

## Newsletter Summer/Autumn 2004

Dear Members,

Now that I have recently returned from enjoying a damp English Summer I have the leisure to reflect on my visit and the activities of Zhong Ding UK. I am very pleased to see that our students continue to go from strength to strength and that instructors at all levels are not only committed to improving their own skills but also to imparting those skills to the best of their ability.

I was able to conduct Part Two of the Instructors Martial Skills course in Sussex, the East Midlands and Manchester. Congratulations to all those who successfully completed this course. In London I was able to do Part One and I hope to cover Part two on my next visit. I was also busy teaching the Jian (straight sword) usage skills at courses in London, Sussex, Manchester and East Midlands. Part Two of this course which covers sword sticking and sparring will be included as a part of the Taiji Essence course to be held on the first weekend in December in the East Midlands.

Over here in Malaysia the Intensive Instructors Course continues and two of the participants Hugh Crosland and Chris Sims have just completed a grueling seven day intensive training course which saw them training from four in the morning often until late at night. The focus of this course was on baguazhang and in the next few weeks they will be completing a similar course on xingyiquan. Such training taxes body, mind and spirit and injuries are common, as is the mental decision to quit and the spiritual challenge of dealing with the negative emotions that inevitably arise during such training. Both participants acquitted themselves extremely well despite fractured ribs, heat rash, jammed fingers and the inevitable but unavoidable Roti Crotch. Sorry I meant to write groin discomfort. To those who know him Chris sends his best!

Already there a number of students lined up for next year's course as well as the usual flow of short-term visitors. Remember if you want to come out for a training holiday, or more intensive study, we can arrange it for you. And don't worry you won't have to do the Seven day Intensive unless you really want to.

I shall be over again at the end of November to conduct courses throughout the country as well as to oversee the Ratification of Grades Annual Meeting which this year will take a slightly different format. There will be an extra evening session on the Saturday evening including a talk and theory session.

In this issue of the newsletter I have recorded some of my feelings about our role as instructors and the responsibility this entails as well details of the new grading structure. There is also a guest article by Zhong Ding York's own Nick Merriam which I hope you will enjoy. For those of you who wish to read more of my golden prose I now have a column in Martial Arts Illustrated. I hope to see all instructors and potential instructors at the course in December and of course, as always, the course is open to and useful for all.

Till then all the best,

Nigel

## What it Means to be a Teacher

By Nigel Sutton

Traditionally in taijiquan there are no grades, no belts, no ranks and no certificates. The only factor discriminating ordinary students from the serious ones being whether they had undergone the bai shi (literally Praying to the teacher) initiation and become jingmen dizi (inside door disciples) or not. The significance of entering the door was that the student now entered into a relationship with the teacher

whereby he or she would be taught inside the house, that is would have access to the inner teaching, whereas before he or she would have been taught only in open, public classes, where the teaching would, of necessity have been "shallower". Furthermore in Chinese society, being "inside" is always the favoured position, whereas to be an "outsider" is to be one who is lacking in knowledge, information, connections, power or any of the other essentials for what was deemed successful living.

For those privileged to become indoor disciples then the day would probably come when the teacher invited them to teach. This was a big step for both teacher and student for the risk being taken by the former was enormous. What if the student started to teach, were challenged and then beaten? Although the student's reputation would be tarnished, if not destroyed, ultimately it would be the reputation of the teacher that would suffer. How could he produce a student who could be beaten? Such a loss of reputation and "face" could result in the teacher losing his livelihood so this was indeed, no laughing matter.

Thus a teacher would not only be very careful about who he taught, but more specifically so about those whom he allowed to represent him as a teacher.

Traditionally, permission to teach was given orally but in some cases, particularly when the student was moving to a new area the teacher might give him a letter of introduction and permission, often detailing not only the student's experience and aptitude but also what he was qualified to teach. When I returned to the UK from China in 1985 the Gao family gave me such a letter explaining who I was and what I had permission to teach. Upon establishing the Zhong Ding Association, however, and with advice from my teachers, I decided to establish a more formal grading system. The reasons for this were twofold: firstly many potential employers and hall hirers such as local Councils and Education Authorities required that instructors have some kind of certification for insurance or employment purposes; and secondly because the students themselves often needed some kind of measure or gauge of their own progress. To these ends, I established a system loosely based on the kyu/dan gradings of the modern Japanese martial arts. Dan or Duan as it is read in Chinese, signifies a step, so that the first instructor grade of First Duan literally means first step, and thus indicates the limitless potential of the art for if, after several years study, you have only reached the first step, how much more is there to learn?

To give students a clearer guide as to what these levels mean, I also gave them titles so that First Duan is Assistant Instructor, Second Duan is Instructor, Third Duan is Senior Instructor and Fourth Duan is Master Instructor. The last of these titles, that of Master Instructor, needs some qualification, for I do not believe that there is any such thing as a Master of the martial arts. There is, however, a path to Mastery, and individuals who have been awarded the grade of Fourth Duan are, in my opinion, firmly established on that path.

All of the instructor grades from First to Third Duan, are awarded by a panel of Third Duans and above, while Fourth Duans are awarded by me when I feel that an instructor has reached the appropriate level. Any other grades above Fourth Duan are honorary and reflect a teacher's contribution to, and promotion of, the art.

These are the bare facts of the grading system, a system incidentally which is now being actively promoted by the martial arts authorities in China. There is, however, a lot more that lies behind this system. First to Third Duan grades are technical grades. That is to say they have a syllabus with definite requirements in terms of things learnt and levels reached. Fourth Duan, however, is a grade that relies more on my feelings about the individual concerned. There is another difference: the first three instructor grades are dated from one particular date to another and then they have to be renewed. The Fourth Duan certificate is awarded "In Perpetuity", for ever! This means that I and the Association are recognizing that the Fourth Duan is walking their own path, and that although they may still seek my advice, or that of those more experienced than them, the path they have chosen is their own, they are now their own Master. For the martial artist this is a difficult place to acknowledge that you are at. For so long, he or she has relied on the teaching and guidance of seniors, but now they are forced to recognize that as the questions arise from within themselves, so too do the answers.

Of course the human factor also figures strongly in this grading system. I, and I alone, award Fourth Duans and I am a human, and in my opinion a particularly flawed one. With this in mind I can state that I have two

main reasons for awarding Fourth Duans. One is in recognition that the instructor has started that endless walk down the Path of Mastery, the other is far more selfish, and that is when I feel that the individual concerned, while having completed the technical syllabus, is not committed to the ethos and spirit of the Zhong Ding martial arts community. By giving such an individual a certificate that openly states that they are a "Master Instructor", for ever, I hope to encourage them to move on to explore mastery in pastures new. In the nearly two decades of Zhong Ding's existence I am proud to say that I can count on one hand the number of times that I have had to do this.

By the way, congratulations to our new Fourth Duans, Don Harradine, Glen Pelham-Mather and Ian Sinclair, all of whom I hope to have close around me for decades to come!

To return to the grading system in general however, far more fundamentally, what underlies the system is an understanding of what being a teacher of the martial arts really means. It does not mean "ownership" of a set of technical skills, it does not mean automatic status and the accompanying automatically conferred respect, it does not mean authority over those who have lesser skills. What it does mean can best be summed up in one word, responsibility.

The teacher has the awesome responsibility of being a "vessel" for the knowledge and a conduit through which it is passed. No human being can ever own this knowledge or these skills. They are a gift from our ancestors to our descendants. When considered in this light our responsibility is truly huge. As teachers we must not lose even one iota of what is or might be valuable in the knowledge that has been passed on to us; so also, must we ensure that anything we decide to add to the art is going to be of value to future generations. This responsibility is truly an enormous one for all of you who are Zhong Ding Instructors, but for me it is even greater.

The reason for this is simple: I have learnt and continue to learn arts which were traditionally never, I repeat never, taught to outsiders. And outsiders could mean not just people of a different racial group, but even people from a different region, village or family. Many of my teachers have suffered the threat of actual physical harm because they have chosen to teach me. In all cases, it has not been a decision they have taken lightly, and they have impressed upon me the responsibility to care for, nurture, safeguard and, ultimately pass on their beloved art.

This is the responsibility I live with and indeed I love. It is what drives me to take every opportunity to learn new skills and to hone previously acquired ones. It is what takes me away from my family for days and even weeks at a time, and it is what sees me traveling hundreds and even thousands of miles, the length and breadth of Malaysia and beyond, to continue my training.

All of you Zhong Ding Duan Grades share a measure of this responsibility. You owe it to your students and their students, to your teachers and my teachers, to be the best that you can be. This may mean that you have to travel outside your own area to train with different people; it may mean making a commitment to something that is beyond your personal comfort zone; but that is the responsibility you took on when you did the bai shi and elected to become a serious student of this art.

Once a year we have a Ratification of Grades meeting which always includes a course as well as the components of the grading. Last year it also included a mini-competition between the different areas. In recent years it has been interesting to note who has attended and who has not. I know that there are always reasons, often good ones, why it may be difficult to attend, but the bottom line is that you have chosen to take on the responsibility of being a Zhong Ding Duan Grade.

Now for those who might see this as some grand marketing ploy on my part, I must vigorously point out to you that financial concerns should never affect your decision to attend. If you are in dire financial straits, let me know and we will make some arrangement that allows you to attend. I value your role as someone who is helping to shoulder the burden of my responsibility. But also consider that if it were the only course that you were going to attend all year, by the simple expedient of putting aside a few pounds a week, you should be able to make ample financial provision for your attendance. It is all a matter of priorities.

I hope that these few words will help to inspire you to muse on your role as an “inheritor” of our art and I hope to see you all in December.

Good training

Nigel

## Dual level Grading System

In order to cater for those students who wish to primarily help teach the therapeutic aspects of the art the new Grades of Assistant Instructor of Taijiquan for Health and Instructor of Taijiquan for Health are being introduced. Candidates who take these grades will not be expected to take part in the freestyle pushing hands, application or weapons components of the Ratification of Grades. If holders of these qualifications subsequently wish to cross over to the martial aspects they may do so subject to successful ratification of their grade to including the above components.

## Fighting Talk

What is a 30-something dad doing trying to learn to fight? How can it possibly be relevant to my life as a parent and as a professional engineer? If you're involved in upholding or violating the law then maybe you do need to know about fighting. But beating somebody up isn't going to save my marriage. It isn't going to make my children feel happier or more secure. And my work certainly doesn't want me to throw argumentative customers out of the office. If anything, all this aggressive behaviour would seem to undermine everything important to me.

So what am I doing spending valuable family time and money blundering about in the martial arts? Some of you at the 2004 ratification of the grades saw me catch a punch on the nose while practicing the nine fighting methods. As I was stuffing toilet paper up my nose to stop it bleeding, I felt I needed to come up with some better answers to these questions to justify carrying on with taijiquan.

Nearly a year later, I'm still struggling away with taiji; in fact, I am putting more time and effort into it. And some of my answers to those questions have surprised me.

I like the relaxing aspects of taiji and I need some movement to keep me active and healthy after a sedentary day in the office. Although I initially shied away from the martial dimension of taiji, I soon saw that all the best practitioners valued the martial applications of taiji. I became curious and then hooked, and I saw that the quan (fist) of taijiquan was an intrinsic part of the whole. However that discovery isn't particularly surprising, nor is it enough for me to justify practicing a martial art.

To my great surprise, I seem to have discovered that martial arts training really is relevant to my life as a dad and a software engineer.

I think I got interested in computers because the Sinclair ZX81 came out when I was about twelve and, at that age, it seemed completely fascinating. As I grew older, my interest grew and grew partly (maybe largely) because I could spend vast amounts of time working at a computer without having to justify myself to other people, or argue a point of view. I was in my own world, designing and creating with incredible freedom. I was a classic computer nerd, happier with a computer than with real people.

A lot of things have changed in the last two and half decades. I'm no longer willing to live with the consequences of continually running away from conflict and competition with other people. In fact, I have come to see those conflicts as a way to grow and to learn. But I still have a basic instinct to flee from challenge and conflict.

My difficulties in dealing with pressure and conflict showed themselves when I was playing basketball, when I froze up and made all kinds of bizarre mistakes that I couldn't understand and analyse. I couldn't train them away because I seemed to have no control of what was going on.

I don't think fear, pressure and conflict can be expressed anywhere so explicitly as in the martial arts. It's not just a risk of getting hurt where everyone is trying to be careful; the other guy is actually trying to hurt you. In all martial arts, the most successful proponents have an unnerving ability to stay relaxed and remain near 100% effective even in the heat of a fight. But taijiquan seems to me to be pretty much unique in martial arts in that right at the start, as its very first principle, it trains smoothness and calmness of mind. Only later do you face more stressful situations, where you are required to continue that smooth calmness and use it to keep you intelligent and mobile.

That's exactly what I need in my life. That's what I am looking for, to be a better husband and father. Whether it's a row with my wife or one of the children's tantrums, I need to remain smooth and responsive in mind and body. If a frustrated child hits you in the face and it hurts, you are probably going to blow up and make the whole situation even worse. If you see that hand flashing up and just angle your face away a little to soften or avoid the blow, it's easier to then apply some discipline in a disciplined manner.

The nine fighting methods, for example, teach us that we don't have to respond to incoming violence with head-on violence of our own. Nor do we need to retreat, nor allow ourselves to be struck. We learn how to create shapes and angles to diffuse the force and protect ourselves, creating an advantageous position out of each interaction.

Surely this is the way to react to the office bully. If we respond in kind then both of us may face disciplinary action and risk losing our jobs. If we capitulate to every angry demand and barked order, even when clearly stupid, then we become impotent office drones. But if we treat the other person with a gentle, softness that does not collapse, we have the chance to stand our ground and make a valuable contribution. Maybe our respectful interchange even results in a new friendship.

For me, taijiquan seems to be about the perfect environment in which to train qualities that I most aspire to in my home and professional lives. I can't get another try at that row with my wife, the tantrum in the supermarket or the polite but malevolent office politics. But I can practise a taiji form whenever I want to, as many times as I feel the need. I can find a partner and repeat a two-person drill over and over until I start to notice that first point when my shoulder closes down and my chin tilts forwards.

So I'll carry on with taiji and see where it takes me next. According to Christian philosophy, our relationship with God has a way of giving us things we need whether we expect them or not. So it seems to be with taijiquan.

Footnote: My wife has pointed out that we don't really row, nor do the children have huge tantrums in the supermarket, nor do I face much bullying at work. Forgive the exaggerating (and maybe concealing) shorthand for the actual, lesser conflicts that exist in our lives.

Nick Merriam

If anyone else has articles that they wish to submit for the newsletter please do not hesitate to do so. The can be e-mailed to Nigel at [ncs8@tm.net](mailto:ncs8@tm.net).myDates for Your Diary

November 26th/27th 2005 Nigel's Course in Devon/Sussex

December 3rd/4th ratification of Grades and Taijiquan Essence seminar E. Midlands

2006

February 10th-27th Nigel's visit

May 5th-May22nd Nigel's visit.