

Newsletter March 2008

Honesty and the Dao

Many exponents of taijiquan see their art as a Dao or Way, which means that they perceive their practice of the art to be more than merely a physical pursuit. Indeed those who follow such a Dao find that their art provides them with countless opportunities to work on and improve themselves as human beings. Zhong Ding technical adviser Master Koh Ah Tee is a firm believer that his Zheng Manqing taijiquan is a Dao and he seeks on a daily basis to use the art to refine himself.

Because we see our art as a Dao does not mean that we somehow become instantly more enlightened, more refined and "holier" than everyone else. Indeed to those around us we may seem to be extremely flawed, rough and far from any kind of perfected state. This does not mean, however, that no progress on the Dao is being made, rather it illustrates the fact that progress is most often in infinitely small increments, and that no one other than ourselves can really judge the progress that we are making.

In the Daoist classic Dao De Jing, the author states that "the Dao that can be named is not the true Dao", and far be it from me to try to name, describe or explore in any great depth what must always be your individual Dao, but in this article I am going to focus on one aspect of the Dao and that is honesty.

Now do not get me wrong, I have no intention of setting myself up as a paragon of virtue when it comes to being honest; I am as guilty as the next person of telling white lies and of sometimes not being as truthful as I might but there is one area of my life where honesty is paramount and that is my practice of taijiquan.

If you are a practitioner of the martial arts and you tell all and sundry that you train every day for three hours, while the reality is that a quick ten minutes on alternate days is all you actually manage, one day when you are facing a hostile opponent intent on doing you physical harm, the actual amount of skill you have attained will be revealed. To put it more directly you can kid yourself but you can't kid an angry opponent.

Similarly when describing your training experience and the teachers you have trained with, saying that you have trained "extensively" with this or that Chinese teacher, when the reality is that that you have been in seminars they taught for several hours rather than the years of study that the statement implies, is dishonest and does nothing to increase the actual skill that you have.

A few ex Zhong Ding students have, unfortunately been guilty of such claims and statements and that they have done so is indicative of the lack of actual progress and improvement they have made in their art.

One such gentleman bases much of his teaching on what he learnt from Koh Ah Tee despite the fact that the maximum amount of time he spent with him amounted to no more than four hours. I have known Master Koh for fifteen years and have trained regularly with him, even sharing his bed on occasions :^), and yet I have not received the same level of insight that this illustrious gentleman gained from his "brief exposure".

Another such "expert" who has risen to giddy heights in the governing bodies for taijiquan and Chinese martial arts and who has been training for so long that in an interview he stated that "it's been such a long time that I forget when (I started taijiquan)". Strange as I can remember exactly when I started taijiquan and it was a lot longer ago that this gentleman. He also gives the impression that his main training was with me, but this is far from the case. Apparently I taught him during my once a month visits to Manchester. While I did visit Manchester regularly, it was not once a month. By claiming me as his teacher, he not only disrespects the teacher who put in all the hardwork to train him, but also disrespects our lineage and its teachings. One of the most important of these teachings is that we should always acknowledge from where we gained our skill as this conveys a kind of immortality upon those teachers who have taught us and the

ones that have gone before them. This is why lineage is so heavily emphasized in the Chinese martial arts, so that we never forget where we came from.

This gentleman's silliness, however, does not stop there. In his internet biography he states that in 1991 he was invited to go to Malaysia and Singapore. He then recounts how in 1991 and his "subsequent visits" he trained with a number of my teachers. Strange but I did not move to Malaysia permanently until 1992 and did not meet at least two of the teachers he claimed to train with in 1991, until 1992! His subsequent visit, for there was only one after the first trip which lasted only a few days, included visits to the teachers he mentioned and he probably spent a few hours with each of them, training in a group and receiving their teaching through a translator. He did indeed meet several of these teachers during their visits to the UK but again the degree of contact was minimal.

You might notice that what I have described above is different from the implied long and personal teacher student relationship implied by the statement:

" In 1991, and my subsequent yearly visits, I trained intensively with Tan Ching Ngee in Singapore, Ko Ah Tee in KL, Malaysia, Wu Chiang Hsing in BP, Malaysia, Liang He Ching in Muar, Malaysia and Tan Seow Theng in JB. Malaysia."

As well as being a dishonest statement the above is also inaccurate. Master Tan Swoh Theng, like his wife's cousin, Master Wu Ching Hsing lives in Batu Pahat.

The question that all this leads me to is that if you are less than honest about your training history, how honest are you about your own training? As I write this I am sitting in my training hall in a little fishing village called Kuala Sungai Pinang; a student is practicing his form and the sweat is leaving little drips across the tiled floor.

I know exactly how much I practice every day, I know that I have spent hours, days, weeks, months and years training with Masters Tan Ching Ngee, Lau Kim Hong, Lee Bian Lei, Tan Swoh Theng, Ho Ah San, Koh Ah Tee, Wu Chiang Hsing, Gao Ji Wu. I know that I am an initiated disciple of Masters Tan Ching Ngee, Lau Kim Hong, Lee Bian Lei, Ho Ah San and Gao Ji Wu. I am shidi (younger brother) to Wu Chiang Hsing and Koh Ah Tee. I am an initiated student of Gurus Azlan Ghanie, Mohd Hasyim, and Zainal Abidin. I am an initiated member of Master Eric Olavides' Eskrima De Campo JDC-IO. All of these teachers and seniors have entrusted me with the perpetuation and transmission of their knowledge and lineages. I am very proud to do so and I will do so as honestly as I can. That is my Dao.

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Nik Jago R.I.P

Many of you will remember Nik Jago, a stalwart of Zhong Ding Devon, who went on to practice the Old Wu Style. I recently heard that Nik had passed away and the thoughts and condolences of all of us Zhong Dingers who knew him are with his family at this time.

Nik was a real character with a passion for taijiquan. Having spent much of his life as a soldier in the Royal Engineers, Nik approached taijiquan from an engineering perspective. I well remember how he would dissect each and every move so that he could find out exactly how it was "engineered".

Despite his serious approach to the art Nik's sense of humour shone through in everything he did. He was never short of a story and the ones from his army service took his listeners from the jungles of Belize to the backstreets of Northern Ireland. I remember how Nik would describe the best way to booby trap a toilet seat so that it exploded when you sat on it, and how he would smile as he described the operation in such a way that you would smile with him but also check your toilet seat when you got home!

Nik explored many different avenues in his journey to understand the complexities of taijiquan and he served as an example to younger club members who found inspiration in his dedication and enthusiasm. He was, in short, a true martial artist and a good man. I shall miss him.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

If you wish to attend either the May visit to Beijing or the September Penang Extravaganza please contact me or let your instructor know asap so that we can ensure you have a place.

Thank you.

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