

Devon Interview with Patrick A Kelly - 2011

Q. What is your understanding of how, and when, Tai Chi emerged?

There are really two versions of Tai Chi history – a written academic one and another which is passed down from teacher to pupil. My teacher (Master Huang Xingxian) had his history that he had been told by his teacher who had been told by his teacher and so on. I trust that one more because each of these people in the chain trained for a long time, 20 years or more with their teachers. Their teachers passed on their genuine knowledge that they had received from their own teachers.

Then there are the written historical records and these are incomplete really, because especially in older times the teacher never gave out the information - this was a type of secret information that was passed on from teacher to pupil. It's only in more modern times that the history has been written down and correlated between the different accounts. If you look at the historical records a few generations back there is a break, before which not much is known. The information that has passed down from teacher to student was more continuous and goes back to who is considered the (perhaps) mythical founder, Chang San-Feng, who is said to have lived about 750 years ago. So that information was passed on. My teacher received it from his teacher and so on, back as far as we know. I think this is more trustworthy information.

Q. What did they say about what happened at the time of Yang Lu Chan (1799-1872) for example?

Well, Yang Lu Chan learnt from a member of the Chen family. It is (according to the inner tradition) true that the best student of each Master receives the lineage – sometimes there are several best students, not just one. So the one (or few) best students receive a lineage. The alternate tradition that the family members receive the lineage is more like an outer tradition, not the inner one. Yang Lu Chan, as far as we know was the best student, substantially better than the other ones of his teacher and so the Tai Chi tradition passed on to Yang Lu Chan.

According to Master Ma Yu Liang, the present Chen style is not representative of the Tai Chi that the Chen people practised at the time of Yang Lu Chan. Master Ma said it was lost and recreated quite recently out of the Chen family Shaolin type of art.

Q. Does that explain why the Chen style we see these days looks quite a lot like the Shaolin styles?

Yes. Chen style Tai Chi is much closer to Shaolin than Tai Chi in fact. What happened, partly, was at the time of the communists taking over in China, they suppressed Tai Chi. Many of the best practitioners escaped to Hong Kong, Taiwan, America and Great Britain. The ones that remained in China were heavily repressed – prevented from practising or teaching, often imprisoned and sometimes killed. After a time the communists realised they'd made a mistake and they began to attempt to resurrect Tai Chi but because Yang and Wu styles had mostly escaped to the west they attempted to resurrect the Chen style - so that became the government sponsored art, the one that wasn't taught widely in the West. That's why the Chen style became popular. I knew Yang and Wu style people who switched to Chen simply because that was the only one they were allowed to practise.

Q. Within the lineage that you trained in, has Tai Chi changed at all since its early origins?

It is absolutely unknown how much it has changed in the last centuries. What we do know (once again this information came from personal conversations with Master Ma Yu Liang who lived in Shanghai for most of the 20th century) is that before his time the slow form didn't exist. The Yang style slow Tai Chi Form was created in the early part of the 20th century. Yang Cheng Fu created the Yang style Form and Wu Chien-Chuan created the Wu style. Before that the Forms were substantially different.

Q. There doesn't seem to be much consistency between different written accounts of Tai Chi history.

No, because there is not much good information about. Master Ma saw and knew, these old Tai Chi characters – Yang Cheng-Fu, Wu Chien-Chuan, Yang Chien-Hou, Yang Pan-Hou. Before this first-hand account of his, the history is really vague.

Q. How do you think the philosophies of China have influenced Tai Chi, for example Confucianism, Taoism, and Chan Buddhism, have they played a part in influencing Tai Chi?

They have played an inevitable part – they play a part in the whole of Chinese society. The Chinese mostly integrate those three quite smoothly in their life without feeling they are separate things. Typically they use the Confucianism for their external way of life, how they relate to their parents, their family, to society. The Buddhism has more of a religious nature, the Taoism has more of a philosophical nature and so they use the philosophy of Taoism, the religion of Buddhism and the social interaction coming from Confucianism. That philosophical pragmatism naturally infiltrated the Tai Chi teaching as well. Master Huang and Master Ma, for example, were members of an esoteric society that deliberately integrated the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist principles. They merged them without the feeling that people might get in the west that these are three separate things that should be kept separate.

Q. In the west most people say that Taoism has been the biggest influence on Tai Chi. Is that true?

Well yes I'd say that's true, Tai Chi is considered more of a Taoist art, while the Shaolin arts were practised in the Buddhist monasteries. Tai Chi, Hsing I, Ba Gua and a few other lesser known arts arose more amongst the Taoist teachers. Master Huang's teacher was known as a Taoist wandering monk. Buddhism has a later influence in China than Taoism. Taoism can be traced back to two and half thousand years ago, via Lao Tzu, so that is the original influence I suppose. It was when those two, Taoism and Buddhism, met, that Chan Buddhism appeared. Chan Buddhism later spread from China to Japan giving rise to Zen Buddhism.

Q. The Yin Yang symbol, which seems to come from Taoism – could you explain the general meaning of that symbol and its specific relevance to Tai Chi?

Tai Chi as a philosophical concept existed long before Tai Chi as a practice. Only in the last one or two hundred years was the name Tai Chi given to this system of practice. The general meaning of the Yin Yang symbol, put simply, is the intelligent interaction of opposing forces, rather than the unintelligent meeting and conflict between opposing forces. Speaking more specifically, it can apply to two people - the intelligent interaction between the two people. It can apply more generally in society to the large social pressure of groups or even cosmologically to the interaction of universes. It can also apply more particularly inside yourself, to two types of otherwise conflicting forces. For example, the emotions and the intellect or the body's urges and the mind's wishes. It might also apply to the struggle between external forces that drive a person connected to their outer life and the internal ones connected with inner evolution, enlightenment or immortality.

To add a little more it can also be seen in the interplay of awareness and intention in terms of the active and the passive, so this is looking at it more specifically not as two equal opposing forces but one permanently active and one permanently passive, together with the intelligent interplay of these two things. The intelligence is the neutralising force – that is not always seen. That intelligent interplay between awareness and intention within the mind is reflected also in the nervous system in that sensory neurons connect with the sensory apparatus of the body and the motor neurons connect with the motor apparatus, while interneurons process the information between the sensory neurons and motor neurons. So the mind itself is reflected in the body's nervous system which is a very specific example of the Yin Yang diagram.

Q. That sounds like it is also corroborated scientifically.

Yes the Tai Chi diagram is a very physically accurate description of what happens in the body.

Q. Could you explain the idea behind the training methods that make your Tai Chi an internal art?

What makes an art internal rather than external? Basically, when the mind is active and the body responds – rather than just the body movement taking place – then the art is an internal one. Conversely when people train only moving with awareness, the body performs the action while the consciousness is aware of the body moving. In this case the body is active and the mind is passive. It is really an external art if practised in that way.

Then there is the question about what level that intention, which initiates the movement, comes from. If the intention is quite an external one then you can barely say the art is internal. For example to imagine some picture in your mind, then attempt to use that to regulate the movement, would be a very superficial use of the mind. So the depth of the mind which produces the intention to move determines the degree to which the art is internal.

Q. Most people when they come to Tai Chi are doing so because their mind becomes relatively calm and they get into a nice relaxed mental state, they might experience a nice peaceful mind, relaxed state of mind, could you talk a little bit about how this can help (or hinder) the process of Tai Chi?

It is necessary in the early stages to learn to quieten the mind, calm the emotions and relax the body. This is external training, you move the body, smoothly, calmly, breathing gently and as a result, through listening to that smooth calm movement, the mind becomes quiet the emotions calm down, the body itself becomes relaxed. So this early training typically takes a few years - that brings about the base condition in which people can begin the internal training.

Q. Tai Chi is often portrayed as quite an effortless art, giving that peaceful feeling to the practitioner. Do you think that is a realistic portrayal of Tai Chi?

There are two aspects to the effortlessness. The external aspect is by removing the excess thoughts, the excess emotional activity and the excess bodily activity then the resulting gentle movements have a feeling of effortlessness about them – but this is only the external sense of effortlessness.

There is another meaning to it completely – that is, that if you go through the intensive training then after some decades perhaps you arrive at a state where, because of the very deep part of you becoming active, then you become able to deal with difficult external circumstances in a very effortless manner.

So the first effortlessness that appears is by making the external circumstances as easy as possible, being as quiet as possible, as calm as possible, moving as smoothly and slowly, then from those external easy conditions you achieve a type of peaceful state. Unfortunately when you later meet difficult external circumstances the effortlessness will disappear.

It's only later, with great intelligence from a very deep part of yourself, you're able to effortlessly deal with difficult external circumstances. This is a much more profound aspect of effortlessness that only comes from long training.

Q. Does that point to a deep integration of the practice of Tai Chi when that arises?

That is really the sign of a person's training having gone deep – that when they meet difficult external circumstances, physical pressure, emotional pressure, mental pressure they are able to deal with it in a highly intelligent, smooth and gentle manner.

Q. How important do you think is Tai Chi's connection to the past and what relevance the art has to life today?

The connection to the past is important not from some philosophical point of view but purely in the sense that each person who has trained deeply received their art from a previous person who trained in it deeply. The training goes back beyond the known history and although the art can be refined from generation to generation it still depends on that highly refined information and training that is passed on from the previous generations. It is not something that is just new and can be discovered easily in one generation. That is the importance to the past. The art is just as relevant to the modern situation as it was to each of the generations in the past.

Q. What emphasis did Master Huang place on some of the philosophical principles?

He placed a great emphasis on the philosophical principles, in terms of those three philosophies that we mentioned earlier – Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. He didn't differentiate between any of them, considering them all relevant teachings to Tai Chi.

As mentioned earlier he was a member of an esoteric society (as was Cheng Man-Ching and Yang Cheng-Fu) where they integrated the outer social practices of Confucianism, the slightly religious practices of Buddhism, (chanting and reading of sutras etc) and the internal energy circulation and transformation that is taught in Daoist meditation. He was initially taught Tai Chi in the Daoist tradition by his teacher who was a Daoist monk. That teacher taught him Chinese medicine, the Daoist fighting arts, the Daoist philosophy and taught him how to read the classics and old Daoist writings and so on - so that was an integral part of his learning and he attempted to pass that on to us.

Q. You talk about the Tai Chi classics. Could you explain what they are?

The Tai Chi classics are a set of writings, I can't give the exact dates – I can't even give the exact manuscripts because different teachings take a slightly different set of writings as the classics. But there is a core group of classics of perhaps five writings. These are writings from competent Tai Chi teachers over the last one or two hundred years that contain the basic principles of Tai Chi and people normally refer to anything that complies with (or fits in with) these particular writings as Tai Chi, and if it doesn't you can't really call it Tai Chi.

Q. During your life you have studied three main philosophies under three main teachers: Daoism under Master Huang, Yoga under Muni Maharaj and Sufism under Abdullah Dougan. How did you reconcile these different approaches within yourself when even, for example, studying two slightly different Tai Chi lineages can cause confusion or be problematical?

I was able to manage these three teachings, the Hindu Yogic teaching, the Daoist teaching and the Sufi teaching in the same way that my teacher was able to manage the Confucianism, the Buddhism and the Daoism. Specifically I looked for what was common to those three teachings, and I considered what was common was what was important. Conversely, what was specific to any one of those traditions was a layer that came from the society in which those traditions had arisen.

Those three very experienced people (who had learnt from various experienced people themselves) helped me to pick out from the traditions what were the really important core elements and what was just this layer that had been placed on top by history and by society itself.

Q. So going beyond the cultural appearance of those things?

Yes, that was the way. I looked beyond the cultural appearances because everything gets layered over by the culture of the time.

Q. Where you looking for what was personally relevant to you?

Not really, I didn't look at what was personally relevant - rather I tried to see what was the true essence of the teaching. For each of those teachers I learnt from, deep inside themselves there was no difference at all. They understood exactly the same thing. Each of them by the time of their deaths had very little of the cultural aspect left in their teaching. Earlier on however, their teaching was much more related to their culture. For example Master Huang when I first knew him was much more influenced by the Chinese culture - 20 years later his teaching had lost a lot of the Chinese culture. It was the same with the other teachers. Apart from that transformation, deeply inside themselves their teaching was the same.

Q. Were they seen within their own culture as being slightly unorthodox because of that?

Each one, as they developed gradually, was seen to be slightly unorthodox.

Q. Within the context of Tai Chi what do you think is possible within Tai Chi from the spiritual perspective?

In Buddhism they talk of enlightenment, in Daoism they talk of immortality, in Sufism they talk of annihilation. In Hindu related yoga traditions they talk of realisation. So to realise the self, to destroy the non-real self of the Sufism, to become immortal in the Daoist tradition, to become enlightened in the Buddhist tradition – all these are just ways of looking from the outside at the same thing that can take place within as a result of true training.

When this transformation takes place (whether you consider the person becomes filled with light or the immortal emptiness arises or the ego is de-constructed allowing the self to be realised) then that person can live within that very deep real part of themselves – they're no longer dependent upon the body and a type of immortality is achieved.

That process should be made clear as an on-going journey with no foreseeable end, but there are stages on that journey and one might reasonably be called by the modern term of "enlightenment" which may confer a type of immortality and can in another sense be called self-realisation. This stage is the stabilising of clear contact with the true part of yourself, your Real Self. Developed teachers consider that stage as a major step on the journey.

Q. It seems that these days there is a danger with the different spiritual traditions being offered as a commodity or there is now a new age industry, a spiritual industry that makes it hard for people to clearly discern what is genuinely going to help them or is going to be quite a superficial teaching. Could you offer any advice on that and how people can discern clearly between the false and the real in respect of that?

The problem arises inevitably for every person because people begin from a relatively superficial space. The superficial part of them, the brain thinking, reads/hears or sees some deeper teaching and translates it to fit into its own superficial structure. So something that is really deep and beyond the knowledge of the brain consciousness (which can only perceive through the external senses) becomes translated into mental concepts by the superficial part of a person which imagines that it understands those deep teachings, then perhaps begins to teach them, even sell them on to other people and so inevitably in every generation back as far as we know the same degenerative process has taken place.

A story I was told by a Buddhist teacher in relation to what I was teaching about this was that one of the Buddha's disciples after training for 20 years came to the Buddha and said I have done your meditations, I have done your religious practices, I have done the physical practises, for 20 years yet I seem to have no result. The Buddha replied that though you have followed everything I've said, everything you've done has been done with your everyday mind. You have translated all I have said into your everyday concepts, you have repeated the mantras with your everyday mind, you have done the meditation with the everyday mind – but the everyday mind can't lead to the Buddha mind.

This problem, the same problem from two and a half thousand years ago, continues today. People read, hear and see profoundly subtle teachings and quickly imagine they understand them. So the only way to avoid that incorrect track is to find somebody who has made something real out of the practise and can lead you into the depth of it.

Q. Could you say how this apparently soft art of Tai Chi could be used as a martial art effectively?

The saying is in Tai Chi the weak can overcome the strong, the slow can overcome the fast. The way that you can use Tai Chi to overcome the fast and the strong is by not opposing the fast and the strong. You mustn't oppose the strength but merge with the person's strength and be part of it. You have to move with it and then you can have an influence over it – the moment you attempt to block it or force it another direction then you meet the strength.

Specifically when a force comes you must move in the same direction as the force, then you can gently have an influence over it – in the same way as pulling on a string in a bull's nose rather than meeting the strength of the bull or forcing it to the side. Untrained people typically meet forces head on while people trained in the harder martial arts train to parry the force at 90 degrees, but they both still rely on the defender's strength. However even the smallest person can begin to lead the bull by its nose once the bull begins to advance. That's a saying in Tai Chi, 'to

lead the bull by its nose', and it's the key to dealing with the opponent's strength as having merged with the person's movement, you can then begin to have an intelligent influence over their force.

In terms of the slow overcoming the fast, then that is done through timing. It is not achieved simply through slow movement overcoming someone moving fast but it is achieved through operating consciously on a much deeper level. That depth allows you to perceive and understand the process in its early stages, so before the process is fully developed you see the earlier signs of it. This places you ahead of your opponent in time, then without needing great speed you can be prepared for the event as it reaches its fullness. So in truth timing can overcome speed and sensitivity or merging with the partner can overcome their strength. Using sensitive intelligence developed through true Tai Chi it is possible for a smaller, weaker person to definitely deal with the power from a larger, stronger, faster person.

Q. At first people can understand the principle of that, how long do you think to put that into practise?

To gradually learn the ability to overcome strength and speed with intelligent sensitivity is something that takes place over time. Initially there is a small ability to do so, and gradually that ability develops over decades, but even after one, two or three years a person should have some ability to deal with gross strength by merging and moving with it rather than opposing it or trying to force it in another direction. Of course after decades the skills should converge towards perfection.

Q. What advice would you give to somebody wishing to start Tai Chi?

If you wish to start Tai Chi, there are two things to do well. One is the process of learning, the other is the process of finding a good teacher or good teaching.

With the process of learning you have to start from the outside and work slowly inwards. You need to begin with exactly what you have. You have your body movements, your thoughts and your feelings – you need to begin with a process of refinement of all three of those. Typically you'd begin by removing the tensions of the body, that's to say relaxing, so to relax the body is generally considered the first stage of beginning to learn Tai Chi. This may take one, two or three years if you practice sufficiently to remove the excess outer tension from the body. In the process of doing this the associated emotional tension and over-activity of the brain will also be affected, will be reduced. So that is what people should look for initially.

In terms of finding someone who is able to teach you that, you have to apply your own intelligence, your own experience from life to look around. Out of the range of teachers, some know more, some know less, some are more suitable for yourself and some are less suitable for yourself. Ideally you should choose someone who has trained for a substantial length of time with their teacher who in turn had trained for a substantial length of time with their teacher who had trained for a substantial length of time etc, so that the very subtle elements of the teaching have been passed down through the generations and are available to you when you learn them.

Q. I was wondering if you could answer some more questions on the history of Tai Chi? It seems the more I look into this the less can be said for certain prior to the mid-19th century. According to the oral transmission of Tai Chi's history that you received was it true that Cheng Man Ching received teachings from Yang Cheng Fu or did he learn from one of Yang's students?

Cheng Man-Ching learnt directly from Yang Cheng-Fu – but of course he also learnt from the senior students. That's the way all schools work. He especially learnt the meditation from Zhang Qin-Lin, one of the most senior students of Yang Cheng-Fu (really a student of his father Yang Chien-Hou).

Q. What is known about Yang Lu-Chan and what did he learn from Chen Chan-Xing? Did he have other teachers?

I have no good information on Yang Lu-Chan and his teachers.

Q. Where did the Chen family learn their art from?

Most old teachers say the modern Chen style is mostly Chen village Shaolin – barely connected to the Tai Chi of Chen village in the past.

Q. What was the significance of Wang Tsung-Yueh?

There is only speculation as to exactly who he was.

Q. Master Huang was taught by a Taoist Sage, so was Master Huang mainly informed by this?

Master Huang's White Crane teacher was a Taoist monk, yes. He taught him White Crane, Chinese Medicine and Meditation.

Q. Can you tell me more about the spiritual interests of some of these teachers?

Cheng Man-Ching was in a Taoist 'sacred society' as was Yang Cheng-Fu we believe. Master Huang was also a member. Master Ma Yue-Liang was in that same one I believe (he talked to me about it). It still exists in Taiwan and Singapore. They teach the internal energy practices of Taoism, the mental attitudes of Buddhism and the social rules of Confucianism. I visited the organisation in Singapore a year or 2 ago. They have 3 temples - one dedicated to Taoism, one to Buddhism, one to Confucianism. Usually this information was kept fairly secret. Most students (of Yang, Cheng, Ma or Huang) are not told about it. It is information only for the 'inside the door students'.

Q. Did any of these teachers talk about Chang San-Feng?

Both Master Ma and Master Huang insisted it (Tai Chi) goes back to Chang San-Feng, but it was lost who was in the chain of transmission from that time to the present.

Q. You have very kindly sent me a copy of Master Huang's original lineage chart which goes back 6 or 7 generations. Can you tell me more about it?

Well, it is something that has never been published before – a secret lineage chart with Master Huang's inner students on the bottom line. The next line up shows all Cheng Man-Ching's inner students. Next up is Yang Cheng-Fu's etc. The lineage chart reveals the exact chain back about 6 or 7 generations. I was the only one allowed to hold a photograph of it and the original disappeared when Master Huang died. Unfortunately the resolution is not good enough to read, although it is perhaps enough just to know that such things exist. I have kept it private till now.

Q. Why was there so much secrecy around this chart?

The secrecy was because insincere people may attempt to use it for their own political purposes. Also in China secret police would have used it to persecute people and relatives of people.

Q. Some of the names appear to be scored out, why was this?

They are probably scored out due to death. I am not sure if a person can be expelled. Master Huang commented on this once saying although people couldn't be expelled, in his own mind some of those people were no longer in his inner school.

Interview conducted by Matthew Rochford, June 2011.