

An American Taoist

INTERVIEW WITH YUNROU

INTERVIEW BY MARK LANGWEILER | ISSUE 51

Then interview with the American Taoist Yunrou appeared in the first issue of the Journal that I edited. I had been reading his novels for a couple of years under the Arthur Rosenfeld. Since those early stories, Arthur was ordained as a Taoist monk. As the interview reveals, I met Yunrou at his school in Deerfield, Florida.

I walked into the class on a Saturday morning. There were about 25 students working on various components of the form, weapons, standing in small groups talking. It was obvious that everyone was having a good time. The atmosphere was light but there was a fair bit of intensity. I have always said that the art is serious, learning it doesn't have to be. This was the epitome of that learning experience. I also took notice of the age range, from early teens (possibly younger) to several seniors. More of a community rather than a class.

Yunrou came over and introduced himself. And the class continued. It was clear that everyone had a clear idea of what they were to do.

I first knew of Yunrou as Arthur Rosenfeld, through his books. I had read his novels, 'The Cutting Season', and 'Quiet Teacher'. It wasn't until I read 'Tai Chi: The Perfect Exercise'

that I realised that he was a master Tai Chi Chuan instructor as well.

Ordained a Taoist monk at the Pure Yang Temple in Guangzhou, China, Yunrou has been studying the martial arts and Taoism for the past 35+ years has acquired the reputation of both high martial skill and as an acclaimed author.

I had the opportunity to speak with Yunrou after class. Unfortunately, our conversation wandered away from an interview format, more like two friends just talking about the world. Below are the answers to several questions I sent to Yunrou after the fact. He was gracious enough to take the time out of his writing and training (not to mention travel) schedule to answer these questions.

I know that you have studied several martial arts.

I've broken out the martial arts training for

you by way of answering the first question. I omitted training in the 1970s because it wasn't so serious.

1980 Tang Soo Do under World Champion David Jang, Santa Barbara, CA

1981 Chinese Kenpo under Christopher Wiedmann, Santa Barbara, CA Grandmaster Ed Parker lineage

1982 Chinese Kenpo under W. Crane Ponder, San Diego, CA

1982 Yang Tai Chi under Steven Leavitt

1983 Shorin Ryu (weapons only) under Cassandra George, Ithaca NY, created juvenile training program

1983 White Crane Kung Fu under Kwong Yu Godwin Chang, Ithaca, NY

1985 Choi Lai Fu Kung Fu under Frank Primicias, San Diego, CA

1986 Chinese Kenpo under Glenn Small, San Diego, CA

1988 Wing Chun Kung Fu under Calasanz Martinez, Norwalk, CT, Grandmaster Yip Man lineage

1990 Shing-Yi Ch'uan under Stuart Charno, Los Angeles, CA, Grandmaster Kenny Gong lineage

1994 Yang Tai Chi under Fu Yuan Ni, Santa Barbara, CA

1994 Yang Tai Chi Ch'uan under Toni DeMoulin and David Barton, Santa Barbara, CA, Dong Family lineage

1996 Shuaijiao applications in modified Tai Chi Ch'uan, Dale McNaughton, Boca Raton, FL

1997 to present Original Chen Tai Chi Ch'uan under Master Yan Gaofei and Grandmaster Chen Quanzhong (Chen Fa Ke lineage) with saltings from Chen Sitong and Chen Boxiang.

Why that interest and how did you find tai chi?

I don't suppose my start in the martial arts was so very different from so many other folks' in the sixties and seventies. I watched Bruce Lee and David Carradine on the big screen and on the little one, too, and was inspired. Perhaps one aspect of my interest that might be unusual is that I was more taken with the attitude of the blind monk in KUNG FU than I was with high kicks and screaming. Equanimity, peace, depth of thinking, understanding, and living was more compelling even to my child's mind at the time. Another reason I turned to training was the fact that my family included Holocaust survivors to whom I was very close. Hearing about the horrors of war while I was being held up, sometimes at knifepoint, at least twice a month in the violent and racially divided New York City of my youth led me to the notion that if I learned martial arts I could be the kind of person, the kind of man, who could not be forced to do anything against his will. Nonsense in the face of tactical nukes, political revolutions, SWAT teams, video, Internet, and audio surveillance, and Glocks in the glovebox, of course, but part of the fantasy that motivated me.

What was the trigger?

I was on holiday in Quito, Ecuador, a stop-over on the way to the Galapagos Islands. I met a pretty girl at my hotel and we went out to dinner. Afterwards, we were accosted on an empty street by a drunken policeman. He assaulted her and I hit him. The game that ensued was a blend between *Midnight Express* and *Kafka*. The net result was that I was incarcerated and abused, she was raped, and I had to bribe my way to freedom. Somewhere in that melee I made a deal with the Powers That Be that if I lived through those days I would learn how to hit a man so he stayed down. I made good on that avowal by enrolling in a Tang Soo Do class the moment I made it back to the US.

Do you remember what the first aspects of the art you learned? Was it strictly the form or was there something else?

Those early years in Korean karate were mostly about loosening my hips, stretching my hamstrings, and learning how to hit the bag hard with a proper fist. My teacher was a superb athlete and was wont to jump over a line of guys in a flying sidekick. Very showy. He liked himself a lot. My training with him came

to a close when he deliberately stood on my knees and ripped my groin to "loosen me up". I am limited by the scar tissue there to this day. When it comes to tai chi, although I practiced for many years before meeting my Chen-Style teacher, Master Max Yan, it was only after I started training with him that things began to come together and make sense. I remain bewildered as to why he is still kind enough to tolerate me and ever grateful for his teaching and his friendship. I also very much appreciate the support and encouragement of my abbot at the Pure Yang (Chun Yang) Temple in Guangzhou, where I was ordained a Taoist monk some years ago.

How do you practice today? Is there anything in particular that you concentrate on?

There is probably no finer practice than teaching, and teaching foundations to beginners most of all. I do an awful lot of that. Also, figuring out ways to convey complex ideas like silk reeling, fajing, and various versions of standing pole exercises helps me to understand these things more clearly myself. My own personal sessions unfold daily according to what I need. I focus on the traditional weapons in my own work and spend a lot of time with the Guan Gung Dao and the long (9 foot) spear. I also very much enjoy the physical challenges of leaping and low stances required by the Double Broadsword Shuan Dao form. Some days, of course, I just do quiet standing or work on some particular piece of qinna that I want to perfect. When I'm fortunate enough to have a high-level partner available, I drill applications in Pushing Hands and in combat.

Related to that, why Taoism? I know that you have undertaken a very serious study. How does it related to your tai chi practice?

There is no tai chi without a deep understanding of the relationship between yin and yang; that dynamic ever-changing and evolving interplay between opposing forces is precisely what tai chi means. Tai chi is a way of life, an awareness of cycles, forces, and trends. Tai chi ch'uan, the martial art based upon these principles and skills, is no more or less than an exquisitely beautiful physical manifestation of Laozi's Taoist philosophy. Most of us won't have to use the arts to save our physical lives but we can and must use them to save our spiritual and emotional lives every day. Tai chi can make our intellectual experience of the world



deeper as well. I was a Taoist from the age of 9 or 10, even started reading books in the Taoist Canon back then (along with some Japanese Zen material) despite having absolutely no idea what it all meant and never having heard the term Taoist. It is said that even in translation from the original song poem, the Tao Te Ching has a profound, almost magical effect upon readers and chanters. Perhaps there is qi in the very ideas, perhaps there is a rhythm to the words that transcends language, perhaps there is power in the visuals and examples that stirs the hearts and minds of women and men in a very particular way. Whatever the reason, when I discovered Taoism as an organized philosophy and religion (despite the very fact of its characteristic disorganization) I felt as an albatross at last come home to roost after flying for years over oceans. Everything from the deep and abiding regard for nature to the detailed analysis of human behavior, replete with foibles and traps, made (and continues to make) deep and perfect sense to me. It is a stunningly relevant way of looking at the world, practical, useful, and beautiful, too.

What do you see (feel?) is the essence of tai chi?

Relaxation, a wuji (balanced) mind, and the progression from philosophy to principle to applied technique.

As for your teaching, I saw that the class was divided into differing levels but that the general feel was one of lightness with a great deal of laughter and banter. What is your 'philosophy' of teaching?

You saw laughing? You saw banter? Let me know when and where so that I can snuff it out! Seriously, though, since relaxation is such a critical ingredient in tai chi success, the more welcoming and non-judgmental the study environment the better. Humor is an important ingredient in Taoist study. There is every record and evidence that the early Taoists were a Bacchanalian lot, reveling in the mountains between rounds of practice and meditation. Ch'uang Tzu, perhaps the most greatly-loved Taoist teacher is certainly a humorist. Laughing and humor help us relax. If people don't feel competitive one with the other and if they don't feel pressured to achieve, their mind and body relax and the ideas pour in through the training and help us to follow Laozi's exhortation to "be like water". We drink tea together, enjoy snacks, and usually have music playing



in the background unless I'm giving a Taoist "chat". I also read poetry from the Chinese wilderness tradition, mostly Tang dynasty, at the close of every class. In my experience, highly regimented classes, rife with ego and with a lot of bowing and scraping lead to stiff minds and stiff bodies, too. The essence of taoism is organicity and the essence of taiji class is, too. My grandmaster, Chen Quanzhong, once told me that the more balletic tai chi looks, the worse it is; the more organic and home-grown,

conversely, the higher the level of accomplishment. This doesn't mean sloppy, of course, but it does say something about softness and the individual practitioner needing to make their art their own over time. I run my classes like a family gathering but without the usual squabbling. It's a community, and I believe the students enjoy each other's company and look forward to our meetings.

Speaking of teaching, do you see any common misconceptions that may hinder students learning?

Teaching and learning tai chi is a real challenge in America these days. We live in a culture of speed and greed on this side of "the pond" and of instant gratification and outlandish promises, too. Promises of losing 20 pounds in a week on a diet of grapefruits, assurances of profits of 80% in two months, and claims that we can learn real life skills through video games and get smarter from pills exemplify the

type of nonsense that surrounds us in relentless multi-media messages, sales pitches, news stories, and pop culture. Unlike such hollow promises, tai chi really does have the potential to be profoundly transformative on an individual level, one student after another. It comes from a different time and a different culture, though. Even in China these days it is difficult to find training that has not been tainted by the "I want demonstrable results yesterday" men-

tality. In the chat I give beginning students, I tell them that while a closet full of black belts is no guarantee of success in tai chi, and while they don't need to be able to run marathons or put their leg upside their hand while standing on one foot, they do need to be able to make bewildered their friend for a few months until they begin to see what's going on, and to trust the process and keep negative and judgmental thoughts at bay. If they can do those things, accept that millions of people for hundreds of years have been benefitting greatly from the art, and if they can accept me (despite my manifest limitations) as a reasonable conduit of authentic information, then they will succeed.

How about common physical problems?

Tai chi can be hard on the knees if it is done incorrectly, which is to say without proper alignment between knees and feet and with undue emphasis placed on low postures rather than the spiral movements that open the kwa. I've seen people get stiff backs from engaging too robotic an affect while trying to do the form, and I've seen people suffer groin and hamstring pulls when doing vigorous weapons form training without sufficient warm-up. I can't say that those injuries are unique to tai chi, though. If we don't stretch and ease in to the practice, particularly as we age, we are asking for a reminder of the physical kind. Too, jumping ahead to exercises like fajing without waiting for the body to really relax can be a recipe for injury, as can using too heavy a weapon or one that is poorly balanced.

Can you tell me about 'The Sisterhood of the Bloody Tears'?

So you heard about that. I introduced a series of wall stretches that are fairly vigorous. Somewhere along the way they acquired that name.

While I was watching your class you mentioned that tai chi developed out of use of the halberd, can you clarify that for me?

Chen Wang Ting, the founding organizer of the art we now call tai chi ch'uan, was not only a recipient of Taoist training from his wife's family, the Li's, but also an observer of nature and a devotee of proven fighting techniques. Tai chi was originally a battlefield system, most emphatically not a practice for old people to commune with birds and nature in the park in

the morning. A popular and effect weapon of his time, and one it's still fun to watch being used in modern kung fu movies, is the halberd you mention, the so-called Spring and Autumn Broadsword or Guan Gung Dao. In the traditional Chen Family system this is a fourth level training tool. For reference, most serious students finish their lives in tai chi at third level, as "tai chi experts". There are many movements in the first open hand routine, Lao Da Jia, which are taken from the manipulation of the halberd on horseback, which required great relaxation, a horse-riding stance, great mobility of the shoulders, a strong and active dantian, and the ability to relax with a very heavy weapon in one's hand. Some of those early halberds were reputed to have weighed as much as 75 pounds, although in the Chen village the biggest ones I found weighed about 50 pounds. I have practiced with one that heavy but could the long and complex traditional form with it; some movements are just beyond me these days. Usually, I use a somewhat lighter one. The intricate footwork of the halberd form, by the way, was introduced later than the equestrian applications so that soldiers could use the weapon against cavalry and also practice it on foot.

Along with your tai chi, you are a very successful author. Do you see a relationship between your tai chi practice and writing?

My accountant would vigorously dispute your assertion, but thank you for the compliment. I suppose it's important to understand the natural cycles of energy and the need for rest in both tai chi ch'uan and writing. It's also important to feed the creative mind with insights into nature and the human condition, something Taoist philosophy provides in spades. During the last 15 years or so, I've devoted my writing of both fiction and non-fiction to the propagation of Taoist themes, memes, and ideas. On a more prosaic level, writing is tough on the body. Sitting is the new smoking, as I wrote on social media some years ago, and we must get up and move to keep our health. Practicing tai chi is a great antidote to the pitfalls and dangers of a sedentary lifestyle.

Any last thoughts?

I very much look forward to sharing my deep love of Taoist arts with your community!