

## Newsletter Summer 2004

### Look at the Residue

This article is going to be one of my periodic rants about the exact nature of my own personal martial arts quest. Since the age of thirteen I have studied many different martial arts including karate, Thai boxing, Filipino stickfighting, Russian Sombro, several different styles of Chinese martial arts and three different styles of Malay silat. All of this I have done for one simple reason – I am a martial artist. Note that I did not say I am a taiji practitioner or a bagua practitioner or a silat practitioner, I am a martial artist. I have devoted much of my life to learning more about these arts and to perfecting my own skills. In 1988 I met Master Tan Ching Ngee and he introduced me to Cheng Man Ching taiji. Furthermore he advised me to drop all the other arts I was practicing in order to concentrate on the Cheng Man Ching form and in order to develop a root and learn how to really push hands. He did, however, advise me to continue practicing the Bagua 64 Hands as he noted that this was similar to taiji's fighting usage.

I did as he had advised and it was not until I moved to Malaysia and met Master Liang He Qing in 1993 that I undertook serious study of other arts again. In the meantime I had indeed developed a root and gained some measure of skill in pushing hands. With the benefit of hindsight and experience I now realize that it is not necessary to practice Cheng Man Ching taiji in order to develop root or to be able to push hands. What you do need to do is to gain fundamental skills in one style in order to build a solid foundation upon which you can build and also give you a frame of reference from which you can examine any other art or style you might encounter.

It is fair to say that taijiquan is my core art; it is the lens I use to scrutinize all the other systems that I learn, it is also the root to which I constantly return. Prior to learning Cheng Man Ching style I practiced the 24 and 48 forms developed in Mainland China. I then went on to learn the traditional Yang style long form and the Old Wu style. The teacher that I learnt the latter two from considered Cheng Man Ching style to be a postgraduate taiji form and reserved it for the highest level of his own syllabus.

After more than five years of total immersion in the Cheng Man Ching style I started to explore other styles again. I learnt the old form of Chen style from Master Fu Chang Hui and his teacher Master Zhu Tian Cai. This included time spent studying in Master Zhu's instructor's class in Singapore. As result of my exposure to Chen style I discovered that the silk-reeling energy was present in the Cheng Man Ching style but not in an explicit manner. To keep this explicit training I incorporated the silk reeling and the contrast between hard and soft, fast and slow into the fast taiji that I had earlier learnt from Master Liang He Qing.

It was only after I met Guru (teacher) Azlan Ghanie that I was introduced to the world of Malay Silat. At that time I was eager to explore bladed work and Guru Azlan's Silat Melayu Lok Sembilan offered the perfect opportunity, based as it was on the traditional Malay weapon, the keris. It took me three years of monthly visits to Kuala Lumpur, group and private lessons and both successful and failed gradings before I finally reached instructor level. Now, according to Guru Azlan, I was no longer a sifu but now a cikgu (teacher). Actually I was quite ashamed as Guru Azlan had announced at the start of my studies with him that if I had not learnt the whole system within two years he would have failed. The failure was not his, it was mine. Shortly after achieving instructor status I met Guru Jak Othman and through him some students of Lian Padukan. When I found out that the current generation lineage holder for Lian Padukan lived just around the corner from me I arranged to go and see him and thus the die was cast. Lian Padukan was a system that seemed to put into actual application all of the fighting principles of Cheng style taijiquan. The strong emphasis in the system on actual fighting was just what I was looking for and over the next year I not only managed to complete the whole system but also to be only the ninth student and the only non-Malay, non-

Moslem to complete the Khatam initiation. All along the way I had to spar, compete and fight; a very practical way to see if all that I had previously learnt was effective. It was.

From my experience of Lok Sembilan I gained a greater appreciation of the subtle wristwork and agile footwork needed to wield the taiji jian effectively and from Lian Padukan I learnt that I could have total confidence in my art. Of course these were only the most obvious lessons there were many more. It was interesting to be in the company of warriors who saw their art as being a very real fighting system and who were not averse to using it. It was an eye-opening experience to train with real weapons where there was a very real risk of injury and to say that it totally changed my perspective on the practice of pushing hands and taijiquan's close-quarter combat is no exaggeration.

Now after a separation of more than one and a half decades I have re-established contact with Master Gao Jiwu, a fifth generation descendant of baguazhang and am now rediscovering the pleasures and pains of that art under his masterful guidance. The journey continues but the never-changing constant is the daily challenge of trying to make the theory and practice of Cheng's taijiquan into one seamless whole.

Every art that I have practiced has left a residue whether in the form of specific techniques, an attitude or approach, theory or experience and it is this residue that will be found in the teachings in Zhong Ding schools around the world. In addition all over the UK there are now people practicing Five Ancestors Boxing, Lok Sembilan, Lian Padukan or Hongquan who would never have received an exposure to these arts without their membership of the Zhong Ding family. As well there are students and instructors at all levels in Zhong Ding who cross train in other arts with, I must state categorically, my full and complete blessing. That is the Zhong Ding Spirit, long may it last!

Nigel Sutton

The following article was written by a student who wishes to remain anonymous and concerns his experiences learning from one of Zhong Ding's new generation of Master Instructors, Darren Roberts. Darren's expertise is of the highest level and with the art in hands such as his, the continued transmission of the very highest levels of the art is guaranteed.

## The Eureka Moment in Tai Chi

The Eureka Moment occurs when you suddenly realise something; a concept or an idea that has been there all along but that you hadn't fully understood. You may have had glimpses before, but in the eureka moment, you understand it more fully.

I have found it to be true in life and in tai chi that you learn things through a series of such eureka moments. I had one in a tai chi lesson recently; this was a class given by Darren Roberts and the subject for study was ting jing in pushing hands.

I have been studying tai chi for about four years and it has become a healthy addiction. I try to study for about an hour each morning; with the occasional 'fragile' morning off. I also attend two classes a week; one with Darren, the other with Junior Mead. I have been doing and enjoying pushing hands now for about 18 months and have made steady progress, with many a lesson well learnt whilst being helped to fall backwards through space by a friendly 'opponent'.

With the demands of a young family and a busy occupation, it has always been difficult to get enough pushing hands. I do enjoy this aspect of tai chi and believe it to be an excellent teacher. I previously played judo and loved the randori; I have noticed therefore that there is a lot of judo happening at tai chi competitions and this has certainly got me out of a few vulnerable moments.

I think that, because of this judo background, my pushing hands practice has mostly been concentrated on specific techniques to help me improve. Studying the fixed pushing hands patterns, sinking and withdrawing the hips to allow your partner to fall into nothingness and using my ward off to keep my partner

away are examples of the type of thing I mean. I have long been aware of the concept of ting jing, but I don't think I ever really understood it until one Thursday night.

On this particular night Darren was giving a class and pushing hands was the subject for study; I can't remember the specific thing it was that he said that provoked my eureka moment but I do remember the feeling with which I entered that night's pushing hands practice. This was of putting my mind into the points at which I touched my practice partner. This concept I had tried before but I now realise, without the necessary preparation. By putting my mind at these points of contact I found I could sense the whereabouts of my partner. I found I could sense my partner's energy and the directions of its movement. This allowed me to 'stick' to his movements and allow my movements to be in harmony with his. I felt as if I was doing some of the things I had only read about before and this was one of the best experiences I have had with tai chi so far.

At my next opportunity at pushing hands I found that I couldn't quite achieve the same sensation; but the memory of it is there and now gives me something to aim for. If my previous tai chi experiences are anything to go by this is the way of things. First you get glimpses of an experience, then you sense the experience for a short period, and then you attain the experience permanently. I can now appreciate what ting jing is a little better than before; at the same time I expect that there is much more to ting jing than this and that once I have attained this experience more regularly I will become ready to learn yet further levels of skill.

What was it that provoked me to have this experience? I think it was something to do with the amount of practice I had put in before and something about Darren's teaching that night. Darren has a teaching style in which he tells you about something and then tells you something else about it, and then tells it to you again in a different way and then again and then perhaps again. When I first visited Darren's class I thought that either, he liked to talk, or that he didn't really know that much tai chi and so was 'padding' out the sessions with talk; how wrong I was. Not only does he know what he is talking about, he is also able to demonstrate what he knows very well.

I look forward to further developing my tai chi and ting jing and hope that I get plenty more eureka moments in my future practice.

## Zhong Ding Spirit Training Weekend

This course will take place on Saturday and Sunday November 20th and 21st in Rainworth, East Midlands. As with last year Zhong Ding East Midlands will be hosting this event and they have arranged to include a delicious meal on the Saturday evening. Hopefully this year there will be a lot less singing of crude songs by members of the medical profession, still maybe fatherhood will have matured him. (Sorry C I couldn't resist!) The weekend will be focused on the practice of taijiquan's gong fu, that is the skill that you acquire through lots of hard work! There will also be a grading and our first ever multi-discipline friendly competition. Teams from all of the Zhong Ding areas will be competing in empty hand form, short weapon form, long weapon form, push hands and freestyle sparring. I know that teams all around the country have been training hard for this event. The competition events will be held throughout Saturday and finish on Sunday. Based on the performances of the competitors myself and the rest of the Technical Panel will be selecting a Zhong Ding National Team to train together and ultimately to take part in international competition.

The Spirit Training that we will all be taking part in is an important part of the Zhong Ding tradition. We will train hard encouraging each other to reach greater heights than we had previously thought possible. This is a great way to forge ties of friendship through hard work and a shared experience. As some of you might know in June my wife, Fong led a group of hardy Sussex Zhong Ding members in a night of midsummer madness during which they managed to complete among other things four thousand spear thrusts. This is no easy task but those who completed it felt transformed and empowered. This weekend is a chance for you to achieve the same thing.

For those of you who wish to take a duan grading or to reconfirm your current grade this weekend is the chance.

So I hope to see all of you there. Oh and did I mention there will also be a shop selling weapons and other equipment at prices that cannot be beaten. I'm looking forward to this weekend and to seeing you all.

## Intensive Instructor Training Course

I doubt that there are many people within Zhong Ding that are not aware of the Intensive Instructor Training Course, held in Penang, Malaysia. The course is on a full-time basis, with an average of six hours a day, six days a week lasting up to one year. Instructors and potential instructors can gain experience in forms, fighting, competition, weapons and self-defense.

From the start of the course there has been a healthy mix of all aspects of the course. I began learning the 64 hands of the Gaoshi Baguazhang immediately and since then have steadily progressed through the syllabus of Gaoshi Baguazhang. The syllabus is comprised of eight Bagua forms and six forms of Xingyiquan.

After eleven years of doing Cheng Man-Ching Taiji, the contrast between the different styles is noticeable immediately. When practicing Xingyi, the student has to keep a certain amount of tension in the body, like a coiled spring, difficult to do at first after trying to relax everything for so long. But traditionally, a potential exponent of martial arts would start by learning Xingyiquan. Then progress on to Baguazhang, where they learn to relax the shoulders and hips and finishing up by studying Taiji, relaxing the whole body.

The learning of the forms is very detailed. By training every day, the time taken to learn a form is usually around ten days, depending on the length of the form. During this time, the movement and postures of the form are corrected and refined by Nigel's ever-watchful eye, and you repeat each move in excess of a hundred times. Then you start practicing, sometimes going up a hill, sometimes against a partner, but all cases looking to perform the movement as if your life depended on it. As well as the Bagua and Xingyi, we spend time practicing and enhancing our Taiji. At one point, practicing the form fifty times a day and seeing how our understanding of the other styles influences our Taiji.

The aspect of fighting and self-defense is pretty much where your life depends on it. With all the forms that are learnt, time is taken to examine and practice the application of it. Also we have been training with Master Ho Ah San. Master Ho was a student and disciple of Lu Tong Bao, who also taught Master Lau Kim Hong and Master Lee Bei Lei. Master Ho took time to go through the 37 posture form, explaining and teaching applications for each posture. This training is traditional, meaning that you spend half of the time on the floor, in a wall or generally being hit, despite assurances that you won't be. This is good preparation for Master Zhong Cheng Li. Master Zhong is a former international full contact champion. His lessons revolve around him sparring against you and teaching you practically. Ergo, kicking/punching/kneeing/elbowing you in the head/stomach/legs when you don't block correctly. Not to be out done, Nigel also spars with us, both empty hand and with weapons. As there are about 15 years and stones difference between Nigel and everyone else, you tend to learn quickly what you can and cannot do.

In between learning forms and getting beaten up, there are what I think makes the course truly intensive, lots of training drills and exercises. From a few thousand spear thrusts a day, follow-stepping a thousand times, circle walking for an hour, to trying to peng, lu, ji, an through the walls and kicking at pads constantly for two minutes at a time. It's these drills and exercises that give substance to the forms you do and helps you to understand why we do them the way we do them.

The final aspect of the course - how to conduct yourself within, and how to represent Zhong-Ding - is done with as much gusto as the practical training. Broken down into smaller areas of study, it consists of drinking beer, eating and drinking beer; studying Kung Fu films and documentaries, shouting at the locals to make yourself understood, haggling over 20p on the price of everything, attempting to re-establish the Empire.... and drinking beer.

I hope that I have been able to give you an idea as to the content of this course and what you can experience and hopefully gain. If I could only offer you one piece of advice it would be drop everything and catch the next plane out. You would not regret it!