

A hermit, a westerner and a motorcyclist...

BY JAN SILBERSTORFF | ISSUE 18, SPRING 2004

Jan Silberstorff has been active in the international tai chi community for years. He spent time living with his teacher, Master Chen Xiaowang, in Australia. Prior to starting his studies with Master Chen, Jan had been training in several different arts including Yang style, Xingyi and Bagua along with several methods of qigong. He stated that once he 'found' Master Chen he was, at last, home and gave up everything else. His travels through China, always challenging, relates his experience visiting a small Buddhist temple and meeting with the caretaker monk.

It was a long dusty dirt road, which continue to lead me from the Daoist Temple, Louguantai to the mountains. The sun stood high in the sky, 37°, not unusual for a summers day in Shaanxi. The Louguantai temple is situated at the foot of the Zhongnon Mountains and is considered to be the place where Laotse left the Doa De Jing.

After spending some days in the monastery, I longed to see the wide-open landscape of the fields and mountains that are the familiar rural settings of China, far away from the busy, hustling towns. In the distance I could see the Buddhist pagoda where I was heading. It is believed that during the 7th century the Christian Niestorian sect had established a church at the site. The countryside was similar to what I had known in Chenjiagou village; very simple, quiet and still. I passed several smallholdings, a village school and even a small Wushu school, all of which had buildings which had been fashioned from the local clay. There was no difference to the ground on the inside of these buildings, just the simple soil of the earth. Inside simple wooden structures, which were their beds, could also be seen. The black soot indicated where their kitchens were. The area reminded me of my first trips to China in the late 80s when I had lived in similar surroundings. The only source of water was the village well. I was always soaked in sweat but much appreciative of the quietness. The people were never obviously happy nor unhappy; they just were. The old people sat on small stools outside their doors, watching the children play; the youngest around three, the oldest one over 80. When they saw me, their expressions initially stiffened but when I spoke to them in Chinese

they immediately smiled widely. They invited me to sit and have some tea, but I wanted to move as my intention was to walk through the countryside, across the open field and visit the pagoda.

After walking for some time, I realized that the pagoda was further away than I had imagined. Just as I was thinking of turning back a motorcyclist appeared with a large dust cloud behind him. Noisy vehicles are very common in rural China and this was the very first sound to break the silence of my day. The driver offered me a lift; not asking where I was from or where I wanted to go as there was only this long, single track road.

When we arrived at the pagoda, I asked him to stop. Not another living soul could be seen. The Buddhist pagoda was situated in the open, surrounded by the wide corn fields and small farmsteads. The curtain at the entrance was thrown back and an old Buddhist monk, in full robe, suddenly stood before me. He spoke to me, but due to his strong rural dialect, I had difficulty understanding him. I became aware of his near empty mouth which had only a few teeth left. Slowly, I became accustomed to his accent and understood that he was inviting me to ignite some joss sticks. We went into his dark clay hut, which held only a small bed, a few bits n' pieces and a small altar containing a picture of Buddha. I lit the joss-sticks and paid my respects whilst, at the same time, he struck a small bell.

The motorcyclist told me that he was the only monk in this area and that he was the only student of an old Daoist nun who recently died at the age of 116. She had lived in the pagoda since she was 11 years old, caring for the pagoda. In the many decades she stayed there her only student

was the old monk, who had been with her for over 30 years. I looked around the room and realized there were no golden trinkets, no large icons and no postcard salesmen – only the clay hut, the pagoda and the old man. When I asked about his teacher, he took out a small glass picture frame.

That night I lay awake for quite some time, unable to get the monk out of my head. On the next morning I needed to visit him once more to say goodbye. This time I walked the entire distance on foot. On arrival, the monk came out to see me. With a radiant smile, he told me that the mo-



Even with the bright sunlight through the door I strained to see anything in the frame. When the monk removed several millimeters of dust with a cloth a photo of a very old nun appeared.

One normally makes a small donation for the temple, but I had only 50 Yuan note (approx. £5) and 5 Yuan is the usual amount to give. After a few minutes of searching; in his robe, in some jam jars, under a booklet, and behind the joss-sticks, he could only come up with 10 Yuan in change around 40 small banknotes. In expressing my thanks, I suggested that he should just hold on to the rest of the money. He insisted on continuing his search for more money but after my persistence he finally agreed to keep the money. We then went outside to say our goodbyes and I made my way back to Louguantai.

torcyclist had already called there that morning. He came with enough change to allow him to give back the money you over paid, so he could return it to you, as per your request. I looked surprisingly at him and explained that I had no such arrangement with the motorcyclist, as I intended for him (the monk) to keep the money. “You didn’t say anything like that to him?” the monk asked. “Nothing,” I replied, “I never spoke to him.”

We both silently looked over the sprawling cornfields to the mountains in the distance. The sun was as hot as yesterday. After some time he returned to his hut and a day later I returned home to Germany.

A hermit, a westerner and a motorcyclist; two connected hearts and a pocket full of money...