend your awareness out to feel the qi of every living thing and the qi of the very environment in which you have your being. Master Zheng talked of borrowing the strength of the earth and the qi of the heavens. This is it. The strength of the earth is what gives strength to our physical structure as we stand up to the force of gravity; the human being as the element which joins heaven and earth. At the same time it is the air around us and the water it contains which gives us life.

But enough of waxing philosophical; let's get practical. How can we best become aware of the energy of our own body and of everything all around? The answer is simple, by being song! Sorry, I'm maybe being just a little facetious but the serious stuff is coming. The most efficient mental state for the development and training of song is that which one enters when on the verge of sleep. In the Malay martial art of Silat this is referred to as the trance state. One is aware of all that is going on around while still being deeply centred in oneself. In fact the slow rhythmic movements of taijiquan coupled with the deep breathing which such movement promotes, is ideal to get to this state. Add to that the focus on the dantian or physical centre as being the source of all movement serves to keep one centred, while the concept of deriving power from the ground to which one is rooted keeps one grounded, both literally and metaphorically.

Lest you worry that this talk of semi-somnolent trance states is taking us far away from taijiquan as a martial art, I have seen extremely proficient Muay Thai fighters enter this state while fighting in the ring. Similarly I have seen skilled silat practitioners enter the same state when facing unrehearsed attacks coming in at full speed and power and sometimes with opponents armed with live blades. To come closer to home in your own practice of freestyle pushing hands have you ever noticed that, when your attention is on something else, you are able to execute effortless techniques against your opponent? For example you are pushing and someone calls your name. You turn to answer and your opponent taking advantage of your seeming distraction, launches a surprise attack only to find him or herself flying across the room.

It should now be apparent, from our exploration of song so far, that a whole range of quite complex mental and physical subsets combine to create this state. Therefore, should not the development and training of song be quite a complex process? The answer is that if you train your taijiquan systematically and progressively then you are already well on your way to becoming song. The physical, postural requirements of the solo form, the slow rhythmic breathing that they develop, the mental requirements in the form of visualization, such as all movements originating from the dantian, one part moves all moves and so on, all combine to create this state. Solo form practice alone, while an essential foundation, is not enough. To determine whether this is real song it must be put to the test. Initially this may be done in pre-set pushing hands patterns such as si zheng tui or da lu. Then you must progress to freestyle. Further practice may include defending against attacks, at first pre-determined and then random and all the time increasing in speed and power. At a later stage weapons may be added in to the equation. In this way you will have a constant barometer by which to measure the level of song you have attained. With such feedback you will always be able to return to your solo form practice where you will try to deepen your understanding and attain higher levels of song.

When all's said and done there is a lifetime's worth of work here and I hope that you will be inspired to leap up and get into that trance state, harmonizing with the universal qi of heaven and earth, even as you get more in touch with your own qi. I know, I know, doesn't sound like me but I cannot resist by ending on the note that in taijiquan it's always the song, not the singer!

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Sifu, Seafood and Sifutt

Master Liang He Qing passed away at the beginning of last month. He was Shifu (Mandarin) or Sifu (Cantonese) to myself and Fong. To everyone else in Zhong Ding he was Shigong, that is grandfather.

While this might seem nitpicking it is an important distinction for those of us who are committed to the traditional martial arts. It was important to Master Liang. He constantly pointed out to the students in the UK and Europe, that I was his representative and that those listening were lucky to have a teacher such as me. This he would force me to translate even though I didn't want to. He would point out that few other teachers would let their students have such free access to their own teachers!

The relationship Fong and myself enjoyed with Master Liang was unique; Fong was closer to him than me because of their shared cultural heritage. But to both of us he was shifu (teacher/father). Some people have expressed their sympathies to myself and Fong at this time, recognizing the nature of our relationship and the pain that we must be feeling. This is the correct thing to do. This is not to say that our pain is greater and everyone else's is lesser but it does observe the correct form and shows a sensitivity and awareness which is indicative of the potential for attaining the highest levels in martial art.

Master Liang insisted on letting everyone know that many teachers would not be as open as me because he grew up in the martial arts at a time when secrecy was rife. I like to think that he saw my attitude as being an expression of his beloved Jingwu Jingshen. Even so he knew the problems that this might cause and indeed has caused. So then why do I allow you, the students of Zhong Ding such free access to my own teachers? The reason is simple; my life has been so blessed by my relationships with these men that I feel that it would be selfish to keep them all to myself. I do not want to be the fount of all wisdom but I do want to dig that channel and keep it clear so that the waters of their knowledge can flow.

This is why I continue to bring teachers over to the West, why I invite students to come over here to train with them, why I write books and articles and why I continue to travel and train to learn wherever and from whomsoever I can.

Why then are many teachers reluctant to allow their students access to their own teachers? Very often the answer to this question is that some students are not to be trusted with this privilege. The claim they have received "special" teachings or that they have been granted insights that their own teacher somehow missed. In the case of myself this is an interesting one as the majority of my Chinese teachers speak little or no English, so how are these special lessons transmitted – well through translators of course. And who would that be? Well for the most part that is me or Fong.

So has this openness backfired in Zhong Ding? For the most part the answer is an emphatic no! There are, however, the exceptions. One instructor who spent at maximum a matter of nine or ten hours with one of my Shixiong, has spent several years teaching those special insights that he gleaned during those hours. And of the nine or ten hours, most of that was in a large group. One hour, however, was spent with two other seniors and an interpreter – Fong. What she and the other two reported of this hour's training differed so much from the accounts that the instructor passed on to his own students that one wonders whether he did not get some of it by thought transference.

This same instructor, who has since moved on to pastures new, claims to be a student of Tan Ching Ngee, Lau Kim Hong and Koh Ah Tee. It is true he has trained with them and I guess if you added up all the hours

of training it would come to maybe a month, but he is not their student. He has trained with me for many more hours but he is not my student; he is my Shidi's student. That is and always will be his position in the hierarchy. But who cares? Where he is in the hierarchy is not important. What is going on in his heart is. In the traditional martial arts our code of honour requires that we never forgot where we learnt from, never. Furthermore to progress on the path we are required to be brutally honest with ourselves. If we tell everyone that we train for ten hours a day but in reality only practice for ten minutes when the time comes for our art to be put to the test we will not get ten hours worth of results we will get ten minutes. That is the nature of the art that we practice.

Zhong Ding seniors will be aware of how I have broken tradition to allow them to take their own indoor students, those we refer to as "disciples". If I were following tradition then everyone who wanted to "enter the door" in the UK would do so by becoming my "indoor students". I did not, however, feel that this was appropriate. Looking at the close bonds that have developed between teachers and their own "inner door students", I think my decision was correct.

A few years ago, after I became a disciple of Master Lau Kim Hong, in an effort to promote unity and brotherhood amongst the senior Zhong Ding instructors, I asked Master Lau if he would take them all as his disciples. This he did. Whether this instant promotion from my disciples to my younger brothers was a success or not is up to the people concerned to decide. As far as I am concerned it is interesting to see if and how the relationship between myself and these seniors has changed. In truth I feel honoured to have them as brothers in the same discipline. I have only ever been in a similar situation once and, aware of the potential for hurt feelings, I have always tried to treat my original teacher as my teacher and not as my elder brother. In the case of my current Silat teacher, Guru Zainal Abidin, this is not a problem as he insists that I address him as Elder Brother and that our relationship, although that of teacher and student, is that of one brother teaching another.

To return to those individuals who claim to be students of those they have only trained with for a few hours: imagine if I were to claim to be a student of every teacher that I have spent a few hours talking to or training with. Well then my teachers would include: Fu Sheng Yuan, Kang Ge Wu, Li Zi Ming, Sha Guo Zheng and many, many more. Have I learnt from all of these Masters? Yes I have but I do not state that I am their student.

Furthermore if you are a part of the Zhong Ding tradition and lineage you NEVER refer to yourself as Shifu or Sifu. This, at worst, is arrogance and, at best, is an indication of cultural ignorance unsuited to someone who has spent years pursuing the martial arts of that culture. I have been involved in the martial arts world here in Malaysia for some years now and people do greet me as Shifu or Che'gu (Malay for teacher) but I do not accept the titles; this means that I always protest that I am not a shifu/che'gu/master, just an enthusiast. This is the polite and correct thing to do.

"What is so terrible about these breaches of custom that Nigel is raving about?" I hear you ask. Well here it is – such ignorance and dishonesty will prevent you from reaching the highest levels of your chosen art. Training in martial arts is about awareness, sensitivity and attention to detail. If we are not aware of what is going on around us how can we hope to be able to defend ourselves. Our martial arts training experience, including our interaction with our teachers provides us with numerous opportunities for cultivating awareness. This is even more true in the West than it is in Asia. This is because our teachers are often also our friends and we must constantly monitor our behaviour in relation to them. Is the teacher in teacher mode or friend mode? Is it appropriate to joke and back-chat or is silence and discretion required?

Although I train predominantly in Asia, because of my often close relationship with my teachers, this also a problem I have to be aware of. In fact I am constantly on my guard, checking that I do not cross the line into over-familiarity, or commit any faux pas that would be culturally inappropriate. Whether I call my teacher Brother, Shifu, Guru or Master, it is because it is culturally appropriate. My teachers never introduce themselves as Shifu or Guru. When people try to call me Sifu, I say that actually I am Sifutt (it means buttocks in Cantonese) which always raises a laugh. If that doesn't work I say I am Seafood, I see food and I eat it.

In the West we can be familiar but our training has also taught us to be respectful. That is how it should be. Knowing our place in the hierarchy helps us to understand the importance of the lineage and how these arts we love depend on this same lineage for their very survival. Whether Grandfather or granddaughter we are all part of the family with the responsibility for preserving and passing on the art.

If our training takes us not only beyond our own physical and mental limitations but also beyond our own cultural and social boundaries, so that we are able to understand more about our fellow human beings irrespective of race, creed or religion, then Master Liang would be proud.

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