

Professor Chang Man-Ching

A LATE NIGHT CHAT WITH THE MAIN MAN

BY LINDA CHASE BRODA | ISSUE 2, SPRING/SUMMER 1994

Linda Chase Broda was an early advocate of the Tai Chi Union, being actively involved in teaching and writing, her other calling was as a poet. Linda was born on Long Island, New York. She began her studies of Tai Chi Chuan with Sandy Cuthbert in 1974 followed by several other teachers in both Yang and Wu styles. She moved to Manchester in 1980 and set up the Village Hall Tai Chi school as well as teaching locally in other venues. In 2000 she formed the Tai Chi Forum for Health, training Tai Chi teachers to work with students with a variety of health needs. Sadly, Linda passed away in 2011 but continues to be inspiration in both Tai Chi and poetry.

Remember Lawrence Galante? He was one of your students in New York. He still lives there and teaches Tai Chi. He came over to Britain a while ago, invited by a group of us, to teach. Picture it, Lawrence, Larry Butler, Ronnie Robinson, Bob Lowey, Doris Hoften and I sat together in a restaurant in Glasgow and talk to animatedly about -wait for it -our computers. To be accurate, Doris listened while the rest of us talked about software graphics programs. I think you would've enjoyed it a lot, actually. Good food, good spirits and good company. We talked about Tai Chi too, but the fresh fascination we all had with the potential of the technology available to us inspired a very lively segment of our conversation. Publicity, database, graphics and bookkeeping. We've also talked about the video some of us had made, were making, had seen and hoped to see. We talked about travel, people in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and the US – Some of whom we knew personally and some of whom we knew only from their videos. You knew all the old guys. It was a happy occasion, there seemed to be nothing we couldn't know about the various Yang style tai chi forms, or at least, we could know what they all looked like. And oyster feast, metaphorically speaking.

For instance, I certainly know what your form looks like. How many times have I had you on pause, rewind, fast forward and play? As an old man and a young man, in a white tunic or a black tunic. Smiling or frowning, and taking those deep steps in before the big bushes. Sometimes, when it's late at night, and if it's just the two of us, like tonight, I love to have these little conversations with you. Well monologues actually. I talk and you don't, but I pretend that you listen. Anyway, I like to let you get on about your business. (Carry-on. Roll back, press, separate, push.)

Funny, isn't it Professor, you and me spending all this time together? Did you know, I always refer to you as my main man? It's not just to flatter you, but to make sure you realise that you're not the only one. For instance, recently I've been studying with one of the top students of one of your top students. The American, Aarvo Tucker, who's a senior student of Mr. Liu Hsi-heng in Taipei I haven't met Mr. Liu yet, but I hope to visit him later this year. I know he was one of your favourites.

That reminds me, Aarvo told us a story about you and Mr. Liu. You called him to come round to your house to see you because you had something very important to tell him. When he arrived, he knocked on your screen door. You were inside and obviously had heard him, but you didn't answer. He could see you. You were reading through the proofs of your book (the one you had written with Robert Smith) at the same time you were moving your weight forward and back and doing your magic little hip trick turns which you always had hid under your shirt on all the films. You just kept on reading and moving forward and back while poor Mr. Liu stood outside, not knowing whether to knock again or just wait. Eventually, you spoke. "It's all contained in this. This is the key to everything in Tai Chi." I think you were pretty pleased with yourself.

I learned a lot about you from that story – something of your arrogance, your impatience with less than perfection, your recognition of your own talent and your total dedication to the supreme ultimate aspect of Tai Chi. I wondered how many hours you spent doing that exercise. I felt ashamed of my own fickleness – getting bored after ten minutes of almost any exercise I can think of. You were in the business of discovery, of creating understanding and trying to trans-

mit it. But did you, I wonder? Aarvo said that Mr. Liu went on to make that hip turning exercise into his main complementary practice for his Tai Chi form and pushing hands. Did you want him to do that? I know from some of your other students that you weren't very keen on warm up exercises in general. The form seemed to be all that was needed. And as for pushing hands, announcements of theories or directions on how to practice were pretty useless. Only touch and feel could begin to get the message across, but not everyone got it. I know they didn't.

Where did you get it? Robert Smith says in one of his books that you only fought with your teacher, Yang Ch'eng-fu, twice and that both times he sent you flying. Smith speculates that your skill came in part from the other senior students and also from learning techniques from all the people who challenged you. You said it came from Yang Ch'eng-fu and from always sticking to the basic principles of relax & sink. When people ask you why none of your students approached the level of your skill, you said, "No faith." "Faith in what?" Smith asked you. "Faith in the twin principles of relax & sink, in not resisting and always remaining gently attached to the opponent... Never put more than four ounces of pressure on your opponent and never let him put more than four ounces on you. If this is followed, mastery will come. If you follow it."

How many times have I read these words and thought about them? But, when I'm pushing hands, I often forget. Four ounces quickly escalates to twenty. Yet you describe it in such playful language - a bit like 'take an aspirin and go to bed'. Or 'lose the self and follow' or 'place a foot on each thigh' or 'I have no preferences' or 'be here now.' The instructions are deceptively easy and so too is the eventual accomplishment of the instructions. The hell is all the stuff in between which one might do instead. I try and remember, but I forget. Simplicity coupled with faith. Not technique alone, but an implied suspension of reality which allows a leap into the unknown. Oh, yes. I suspected something like that.

I'm so curious about you. I try not to take too seriously the slacking off you get about your drinking. Ok, you drank a lot. I'm not interested in that. I think that now I am most interested in you as a painter and as a poet, probably because I know very little about those parts of your life. I know that you taught painting (Chinese water colour) at the University of Peking and then later in Taiwan. I think I've read a translation of a poem or two, but I can't really remember them. Recently, when Alan Pittman visited, he told me



Cover photo from *There are No Secrets*
by Wolfe Lowenthal

some things Robert Smith told him about you. (Alan had been Mr. Smith's student in Georgia for a long time) Smith spoke of how you straddled various social groups. There were martial artists, who are not particularly sophisticated and the academics, who were very conventional, but the people you liked the most were outside both these groups. They were the misfits, the unconventional ones, the eccentrics. Ah, I thought at that time, in another restaurant, this time in Manchester. That fits very well and my view of you; someone living close to the edge, a bit fed up with how things are and looking for new interpretations, not needing to tow the line or seek approval

This year, I'm finally going to take a trip to the Orient, mostly because of you. I want to get a better handle on who you really were. I'll go to Taiwan and see where you lived. I'll go to that park with the palm trees in it which I've seen so often in the video, waving in more than one direction and at more than one speed as I fast forward and rewind you. But my immediate purpose will be to meet Mr. Liu and invite him to come to the UK. Do you think he'll want to come? After all, he's the one who stayed home to mind the store for you. He didn't venture out and ride the bandwagon of your success. Do you realize, he's in his late 70s now? I hope he may still want to travel.

You're probably laughing at me, chalking them up - Ben Lo, William Chen, Lawrence Galante. I even met Ed Young once in Edinburgh. In fact, it was he who first showed a 16mm film of you to a group of us. I wasn't very impressed, actually, though I thought I should be. At the time, nearly twenty years ago, I didn't know what I was

looking at. It looked too simple and it seemed that Robert Smith was setting up the whole thing to make you look terribly clever. He probably was. It doesn't matter now. I made you into a hero anyway. Before I saw the film, you were just a name. After I saw the film, you were the ultimate goal, though I didn't even know the particular Yang style form that you did. I learned about it ten years later. It was several years after that, before I had my own video of you, which I could watch to my heart's content, the way I'm doing now. (Snake creeps down, golden rooster one, rooster other.)

I wonder what you would really think of me, of my students, of my colleagues, analysing every breath you took, every step you made and every turn of your palm. When we've done that for a while, then we compare what you did with what your students do and when we exhaust ourselves with that, we compare your movements from your younger renditions of the form with your movements in the older renditions. And when we tire of that, sometimes we practice. (By the way, I've never been able to see absolutely clearly if you really do keep your feet parallel in the monkey. The left one looks pretty straight, but I'm not sure about the right one.)

Did I tell you? Recently I went to a Bob Dylan Society monthly meeting in a pub. Funny to think that you were in New York at the same time he was playing in Greenwich Village coffee houses in New York. Maybe you went to see him. I know that your American hosts were pretty bohemian in their tastes. They would've liked Bob. This particular gathering was in Manchester, England, last month. I went because I was reading from a new poetry anthology about Dylan. I had written one of the poems. (I told you already that you were not my only man.) I recognized the flavour of the gathering immediately. The people assembled were just another bunch of fanatics, paying excruciatingly close attention to their main man. Admittedly, they had more material to work with, better tunes and also a bit of uncertainty since their main man is still alive. But, all in all, it was the same stuff. "What did he do, and when, and how was it, and was it the same the next time he did it, etc.?" We, who might be in the Cheng Man-Ch'ing Society, if ever there were to be such

a thing, had to keep on thrashing around in the same old Yang form again and again. What do you think? Will we learn anymore, any deeper or any better? Or is the show so far, all there is?

Professor, I wish you'd stop those interminable single whips and talk to me. It's a little pathetic, answering my own questions, even though I know what the answer is. I know you'd feel that so much examination and comparison is silly. It's against the way of things. It contravenes the law of change. Tai chi has lost its creative edge as an art form and has become bogged down in details, petty disputes and internal rivalries. Mystery, individuality, talent and innovation have been replaced with technical expertise, academic correctness and intellectual justification, all supported by the inflated egos of the exponents.

That's the truth, isn't it? Tell me, Professor, if you were a young man now, would you take up Tai Chi as a method of discovering and expressing your own interpretation of power, of energy, of health, of art? No. I don't think you would. Too much is already known about too many styles and too many people who have too much technique and no real potential connection with you. You would be told everything about everything there was to know about Tai Chi. How you should feel, where to put your feet, and how to send energy to the tip of your left index fingernail. You would have diagrams, (from our own book, of course) and videos and teachers who had been to every other great teacher in the world. They would be only too happy to tell you who all those teachers were. They would have CVs already prepared, listing every course they had ever attended with any teacher who had a world-wide reputation. They would forget the names of their first teachers. They would be principles and actions from the lives of people they didn't know, who came from places they've never been. You would be their student. You would be trying to replicate truth.

You were a master of the five excellences: painting, calligraphy, medicine, poetry and Tai Chi. I wish I had a video of you painting, or a cassette of your voice reading your poems. If I had these, I would like each of them only once.