

## Newsletter January 2009

### Does Taijiquan Work?

One phenomenon I have noticed related to taijiquan, is the amount of discussion that the subject seems to stimulate whether in the printed word, in the form of book or magazine articles, or on the internet on discussion boards, in forums and in chat rooms. One reason for this, I suspect, is the kind of person drawn to the practice of the art. Since so much of what is taught as taijiquan is so far removed from what might be seen as the practicalities of violent encounter, it allows a kind of abstract warriorship to develop. It is easy through practice of this kind of taijiquan, and study of the "classics" to believe that one is really practising a fighting art and that one is truly able to fight. Sadly, in the cases where such "taiji warriors" encounter real violence their art often lets them down.

In the world of taijiquan there seems to be one issue that constantly resurfaces: is taijiquan a martial art? The questions that arise the most seem to be: Can taijiquan exponents use their art?; How do taijiquan exponents use their art?; What special training is needed in order for taijiquan exponents to be able to use their art? In short:

Does it work?

In Malaysian Zhengzi taijiquan we are extremely fortunate. We do not have to worry about these questions. Why? Because our teachers and our teacher's teachers proved again and again that the art worked. This process started when Master Yue Shu Ting first arrived in Malaysia and beat all comers. What made this even more amazing than the fact that his opponents were experienced Shaolin boxers, was the fact that Master Yue was a small man, slenderly-built and just over five feet tall.

The tradition was continued by his disciples, among them Masters Lu Tong Bao, Zhu Shen Jing and Li Bian Lei; all three of whom engaged, successfully, in numerous challenge matches.

Master Lau Kim Hong, of the next generation, continued this fighting tradition, and used his art on numerous occasions. (As an interesting aside at last year's 20th Anniversary Celebrations, when asked about his experience applying the art, Master Lau said that he had never had occasion to use it. The reason that he made this statement was because in a public forum, with teachers of other arts present, he did not wish to appear either uncivilised [a brawler] or boastful. A lesson we all could learn.)

All of these teachers passed down not only tales of their experience but also clear and detailed training methods to enable their students to acquire the same skills. Through correct form practice, posture, structure, power development and sensitivity are all developed and trained. Pushing hands further develops this sensitivity and enables the student to become comfortable at close quarters. Specific training exercises develop power, footwork, and the ability to sense and exploit weaknesses, or create them when none are apparent.

With the experience and example of these teachers we have no need to rely on our own opinions or speculations about the nature of taijiquan as a fighting art; although our own experience can give additional insights as well as reinforcement to what we have already learnt.

You will notice that I have not referred to Grandmaster Cheng Man Ching's fighting experience. This is deliberate; I have no idea as to the exact nature of his experience. He did, however, provide a guide in his teaching and writing. First of all, he stated that his art was based on the tripod of Boxing (form and pushing hands), Sword and Qigong. Secondly, and most explicitly, he wrote a passage on san shou (fighting, not the

two-person form) in which he noted that in fighting there is “no shape or form” and that jie jing (intercepting power) was the most difficult skill to acquire and that once acquired there was nothing else.

This guide points me to the conclusion that taijiquan fighting training in the Zhengzi tradition should be moving in the direction of “no shape, no form”, and should ultimately lead to the development of jie jing. The training methods devised and taught by Master Yue and the students in his lineage, do not deviate from the Grandmaster’s guide.

If you are serious about developing the fighting skills that the art offers, you should be following this guide. Furthermore you should be moving away from controlled order towards chaos, because this is the nature of violence. Form will develop your core skills and structure, pushing hands will develop you ting jing and dong jing. “Half hit, half push” training will allow more chaos into the pushing hands format but ultimately you must practise your skills in an antagonistic manner, working against an opponent who is not cooperating with you or “feeding” you easily deflected attacks.

All martial arts are an attempt to impose order on the chaos of violence and in the case of Zhengzi taijiquan, the order we seek to impose, first of all, is on our own body and mind. We strive to engrain the physical principles deeply in our bodies and we train hard to attain as complete a state of mental and physical “song” as possible.

The next stage is to pressure test ourselves, mentally and physically. This is usually done by increments, starting in the arena of pushing hands, then moving on to pre-arranged sparring drills and finally into freestyle work. Competition also plays a role in this pressure testing as it provides us with an arena in which we can test our abilities against those who are trying to “beat” us, albeit still in a controlled environment.

In this way we prove to ourselves that our art works, discover those bits that don’t or that need work, and so improve our fighting skills. To see that this process of learning, proving and using taijiquan fighting skills is still going on is, you need to look no further than some of our Zhong Ding members who have used their art successfully, not only in competition, but also in less regulated fights against stylists from other martial arts, as well as on the street. I won’t mention their names lest i embarrass them but if you ask around you will find out who they are, and, who knows, you might learn something from their experience. I have.

Gong Xi Fa Cai, Happy New Year of the OX.

Train hard and enjoy.

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## Zhong Ding 21

The celebrations for Zhong Ding’s coming of age will take place in Penang in August. If you are interested please let me know as soon as possible. Depending on numbers we will be holding this at either the luxury 4 star Sandy Bay Beach Resort (8 or more participants) or the Training Centre (less than 8 participants). Please contact me or your instructor if you are interested.

## On Attitude

I recently received an e-mail from a gentleman announcing that he had moved to a specific area of the UK where he wished to train with a particular teacher. In this communication he asked me to provide him with a contact for said teacher.

I receive a number of such requests on a fairly regular basis and depending on the “tone” of the letter and my ability to answer the request, I answer them or not. In this case there was something decidedly “off” about the request. Firstly I was greeted with the phrase “Hi there”, hardly appropriate for a number of reasons which I will go into later. Secondly the sender provided no information as to who he was or as to

why he felt that I was an appropriate person to ask. Thirdly as his name suggested Asian origin, it seemed strange that there was no attempt to conform to even the vaguest hint of Asian or indeed Martial Arts politeness.

So I replied to this gentleman suggesting that his approach left something to be desired. The response on his part was swift and exceedingly rude. Apparently I am poor at reading comprehension, do not really understand silat and my attitude would serve only to put people off the art. Because of this my correspondent declined to share with me any details of his background and so on and so forth.

Now the teacher that he was desirous of contacting and training with is notoriously selective in whom he teaches; he has high standards and will not compromise. Indeed it is fair to say that to become and stay one of his students bespeaks of very high levels of determination, courage and character. As a result the few students he does have are truly exceptional.

Since he is my senior and my friend, indeed my brother in the martial arts, I contacted him and told him of this gentleman's desire to contact him and it turned out, that he had, in fact, found a way to get in touch with him and had been pointed in the direction of what my friend felt was an appropriate avenue for learning; in this case with one of his own students who is teaching publically.

Whether my correspondent ever ends up training in this school remains to be seen but there are some things that he might like to think about.

The first is that in most traditional Asian martial arts some of the most important lessons are about respect, humility and politeness. The fact that this person sought a favour from a person he knew to be a senior in a less than polite way, reflects badly not only on him, but more importantly on his previous teachers. In his reply to me, this gentleman hinted at the fact that he had studied the art before. How shameful for his teachers to have a student who might be labelled "kurang ajar". The fact that this gentleman appears to be Asian makes his behaviour all the more reprehensible. I live in Asia and practise and teach martial arts here. In this society people are taught from a very young age to treat each other with respect and even more so elders and seniors. In addition, even were I not senior to him, I am the one from whom he is seeking help, surely it is in his own interests to be polite?

In Malaysia people who know of my martial arts background refer to me as Cikgu or Sifu, or Brother depending on seniority; I do not ask to be addressed thus, but this is the polite thing to do. In fact I ask those I know to call me Nigel, which is what my students call me.

In Asia one thing that people are very aware of is that all actions have ramifications; ripples spread out. The parents of a child who behaves badly are shamed in the eyes of a society; teachers of martial artists who misuse their skills become objects of scorn. Indeed becoming aware of this and acting accordingly makes for a more peaceful and harmonious society. Now what ripples spread out from my correspondent's behaviour? Well, he may be unaware that the teacher he was trying to contact and I are in the same Association and that we help to oversee each other's instructor gradings and ceremonies. There is, in fact, a possibility that one day this gentleman, who was so forthright about my "attitude", might find himself grading in front of me. Now don't get me wrong I am a professional and our abortive correspondence would in no way affect the way in which I judged his skills but it might prove somewhat embarrassing for him. Actually, I'm sure, if he trained in this school to advanced level, that radical character change would have occurred, but somehow I doubt that he will get that far.

So what should my erstwhile correspondent seek to do if he wishes to progress in his martial arts career? Well chalk this up as a lesson; make things right by admitting his error, if only to himself, and most importantly make sure that, in the future, he approaches all that he meets with the same respect and courtesy that he would like to have extended to himself. At all times he must try to remember that he represents not only himself but also his teacher, his race and his religion.

Why is an attitude of politeness and humility important to the martial artist? Well first and foremost it is a part of the moral code of most arts (in Silat Tua it is in the akad) to protect the weak and to uphold what is right. This implies respect for people. In addition it is the nature of martial arts that nothing is what it seems; the little old man in the corner may be the Master, the old lady you have just bumped into, his wife. As martial artists if we go around swaggering and flexing our muscles we are giving potential opponents the idea that we have, or think we have, skills and power. If we appear not to be a threat, the advantage becomes ours. This is basic to silat, taiji and many other martial arts.

A further facet of the importance of politeness and humility lies in the fact that with the right attitude anyone can be a teacher and anything a teaching. In the martial arts training group the student who keeps quiet and listens, is able to learn valuable lessons from every training partner and every training experience that he or she has.

Indeed this whole correspondence has provided me with the valuable opportunity to share this lesson with all of you and so for that, and for this gentleman's e-mails, I am truly grateful.

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