

Dan Docherty

AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF TAI CHI

INTERVIEWED BY RONNIE ROBINSON | ISSUE 19

It would be surprising if any members of the Tai Chi Union don't know Dan Docherty. This interview with Dan, unlike the one found earlier, took place in 2004. Dan was interviewed Ronnie Robinson, the first editor of the Journal. Dan's influence on Tai Chi Chuan and Qigong throughout the United Kingdom and Europe has been and remains truly important and, no doubt, changed the public perception of the art. The interview offers many interesting insights into Dan's thoughts, his entry into the martial arts, specifically Tai Chi and as a founding member of the Tai chi Union for Great Britain.

When did you begin your Tai Chi training and what attracted you to the art?

I've studied karate since 1971, achieving a first dan. I read a lot about taijiquan and found it very intriguing. I also met some French karate practitioners who knew a little taijiquan and this led me to read more about the art. Although most of the books available were full of great stories about the incredible feats performed by the great masters, the self-defense techniques illustrated, and the explanations given, did seem incredibly ineffective. I wanted to find out more and had a couple of lessons from a dancer in Glasgow but, of course, she had no idea how to apply the self-defense techniques and I couldn't figure it out from the book.

Where did you go from there?

At that point in time (1975) there was no opportunity to learn Chinese internal arts in Scotland and I realized that I would have to travel east to find out more. I graduated from Glasgow University with a law degree but was more interested in martial arts than a legal career. This led me to join the Royal Hong Kong police.

Was it easy to find what you were looking for in Hong Kong?

There were many things on offer, but it was difficult to find someone who had both good character and a high level of ability in martial arts. I tried Goju Ryu and Wing Chun, but didn't feel either of these systems were right for me. The chief physical training instructor at the police training school was a high-level Aikido practitioner and he told me he learned some fighting taijiquan with a certain Sifu Cheng Tin Hung in Kowloon.

How was your first encounter with the man and his art?

He was very cordial, very polite, but very alert. As he had no English and my Cantonese at the time was very limited, he spoke through an interpreter. He took us up to the rooftop where his students were training. No grades,

no uniforms; all practicing different things- weapons, pushing hands, hand form, self-defence techniques- while some were just chatting. Sifu Cheng showed me some self-defence applications from the hand form after which he invited me to hit him as hard as I could in the stomach to demonstrate taiji neigong (internal strength). He absorbed some of my best gyakutsukis (karate reverse punches) with no sign of tension or pain. It was then that I began to suspect I had found the missing link that I mentioned earlier. A week later I had totally given up karate and Wing Chun.

What did your training routine consist of?

A lot of pushing hands, applications and wrestling, the school was very big on Tai Chi wrestling.

Tai Chi wrestling is not commonly known; can you explain a little about it, perhaps how it differs from Western wrestling?

Wrestling is a bit of a misnomer. It comprises shuai jiao, which is mainly throwing, tripping and sweeping; qinna which literally means seizing and holding by using dimmak (pressure points) or to control the opponent using dimmak strikes as for example in Single Whip or again simply to control and restrain the opponent – which was useful in my job as a police officer; finally there is diepu- to make the opponent fall and then follow up with a strike. Of course, the initial contact skill in all of these involves some pushing hand principles.

You worked on these aspects immediately? How about form work?

The emphasis for the “fighters” was on Neigong and fighting, not on form. However, the way of teaching form was quite different from other Yang lineage systems. Firstly, we learned the square form, which was developed by Wu Jian Quan when teaching at Beijing University. There were so many students that they couldn't easily follow so he broke the movements down so they can see clearly were each techniques beginning and ending, after this the regular round form was

taught.

I've heard it said that without a neigong system Tai Chi Chuan is essentially ineffective as a martial art but most practitioners are unfamiliar with this aspect, can you tell me a little about it?

This is generally, but not quite accurately, considered to be a secret side of taijiquan which is only taught after the student has been training for some time and has gone through a ritual ceremony.

We do not use the term Qigong, because qigong tends to suggest that the qi is deliberately directed to different parts of the body; we never try to direct the qi. Instead, we use the term Neigong. Nei means internal and refers to the fact that the 12 yin and 12 yang internal strength exercises are designed to strengthen the body internally by enhancing the function of the internal organs and the qi and blood circulation. Furthermore, they stimulate the central nervous system, forge the will, and make the mind more tranquil.

The internal strengthening process trains the ability of the body to both withstand the blows of the opponent or even to take a jump onto the abdomen from head height and to strike the opponent with jin- focused power. The yin exercises are also particularly effective in improving health and easing cases of insomnia, muscle and bone injuries, nervous tension, etc. The yang exercises are mainly for power. Most of the exercises have a self-defence application.

What is involved in the practice of neigong? I understand that you may not want to actually describe fully what is involved but it would be interesting to know a little about the mechanics of the work.

The exercises tend to be multidimensional; some might focus on enhancing a particular organ, but also stimulate the autonomic and central nervous systems while the application of the movement may involve dimmak. The emphasis is always on correct practice not the breath, and there is the concept of passing through three levels in training, the ultimate one being that of “no me, no you” or “Heaven and Earth and humanity in unity.”

What about the fight training?

We placed heavy emphasis on footwork and evasion when using either striking or grappling techniques. The footwork is largely trained in the “Seven Stars”, “Nine Castles, and dalu pushing hand exercises. The evasion is trained in the fooyang; “four direction, “Chansigong” (railing silk) and “Cailang” (Gather the Wave) pushing hand exercises. I must emphasize pushing hands

is not self-defence but only a method of training skills that are useful in self-defence.

Both Cheng Tin Hung and his student's abilities have been successfully tested in full contact competition and in “duels”. He produced many South East Asian martial arts champions. I am talking now about Tai Chi fighters, training only in Tai Chi Chuan, fighting opponents from other styles of Chinese gongfu, as well as other martial arts. No other Tai Chi master has produced a South East Asian champion.

In 1981, when they were thinking about introducing this type of contest to China, the Chinese authorities invited Cheng Tin Hung to Beijing to advise them on rules, training and holding tournaments. It's also why the Hong Kong government asked Cheng Tin Hung to examine Tai Chi teachers for the government's Tai Chi morning classes.

I have come across many students and teachers of other styles of Tai Chi Chuan

and have found them able to talk good Tai Chi Chuan - stories about their teacher or their teacher's teacher, but when it came down to it they only had rudimentary knowledge of basic pushing hands and self-defence. No internal strength, no evasion, no ability to “fajing”- strike” with focused power. They do not in fact practice Tai Chi Chuan; they practice “Dofuquan” – bean curd boxing. In other words, because they have only and no yang, their fists are like bean curd; soft and soggy.

What other training exercises did you do to make it possible to win the South East Asia Open Weight Martial Championships?

Although internal strength training is the fundamental prerequisite for practicing Tai Chi Chuan as a martial art it is certainly not enough in itself. Once you've trained an ability, you have to learn how and when to use it, so regular practice of the hand form, pushing hands and self-defence techniques is essential.

The essential combat theory of Tai Chi Chuan is to use softness or yin to overcome hardness or yang and use hardness or yang to overcome softness or yin. So rather than blocking the opponent's attacks we divert or redirect them using evasion and/or footwork at the same time. This is using softness to overcome hardness. The attack has then become “dead” force and has changed from yang to yin. At this point we must also change from yin to yang by striking (yang) the vital points of our opponent (yin).

This is using hardness against softness. In order to train this evasion, it is necessary to do a lot of practice on the pushing hands exercises I mentioned earlier.

Aside from the training skills and hard work involved have you ever thought about what it was that made a boy from Glasgow go to China to not only compete but also beat them at their own game?

I don't look at it that way. It is a matter of finding something that you were interested in and then trying to take it somewhere. My master was also something of an outsider and I think that gives you an advantage in terms of not just accepting and given "truths", but making your own truth.

During this time, when you were doing a lot of physical work, how much time did you spend reading or learning about the art? Did your teacher talk much about the philosophical side?

I read books on Tai Chi Chuan even while practicing karate and continue to do so. My teacher, though without a formal education, was a bookworm as I must also confess I am. We both loved books on history and philosophy. I liked the Legalists and the Dialecticians in those days while he preferred the Yijing and Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. He would often talk to us about the links between Tai Chi theory and Chinese thought.

When did you realise that you would make a profession of the art?

Two years before I went to Hong Kong, when I was still doing karate.

So you deliberately study Tai Chi Chuan with a view to making a living from it?

It seemed an agreeable and interesting way to spend my time and certainly beats working for wages though these days there is considerable paperwork with the Tai Chi Union of Great Britain (TCUGB), Taijiquan and Qigong Federation for Europe, etc.

How did you set up your first classes?

I read in a London newspaper that a centre in South London was looking for martial arts teachers, so I went along. It was, in fact, in an old school which had been "occupied" by a group of Afro-Caribbeans, unhappy about the lack of local facilities. The head of the centre, Michael Jacques, had been a boxer and karate man, became my first student. He has now been teaching Tai Chi Chuan professionally for many years.

Did you consciously promote the martial side from the start or did you have many students for the "health" or "personal growth" side?

I figured those areas were already being covered by the competition, and while I was then, and still am, willing to teach all comers, the martial aspect is what I was, and probably am, best known for.

How do you feel about all the different approaches we now see for the art?

Most people don't want Tai Chi Chuan - that is a martial art; they want Qigong, even to the extent that they don't want pushing hands but two person massage Qigong. Now we get business people wanting half hour of "Tai Chi" before a conference. It makes money for teachers and might actually help a little, so fine.

When did you first stage of competition and what prompted you to do so?

Essentially, I did it for publicity and to make money.

Many believe that you do not fit the traditionally expected profile of a taiji master who, for some, is generally considered to be (at least on the outside) calm, serene and extremely gentlemanly in nature. However, being as you are, and holding positions of great responsibility how do you respond to such criticisms.

The "many" and the "some" must live a sheltered life. Cheng Man Ching, a staunch member of the "Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) for example, was a noted drinker who taught calligraphy and painting to the third wife of Kuomintang leader, Chiang Kai Shek, a former bank robber and member of the Green Gang Triad society, who collaborated with the Japanese and gave his second wife gonorrhoea. The former president of Southeast Asian Taiji Association embezzled funds from the association. The president of the International Taijiquan Federation in Taiwan in 1994 presided over cheating at the second Hwa Cup competition that was so blatant that in consultation with fellow coach, Dick Watson, I withdrew the team and I smashed and threw to the ground the present with which we were meant to be placated.

When did you begin to work extensively across Europe and what was it that made you so much in demand in the various countries you taught?

In the late 1980s, there was a gap in the market and a lot of people wanted to do Tai Chi Chuan as a complete art but couldn't find what they were looking for. Epi Van de Pol once called me the "Enfant Terrible" of the European Tai Chi scene and perhaps that was what was needed.

Do you think he made this remark because of his "softer" approach to the art, or because of your "challenging" ways?

Maybe it is a bit of both.

Are there cultural differences in the various countries you teach in with respect to their interests and approaches to the art?

Well, you need to accept that northern

Europeans like the Germans march to the beat of a different drum than Mediterranean people like the Greeks. Hungarians, Russians, and Bulgarian's are all different again, excellent students and I love that part of Europe. I guess it's like the old joke that in heaven the British are the police, the French are the cooks, the Swiss are the bureaucrats, the Germans are the technocrats and the Italians are the lovers, whereas in hell...

Let's look at the political side of things; you were a founder member of the TCUGB and the TCFE, why did you want to create, or be involved in such organizations and what did you see as the purpose of those respective bodies?

The TCUGB was the idea of Nigel Sutton who had his own political agenda, but I knew immediately that based on my experience with the Hong Kong Tai Chi Association that this was the right thing to do as governments and other large bodies prefer to deal with other large bodies rather than a lot of individuals.

As for the TCFE, I have always loved the idea of one Europe and was happy to support our French colleagues, many of whom are now friends and allies in their idea of creating a pan European federation for the Tai Chi Chuan and Qigong. On the practical side, such an organization can help represent our interests with bodies such as the European Union and we can support one another and preserve our independent right to practice our art without interference from China, Taiwan or anywhere else.

I know you're well read and I've spent much time studying Chinese to allow you to get a first hand sense of the material written about internal arts. Have you come across many inaccuracies or misunderstandings of the information that has been reported concerning the arts?

I think one of the basic problems is that many of the educated, intelligent people who translated the Tai Chi Chuan Classics and wrote many of the books, though perhaps better linguists than I, didn't know enough about Tai Chi Chuan practice, either in the field of internal alchemy or martial arts, for them to understand or explain correctly what they were writing about. So, everything, whether jin or qi or jing or shen is "energy" and the "dashouge," literally "Hit Hands Song" is the "Song of Pushing Hands."

You've also traveled extensively in China, visiting many of the places which lay claim to be an influential in the development of the art and its philosophy. Have you made any interesting or startling discoveries as a result

of your travels?

On a simple level, many Westerners practicing Tai Chi Chuan from the Yang lineage believe all practice should be soft and slow. A few years ago, I spent a week on Wudang mountain in December without proper light and heating. It was bloody cold, and I can tell you I did not feel like practicing slowly. Furthermore, when I first visited the mountain in 1984 there were no martial arts schools in the vicinity though we found in an old Taoist who, in return for cigarettes, performed Tai He Quan (Supreme Harmony Boxing). In 2000 I went back and found martial arts schools all over the mountains which teach a hybrid of modern Wushu and kickboxing. In one school the grandmaster who is around 40 years old claimed to be the 14th generation successor of the Zhang San-feng. If we optimistically take one generation as being 25 years, we come up with the date 1650- Zhang had already been dead for more than 200 years.

Again, on visiting the Chen village, the geography was revealing. As you go along the main road leading through the village, the mansion where Yang Lu-chan lived and practiced is on the left, obscured by high walls and an imposing wooden gate. The road leads to an open area where a training hall of modern construction has been erected. During good weather Chen stylists practice in the open area and when it rains, they practice indoors. This lends credence to the historian WuTan-nan's arguments that there were two groups in the village, those, like Yang Lu-chan, who practice Tai Chi Chuan, one under Chen Chang-xing behind closed



doors in the mansion and those who continue to practice traditional Chen family Pao Chui in the open. In fact, I believe there must have been three groups if we include the spies in double agents. Also, when I visited in 1995, the old gravestones had been removed from the cemetery and laid face up in the open area. None of them mentioned Tai Chi Chuan. The new gravestones in the cemetery all loaded the Tai Chi Chuan achievement of deceased members of the Chen clan.

Herodotus was called the “Father of History,” but also the “Father of Lies.” Many Chinese martial artists merit the latter rather than the former sobriquet.

Are there any practitioners you would like to meet, either living or dead?

Song Shu Ming is a little-known master who is the secretary to General Yuan Shi Kai. He fetched up in Beijing in the early 1900s, claiming to teach a Tai Chi Chuan from Wudang Mountains, handed down in his family. Wu Tu Nan, the famous historian, wrote that his own master Wu Jian Quan and other famous Beijing masters were so impressed with Song that they studied him and studied with him though they were all well-established teachers. It would be interesting to compare Song's art with what people are doing now.

Are you still in contact with your teacher? If so, what is the nature of your current relationship?

I saw him in September 2004 and he said he had left the Wudang Gate and it was now my world. In many ways and for a long time I was the closest of his students to him in both character and other respects though we had our disagreements and plenty of people tried to poison him against me. Karmic retribution has caught up with most of them.

In the last issue of TCC and IA, we included a brief interview with Eddie Wu, the lineage holder of the Wu system, and he stated that Cheng Tin Hung inherited the family system some years ago, what do you think about the statement?

It is a bit more complicated than that. Cheng Tin Hung's uncle, Cheng Wing Kwong was one of Wu Jian-Chuan three main Hong Kong disciples, therefore from an early age Cheng Tin-Hung knew the Wu family. He started training with his uncle and when he was 17 he started training with Qi Min-Xuan from Hebei. Qi's father had trained him with Quan You, the father of Wu Jian-Chuan, but Qi also had another master.

On the death of Wu Jian-Chuan, his son,

Wu Gong-Yi took over in Hong Kong. He did not have a great relationship with Cheng as Cheng had once thrown him to the ground when they were pushing hands. Cheng had a good relationship with his uncle but not with the uncle's family. Cheng's attitude was always that he was practicing traditional Tai Chi Chuan so he called it Wudang. In more recent years, he referred to his art as being Cheng “Shi” (style/model) Tai Chi Chuan of the Wu school. However, we do a lot of things differently from the Wu family.

I remember in 1986, when Gary Wragg brought some students to take part in Cheng Tin Hung's London seminars, when we were doing saber form together Gary and his people went one way and we went the other and both parties realized there were differences. Some of the curriculum is different too, for example the internal alchemy taught by Cheng Tin-Hung was not from the Wu family and the spear form is also quite different. I don't believe Cheng Tin-Hung ever saw himself as the head of the Wu style though de facto others may have perceived him as such. As to Cheng Tin-Hung fighters using boxing gloves, Chinese full contact fighting usually requires fighters to use gloves and these can vary in weight from light knuckle protectors which we used in Singapore in 1976, to the four ounce gloves used in Hong Kong contests for many years to the Thai boxing gloves we used in Malaysia in 1980. Tellingly, Cheng Tin-Hung's school was the only Tai Chi Chuan school to compete successfully in the South East Asian Chinese martial arts championships over the course of many years.

On a personal note, I accept that what we do is perceived as being of the Wu school, but I have no interest to do things the way the Wu family now do them though I respect their skills. I also don't except the idea of Cheng style as this then gets identified with the uncle who quite clearly was not a top-level Tai Chi fighter though a capable practitioner. I prefer “Wudang Tai Chi Chuan” or “Practical Tai Chi Chuan,” as martial arts journalist termed Cheng Tin-Hung's art.

Do you see your self as the natural inheritor of your teacher's system?

The great weakness of the famous Tai Chi families is that they and credulous students seem to regard Tai Chi Chuan as a museum exhibit or antique to be passed from one generation to the next rather than as a living art, so that to the extent I don't believe in “inheriting.” Secondly, I think that Cheng Tin-Hung, like many teachers, was not consistently trying to do the same thing. From 1976, he became more involved with the

therapeutic aspects of Tai Chi Chuan by running instructor training classes on behalf of the Hong Kong government Sport and Recreation Department. It ended up that many more people were practicing his system though the number of people who actually knew what they were doing hardly changed.

Thirdly, he didn't put a lot of emphasis on weapon application or self-defense as opposed to fighting (they are not the same). Partly because of my police background and partly out of personal interest, I have developed both these aspects considerably. Furthermore, my teacher had no pedagogic training whereas in the police I was trying to be an instructor and I have found the derivation of many of the names and terms we use an Tai Chi Chuan through my own reading and research rather than through him.

Do you have any views of the shorter 'new forms', some of which have especially been created for competition purposes and others as an aid to assisting various health problems?

This was the great contribution of Cheng Man-Ching and others who followed his lead.

It has made a Tai Chi Chuan accessible for more people, but it is not entirely positive as the traditional Yang lineage long forms follow a definite sequence for practical martial and gymnastic reasons. Martially, some techniques are logical follow ups to what proceeds, while gymnastically the more difficult and demanding movements occur later in the form.

You have probably seen a number of changes in the art over the years; how they are taught and depicted in the media, how things like competitions and other gatherings have played a part in the promotion and ultimate understanding of how things now are, compared to how they were taught when you first began training. Are there any surprises for you anymore?

Though I did compete and some of my students compete and though I run competitions, I don't like them. However, they can be a test under pressure of a student's character and technique. Furthermore, I think people realize that to do well in competitions they can't always expect to get away with practicing for an hour in class once a week.

Competitions are also a test for teachers, both as coaches of competent competitors but also as judges to identify what is good and not so good about the technique of competitors. Also, it is a chance to meet other instructors.

However, I've seen the downside of this. Twice

in Taiwan where the locals systematically cheated and lied and manipulated against foreigners, especially in 1984 when I withdrew the British team and publicly smashed and threw on the ground the present given us by the president of their Tai Chi Chuan federation.

Other gatherings such as Riecontre Jasnieri, Tai Chi Caledonia and the European Tai Chi Chuan /Qigong forums of the TCFE are important as places where there can be exchanges of ideas on a cultural, technical and pedagogic level.

Do you feel any personal responsibility to the art?

Albert Camus said, "None of us is guilty because we did not begin history; none of us is innocent because we continue it." We who are teachers have a certain responsibility for how, what and who we teach. What I do believe is to treat people as individuals; I believe people cannot and should not always be taught the same things and in the same way.

One publicly asked why you taught taijiquan you replied, "to make money and meet interesting women." Do you still feel this way about it?

Marpa, the translator, was asked by one of his students, "You said that if one does not enjoy meat, liquor and women, it is a disservice to oneself. It appears to us that this is no different than what we do." Marpa replies "Though I enjoy sense pleasures, I have these confidences I am not fettered by them." And later, "While enjoying sense pleasures, I meditate on the deity.... "I do meditate in my Neigong practice, though not on any deity.

Finally; as a young man you entered the world a taijiquan to learn how to fight effectively, are you still fighting the same battles or do you get something else from the art?

There are always more battles though not necessarily against the same opponents. I have a responsibility to Tai Chi Chuan and the Chinese internal arts in general and to my own school in particular to act to further and to protect our interests.

Surge Dreher and members of the French taiji federation have encouraged me in different ways through some of my contacts eastern Europe, in particular to try to help make a truly European Chinese internal arts movement so that there can be an enriching exchange of ideas and culture. I believe that this is a Holy Grail that is worth questing for.