

Taiji – Daoist Principles in Practice.

THE DEATH OF A MASTER.

By Patrick A Kelly, October 1993

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In December 1992 ten thousand Taiji exponents felt the loss of their teacher, Master Huang Xingxiang (Huang Sheng-Shyan). He died in Fuzhou, China, the place of his birth 83 years earlier – having returned there a few months before his death after 43 years spent living and teaching in first Taiwan then later Singapore and Malaysia. He left behind approximately 35 independent schools throughout Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. Each of these schools has professional instructors and many have more than one hundred students. The first of these schools were formed over 30 years ago in Singapore and East Malaysia. I personally established a school in Auckland New Zealand in 1979 after 7 years training under Master Huang and his senior instructors and being accepted as one of his personal pupils in 1978.

Master Huang was well known and respected in Chinese martial arts circles around the world for the subtlety and strength of his internal power and his ability to use it in the Taiji pushing hands. Unfortunately few Westerners ever experienced his abilities first hand and many disbelieved his skill and felt the need to convince others of their disbelief with rational arguments founded on lack of personal experience. I have never met anybody who if lucky enough to practise with Master Huang, had any doubt of his capabilities. Some did argue that his 20 years of practising Fujian White Crane under some of the most famous masters of his time was a major factor in his later success at Taiji, and he never denied it, but while giving due credit to the three Daoist Sages who taught him White Crane from the age of 14, he always attributed his Taiji skill to the late Grand Master Cheng Man-Ching.

Master Huang met G. M. Cheng Man-Ching in 1949 in Taiwan. He knelt to and was accepted by him, the first Taiji exponent who had been able to deal comfortably with Master Huang's White Crane in a friendly test of skills. Master Ben Lo Pang Jang of San Francisco, a student of G. M. Cheng, was present in those early days and he told me that when Master Huang first attended G. M. Cheng's school he was already able to throw normal people 10 metres using his White Crane hands, but the relaxed students of G.M. Cheng could escape his push to some extent. Because of this at first G.M. Cheng refused to believe that Master Huang had not learnt Taiji somewhere before but then Master Huang showed G.M. Cheng the secret White Crane training manual handed down from his Daoist teachers containing on the first page the characters: Sung, Sung, Sung; meaning: Relax, Relax, Relax; and on the second: Yi, Yi, Yi; meaning: Mind, Mind, Mind. G.M. Cheng said he could see that the systems were very similar and that Master Huang had already achieved the first 10 years of Taiji through his training in White Crane. Master Huang stayed with G.M. Cheng until 1959 when at G.M. Cheng's injunction he emigrated to Singapore and later to Malaysia setting up home in Kuching on the island of Borneo. There he remained for most of the rest of his life, steadily practising, teaching, experimenting, developing his training system and opening new schools as well-trained instructors became available.

In later years he held centralised training sessions for serious students from within his schools and sometimes from within the G.M. Cheng tradition. He visited Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand regularly in his last few years while travelling constantly around his schools in Malaysia and Singapore. In his final years he considered moving to various countries and we arranged permanent residence for him in N.Z. but a small injury suffered in 1992 persuaded him to retire to China amongst his extended family and old friends and this was his last move. A few years earlier we had accompanied him on an emotional trip back to China for his first time in 40 years and although at the time he said that he would never return there the pull of his birth place in the end was too great. Master Huang was noticeable in his teaching in many ways but one which I as a foreigner experienced was his insistence that it was not a person's race (being Chinese) or the family lineage that had any influence on learning Taiji, but the person's attitude, practice method and the help of a good Master that led to success. He told me that in his experience neither the very rich nor the very poor would succeed in learning Taiji as they were both too concerned with money. Though he was comfortably well off in his later years, students at his schools paid only US\$15 to US\$20 per month for classes 2 to 3 times per week. When I was short of money he would charge nothing and I often saw him pay the expenses of students who otherwise could not have continued practising.

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In the old Chinese tradition he never demonstrated the full extent of his abilities especially the more internal ones, saying when we asked him why, that many people doubted the things he did show, so the chance of many people being able to appreciate his deeper skills was very small. He did on occasions in the presence of small numbers of his old students, show some of these things but on this subject I will for the same reason say no more. Let those who wish to doubt him do so and those with an open mind investigate further. Like all genuine teachers who teach from their own experience his teaching sometimes seemed opposite to other accepted methods but the results always spoke for themselves. In the Taiji-form, while most stressed the postures themselves, he stressed the changes that occur in moving from one posture to another and in later years said the training method of holding postures went against the principle of constant change and could teach bad habits and interfere with the free flow of Qi (chi) (though holding postures also produces many good effects and he used it extensively in his younger days).

I spent many long hours over the space of 15 years, often in the middle of the night, being thrown by him and he said that in this time he was "passing me the Taiji-jin (Taiji relaxed force)". By the technique of listening in the body to the sensations produced by the flow of his Taiji-jin, slowly but surely my own body began to understand and reproduce the processes involved. Though the student might come to understand these things by their own investigations, this process of energy transmission was most direct and sure and a most important part of the traditional student-teacher relationship. Fortunately for myself as the only Western student among the 40 or 50 students of his inner school he said that he counted on me to spread the Taiji that he was teaching to the Western World and for this reason possibly passed on to me a lot more than I personally had earned.

Taiji tuishou (pushing hands) was certainly his favourite practice and entertainment. The more subtle and skilful you could be against him the more he would laugh and return the compliment. When people insisted on relying on the external factors of strength and speed, substituting the desire to win for the opportunity to learn, their experience would be a short one. Throughout the 70 years over which he developed his skills he constantly sought to refine and internalise them through hours of daily practise and original thought. Over the last 20 years of his life I saw the physical movements he used being withdrawn from his legs and arms then being concentrated and minimised within the centre of his body until at the last it would appear to all but the most experienced eye that he would yield neutralise and issue with no visible changes. This is the stage of pure mind intention (Yi) and all the genuine internal masters have this to some degree. But over the same time a more important refinement was taking place unnoticed by most but he attempted to explain it on occasions. It involved removing the intention (Yi) from the process of issuing energy so that the issuing phase appeared naturally and spontaneously during the sinking and letting go of the mind with the result that it felt both to his mind and the others involved that the receivers of his energy threw themselves. This paralleled the Daoist ideal in daily life of doing nothing yet all things still being done (not to be confused with the elementary psychological method of splitting ones attention and simultaneously doing and observing).

Such was his humour that once he lined us all up and had us marching on the spot and said that was what all people were doing each day, marching towards their own death. Then he would pull a few people out and move them farther back down the line explaining that these were people who practised Taiji and that while nobody could stop marching towards their death they could move a little farther back down the queue. He said that while there were hundreds of books available on Taiji most of them were just the same information going from book to book with very little original experience. He asked each person to go back to first principles and study nature and the animals to understand and rediscover the Taiji principles for ourselves as the old masters who founded and developed Taiji had done in their time. This he had done for himself over the years and he often talked about the results of his own studies. He felt that Taiji was a living teaching and that it must grow within each person rather than become stagnant and fixed. He also acknowledged the individual contribution of all genuine practitioners of Taiji whatever their level. Knowing that I was involved in other internal disciplines simultaneously he advised that all teachers have their strengths and their weakness' and to make sure that I learnt only from each ones strong points – as he had done himself over his lifetime. This was the open-mindedness that held me and so many others to him while at the same time leaving us free to find our own path.

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Some of his old Daoist sayings that I remember and that characterised his life are:

When you drink the water, remember the person who dug the well.

When you water the plant you water the roots and the flower will appear by itself.

Don't be content with being the student of a successful Master; you must make a success of your own practice.

It is all in the Taiji Form.

If I teach and you don't practice, we are both wasting our time.

Learn less and practice more.

All the principles are in the Taiji (Yin/Yang) Diagram.

The most important concept in Taiji is change.

The Universe is a big Taiji; inside us is a small Taiji.

When assessing people's Taiji I look 30% at their body and 70% at their psychology.

Taiji is not important; the Dao is important.

Some people think the pushing hands is all technique but they do not understand that unless they are an upright and principled person they will never get passed a certain level.

All Taiji practitioners are brothers and sisters.

Even after 70 years of struggle things do not get easy; it still requires a daily effort to live a worthwhile and successful life.

For Taiji to be successful it must become relaxed and natural.