



Newsletter June 2007

I was greatly saddened to hear the news of the passing of David Rodriguez, Senior Instructor and Co-Founder of Zhong Ding Espana. Although I only met him on a couple of occasions I remember his smiling face and his fighting spirit. The thoughts and condolences of the whole Zhong Ding family are, I'm sure, with his family and friends and the Zhong Ding Espana family at this time. At times like this, while feeling sadness at the passing from our sight of our friend, we should also celebrate the joy and zest for life that David radiated. Furthermore we should acknowledge with respect and honour the role that David played as a teacher of taijiquan. He played his part as a conduit for our art passing it on to his students, some of whom are now also teachers. His unique expression of this art is even now being preserved, passed on and enjoyed. This is, for us martial artists, the greatest legacy we can bequeath.

Train on David: train on!

On a happier note 2007 is the tenth anniversary of the founding of Zhong Ding Espana and I'm sure everyone joins me in congratulating them. An event is being held in Spain and if you wish to go details may be obtained from John Higginson.

Here in Malaysia the work on our new training centre continues; with Fong overseeing them the builders have no choice but to keep their noses to the grindstone! We have our fingers crossed that all the work will be completed in time for the first visitor, Ian Sinclair from Devon. I have told him not to worry, the full range of torture, sorry training, devices will be ready in time for him.

2008 is the twentieth anniversary of Zhong Ding and we are currently planning events in the UK, China and Malaysia. The China trip will take place in May in Beijing and will be a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Master Gao Ziyong. The training will be Baguazhang based but all are welcome to attend.

The Malaysia event will take place in September in Penang and will be a gathering of our technical advisers and representatives from the Association all over the world. Accommodation will be in a luxury four star hotel on the beach and there will be plenty of fun as well as training. Truly a chance not to be missed.

Events in the UK will be held at both local and national level. Watch this space for further details and start saving now.

On Books and the Internet

I have two books that I would recommend to those of you who are pursuing taijiquan as a martial art:

Waking Dragons by Goran Powell ISBN-10: 1840245131

ISBN-13: 978-1840245134 published by Summersdale

This is Mr. Powell's account of his karate journey culminating in the 30 man kumite where he has to fight thirty opponents non-stop and full-contact. It is a great read for any martial artist.

Mishima's Sword by Christopher Ross

Publisher: Da Capo Press

ISBN-10: 0306815133

ISBN-13: 978-0306815133

For those of you who read and enjoyed *Angry White Pyjamas* this book is written by one of Robert Twigger's housemates. It has interesting insights into Japanese martial arts and Japanese culture and society.

Websites:

Two websites worth checking out are www.womatv.com and www.shikon.com

The latter has an interesting and well-mannered forum.

On Gradings and Tests

For nearly two decades now Zhong Ding has held instructor gradings. Traditionally in taijiquan and other traditional martial arts there were no such things but I decided after consultation with my teachers, to institute an Instructor Grading System. There were a number of reasons for this. Since most local authorities required instructors who wished to teach for them or to hire premises to have some kind of certification Zhong Ding had to issue some kind of qualification. At the same time I was well aware that some of our younger students had friends who were doing karate or taekwondo and who were undergoing intensive testing in order to earn the coveted black belt. I felt that it was only fair and appropriate that the younger taijiquan exponent whose approach to the art was primarily martial, should undergo a similar "rite of passage". Thus was the Zhong Ding grading born. For those, however, who were solely practicing the art for its therapeutic benefits or who felt themselves too "senior" or too frail for what such a test might entail, there was a version which didn't require them to spar or participate in competitive push hands. In reality over the years, even those more mature members of Zhong Ding have often opted to do the full grading. Now, however, we have instituted a grading with the title of Instructor of Taijiquan for Therapeutic Purposes.

To return to those earliest gradings that were often rough and ready affairs. Those who participated and had their grade ratified certainly had every right to feel proud of their achievement. Who can forget John Higginson's luckless partner Lloyd who bled copiously all over the nice judo mats after an unrehearsed collision with John's fist.

On the year of the Association's Tenth anniversary a grading was held in a small Daoist Temple in the southern Malaysian town of Batu Pahat. The temperature in the tin-roofed training area was well up into the nineties and the humidity was almost one hundred percent. The test itself went on for several hours and was avidly watched by a number of elderly members of the Temple Committee (It is worth noting that many of these temples were originally established by various secret Triad societies as a place where they could perform illegal initiation rites. Thus a temple committee member is in no way similar to a church warden!) Earlier in the week I had enjoyed several conversations with these veterans a number of whom had practiced Chinese martial arts in their youth. As they watched the English, French and German students engaged in sparring drills, sweat pouring off their bodies, lungs panting for air, one of these old Chinese men called me over in a very excited manner.

"This is it, this is it," he exclaimed, "This is the real way that Chinese martial arts should be practiced but nobody here does it like this now. This is real Chinese martial arts!"

That old man's words, nearly a decade ago now, made me feel we were on the right track.

Whether the test was in a sports hall in Bognor, a temple in Malaysia or a school hall in Birmingham always the emphasis was on the process of recognizing the grade the individual had reached rather than "passing" or "failing" them. I explained on numerous occasions to other senior instructors how if a student failed to achieve the grade they were going for it reflected badly not on the student's efforts but on the instructor's assessment of that student's level.

Over the years one thing has become clearer and that is how the whole grading process is taken more seriously by those lower down the instructor grades. As a rule of thumb it can be noted that the rank of Junior Instructor, first duan, is taken very seriously by those testing. The rank of Full Instructor, second duan, is also regarded seriously. By the time that the rank of third duan or Senior Instructor is being tested for, it

is regarded less seriously by those testing for it. Actually the truth of the matter is that if you think that failing to be ratified at a certain grade will make you stop practicing taijiquan then you really shouldn't be taking that grade. If that is the case what then is the point of gradings?

The answer to the above question is the reason that annual instructor gradings still feature in the Zhong Ding calendar. Apart from the need for certification there is also a need to put our song (alert relaxation) to the test. Anyone can be enlightened in isolation on the mountain top but it is only when you come down to the city with all its pressures and temptations that true enlightenment may be found. Thus it is that those of us who have chosen the taijiquan path must constantly be aware of opportunities to put our art to the test. It is all very well having the perfect form at home in your living room but what happens when you are under pressure, people are watching, people are judging? Now if you can perform, whether in form or sparring and preserve something of this feeling of alert relaxation then you are making the art work for you. This is what should be the point of your training and the point of taking part in a competition or grading. There are those who say that such competition and testing has no place in taijiquan; this is a viewpoint with which I both agree and disagree. I agree that one should not be constantly competing with the rest of humanity and that one should not be testing oneself to see whether one is better or worse than his or her peers. But I disagree in so far as if I choose to live a life where I totally avoid an environment where there is competition and testing, surely I will end up living on my mountain top and probably staying in bed all day. Even then I will not be able to avoid the tests of aging and sickness. Training in taijiquan, it seems to me at this point on my martial journey, involves learning how to engage in life on terms that are acceptable both to me and to those around me. In order to do this I have to engage in the only competition that matters and that is the one with myself, with my ego, with my negativity, with my weaknesses and failings. Practising taijiquan makes me more aware of these and this awareness in turn allows me the opportunity to "overcome myself".

I have been practicing asian martial arts for 34 years now and one of the reasons that I continue in this pursuit is that it gives me opportunities to put myself to the test; to face and overcome my fears. As I write this I am aching all over and my body is bruised and battered because yesterday I took my instructor's grading in the Thai weapons art of krabi krabong. This was an ordeal and involved not only performing my skills solo but also fighting three different opponent's armed with different weapons. There was danger and there was fear; not only of pain, injury and failure but also of embarrassment because there was a crowd of thirty eager spectators and a panel of some of Penang's senior martial artists. My opponents were all at least twenty years younger than me and strong and fit. I had done all in my power to prepare for the event training the basics thousands of times and engaging in sparring matches with different opponents; nevertheless in the days immediately prior to the test I concentrated on stillness, meditation and the quiet alert relaxation of taijiquan.

As to passing or failure, would I have stopped practicing krabi krabong if I failed? No! Would I have been upset? Probably but I have enough experience to know that what seem to be failures in the martial arts are almost always stepping stones to greater progress. When I was learning Silat Melayu Lok Sembilan I failed one test a number of times. This failure meant that I could not proceed to the next level, but I persevered and eventually passed.

So what about the krabi krabong test? Well as you might have gathered I passed but happy as I am about that I am more happy that I was not satisfied with my performance. There is a great deal of room for improvement. Every bruise on my body indicates a weakness I have to work on. My recollection of the three fights serves to give me plenty to reflect on. How can I improve, how can I make the me of today better than the me of yesterday? I also have plenty of excuses: I got him first before he got me; my move would have killed him while his would only have wounded me; and so on and so forth. But these are just excuses and I must not dwell on them

So for those of you who have taken part in gradings over the last few years and who have felt that:

the grading was not fair/no one paid attention to me/I didn't get enough feedback/I wasn't on form (delete where applicable)

maybe you need to take a long hard look at why you practice taijiquan. When approached from the angle that there is no failure, only stepping stones to success, then every grading, every test becomes a welcome opportunity for growth and progress.

Taijiquan is an art to be practiced throughout your life, it is a wonderful tool to enhance your life. Enjoy it: make it your own; don't care about what the grading instructors think unless it is going to help your progress; don't care about grading or competition success or failure BUT keep coming to the gradings and keep competing! It's all a vital part of the taijiquan journey.

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