

Pushed to the Limit:

# One Hundred Years of Traditional Taiji Training

*A conversation with Master Dong Zeng Chen*

*This book grew out of a conversation between Master Dong Zeng Chen, his disciple Chip Ellis and Karl Chang, a longtime student of Dong style Taijiquan who acted as translator. Karl began his studies of Taiji with Grandmaster Dong Fu Ling in 1972 and often acted as his translator. His fluency as a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese combined with his thorough understanding of the principles of Taiji made him the perfect translator for this discussion of Master Dong Zeng Chen's early training as a third-generation Taiji master.*

*All of us felt a certain urgency about recording this information, as there are very few people alive today who received this sort of traditional training passed down in a direct lineage. Certainly, there will be fewer still in the future. These words represent an almost verbatim translation of over four hours of taped conversation.*

I grew up surrounded by people who had devoted their lives to the martial arts. My home town in Hebei Province, Xingtai Territory, Xin Prefecture has been recognized for generations throughout China for its high concentration of martial artists. Every village had martial arts classes, with many different styles being taught. The various schools practiced separately but all of them got together for Chinese New Year celebrations. They demonstrated for each other, and sometimes one school boasted that their style was better than some other style, which resulted in a fighting demonstration.

These contests involved both internal and external styles. The external hard schools used knives and spears and maces against each other. Sometimes the contest would get out of hand and spill over into the audience, like rugby today. Usually there were no deaths, but a lot of people got hurt. This kind of contest was still going on after I was born and during my early childhood.

The Dong family Taiji history began with my grandfather, Dong Ying Jie, who was a top disciple of Yang Cheng Fu. For ten years, he traveled with Yang Cheng Fu throughout China, teaching the art of Taiji to the people and taking on challenges on behalf of the Yang school. In those days, the teaching was very formal. Teachers commanded a great deal of respect. When my grandfather began teaching on his own, he was treated with

the same respect. His students were not allowed to talk; they had to listen with their heads down and do whatever their teacher said, with no questions. When Yang Cheng Fu taught he gave his heavy full-length brocade coat to my grandfather to hold. Dong Ying Jie would stand like a coatrack, with the coat over his arm, in Peng posture, for two hours while Master Yang instructed. After many years, his Peng was incredibly strong.

Both my uncle, Dong Jun Ling and my father, Dong Fu Ling learned Taiji from my grandfather at our home in Hebei Province. In 1948, my father and his three brothers left Hebei for Hong Kong in order to escape the civil war. After the liberation, in 1950, my uncles came back to Hebei but my father stayed on in Hong Kong.

Even before I began to be formally taught Taiji, I would follow my father's disciples around and practice with them. All my friends were doing the same thing; many of their fathers were masters too. In 1956, when I was nine years old, my uncle began to teach me, or rather to re-teach me. At that time, I knew the whole Slow Set but had never had any formal corrections. Shortly after my uncle began to teach us, he left for Hong Kong, where my father Dong Fu Ling was living.

From 1956 to 1959, I practiced Taiji under the supervision of Mr. Wu Bao Yin, a disciple of my

grandfather. After learning a little from my uncle, my Taiji wasn't too good. I wasn't satisfied. My uncle suggested that I practice with Mr. Wu while he was gone.

Mr. Wu started learning Taiji very late in his life, at age 30. Most people in my village learned when they were young. But his energy was very soft, so soft that even very strong people could not push him. He seemed to disappear when he was pushed; there was nothing there. His softness was very effective. This was an organized class of ten people. We practiced two to three hours every night, after dinner, unless it was raining or snowing or really bad weather. Classes were held outdoors in a field on nights when the moon was out. Even in the dead of winter, we practiced outdoors if there was a moon. If there was no moon, then we practiced indoors in a hall by candlelight. There was no electricity in our town at that time. Inside the houses, the rooms were very small and you could hardly stand up. The room set aside for Taiji in the Wu family house was about 12 feet by 30 feet, not enough space for ten people to practice.

When I first started doing Taiji outside in the winter, it was pretty cold. But it didn't take long before I could see steam rising from my hands as I practiced, even on the coldest nights. We would start classes about six or seven PM. Sometimes they would go on until eleven or twelve PM., depending on the interest shown. Times were not set. Some people left early and went home to practice, others stayed. While we practiced, Mr. Wu told stories. That kept us kids really interested. There was no T.V, no radio, few books then. There was nothing else to do. The stories really motivated us. If you missed a day, you missed an installment in the story. Taiji became entertainment; we were entertained and learned at the same time.

In the winter of 1959 my uncle Jun Ling began to teach us seriously. I was twelve years old at that time. My uncle was very particular about who he taught. He only had a total of ten students in his whole life, and only one true disciple. He chose students who matched his own personality; He didn't want to teach anyone who had a

prominent position in the town, nor any rich people. If you talked a lot, he didn't want to teach you. He believed that disciples should keep what they know to themselves. My own philosophy is very different: I believe that the teachings should be spread around so that the art doesn't die out.

At this point in time, when I was learning from him, he was teaching just his son and me. We mostly practiced outdoors in our family compound on a homemade concrete surface. Indoors there were a lot of family members and not too much space. Practice was usually at night, sometimes during the day. Now that my uncle was back, Mr. Wu began coming to our house to practice.

At first, my uncle just corrected my moves. I tried the corrections and they worked better. As I got better, I became more serious. After Taiji practice, I could jump further, run faster, and I felt better. It felt really good and so I kept doing it, with no thoughts of the future or of becoming a teacher.

My uncle and I practiced often, day and night. There was a long rest period at school after lunch, from 11 A.M. to 1 PM. in the winter. I would practice then, at home. I never took a nap or slept very much at night because I felt so good from doing Taiji that there was no need for sleep.

In summer, our area was very hot and no one did very much at all because of the heat. The rest period from school in the summer lasted until 3 PM. I had been told that I should practice in the hottest time of the day in the hottest place; I took that seriously, so I would practice in midday in the summer. It was very hot when I started, too hot to stand in the sun for more than a few minutes, but doing Taiji actually cooled me down. I could practice gong fu in the hot sun for one or two hours, but when I stopped, it was too hot to stand there. In the old days, it was believed that the harder the practice, the better the practice. Teachers tried to push you to the limit. They didn't force us to do anything, they just explained why it was better to practice hard. We were convinced, so this is how we practiced.

At age nine to twelve, I was so energetic that I would jump off a 12-foot high roof and land on

the ground. The family restaurant had tables about one meter high, and after the restaurant closed, I would jump from the floor to the tabletop and then down and up onto the next table, all over the restaurant. We put a bowl of water on the table and the goal was to jump on the table without spilling the water. If you spilled the water, you lost the game. You had to jump high and land softly. I started by pushing off with both legs and later could do it with one leg. Even our games were aimed at improving our gong fu.

Learning from my uncle involved very hard, difficult practice. He taught us step by step, one move at a time. It was very painful at times. We went into extraordinary detail on every move. We talked about every single fragment and how they fit together. There were almost one hundred steps for every move. Then afterwards he smoothed them all out until they flowed. Sometimes we would practice for seven or eight hours, sometimes only thirty minutes. At this point, I had been practicing almost every day for three years. But Mr. Wu never went into this kind of detail. It felt totally different doing it this way with my uncle.

When family members are being taught, the teaching is much harsher, much more critical. The teaching of outsiders tended to be much more polite. The standards were different if you were part of the family. Once one became a disciple, then you were treated more like a family member. The master is much harder on you.

After Mr. Wu learned from my grandfather, Dong Ying Jie was gone from our village for long periods of time. His students started teaching on their own. My grandfather came back and was testing their Tui Shou skills. One student was having a really hard time rooting himself. My grandfather would stick and follow and the student got uprooted and sent flying time after time. Every time the student pushed, Dong Ying Jie would go back with him; it was like going down the stairs backwards. Once you take the step, you have to keep going. Mr Wu said to the student, "Why are you so stupid? why do you follow him?"

My grandfather overheard Mr Wu and started to push hands with him. He grabbed Mr Wu's hand and pushed him between two Chinese wine jugs. These ceramic jugs are really huge, with a small top and bottom and a very wide middle. My grandfather pushed him right into the small opening between the bottoms of two jugs. His head went through but his shoulders got stuck and he had to be pulled out. Dong Ying Jie did this three times. Each time he pushed Mr Wu right into that small hole.

My uncle was as strict with us as my grandfather had been on his disciples. As we practiced, whenever I felt like moving, like in the middle of Single Whip, my uncle would tell me to stop. When I felt like stopping, he would make me move. He would look for the most difficult part of the move and then make me hold it at that point, to make me get really good at it. That is one of the hardest things to do, to not move when you feel like moving. It breaks the flow. But it teaches endurance and what the Chinese call "nien", the ability to withstand hardship.

At this level of detail, we worked on each move until it was correct. We could not go on to the next move until the one before it was correct. When we felt impatient, he would teach us patience by making us go over and over the same move. Then when you got really tired and stopped caring about learning whatever came next, he would surprise us by going on to the next move. You went on to the next step only when you were judged ready, not when you want to. There is a big difference. There is a Chinese saying, "When the water comes, the dam will be created." It is a very different mentality than in the West.

I practiced only the Slow Set until I was good at it, which took three years. It was just my cousin and me learning this way. At the end of three years, in 1962, I began to learn Tui Shou [Push Hands]. Sometimes my grandfather's disciples would come around, and then we would do Push Hands with them. In the beginning, we were told only about relaxing the body and keeping it straight, not how to push. We were not supposed to do any pushing, just circles for two years, every

night, just me and my uncle's son. I would also push hands with Mr. Wu, if he was there, or with my uncle. I started out with Peng Lu Ji An , two-handed Push Hands, right away.

After two years of Push Hands circles, Mr. Li [Li Qing Shan], who was an expert in hard style Shaolin gong fu came to see what I had learned. Though he was never officially my teacher, my uncle allowed me to learn a few things from him when he came to our house, about once a month. It was Mr. Li who taught me Fa Jing, how to deliver energy. He was a little bantam of a man, but he was incredibly fast and his energy was unstoppable; he was an expert at Fa Jing. He was like a mountain when he moved. There was no way to divert him. Even though it is said that you can divert one thousand pounds with four ounces, there is a point where, if the force is great enough, there is no way to deflect it. All you could do was get out of his way.

He could break a Chinese tombstone with his fist. These tombstones were made of slate, three feet by five feet by eight inches thick. He could break one in half. He once took some Chinese herbal medicines that made you much stronger and he was afraid of really hurting someone, so he went to a graveyard to test his strength. Other people went with him and saw him break the tombstone, so this wasn't just a story.

Much later, at age 70, I saw him demolish my uncle's front gate with one hand. He was supposed to be a judge at a gong fu contest and was being mocked by some of the kids my age for being too old to be a judge. To prove his capabilities, he hit my uncle's front door, which was made of wood two inches thick which was laminated in three different directions and then nailed together. The gate was actually two doors which opened in the center. With one continuous motion, he delivered first a forehand and then a backhand strike, with so much internal energy that both doors were completely shattered. At age seventy! It left me completely speechless. The other kids fell into a stunned, awestruck silence. No one could argue with Mr Li's abilities. He never married; he devoted his entire life to

the martial arts. His father was a master martial artist also.

About this time I began to learn Hua Jing, or how to take energy and change it, from my uncle. When you learn to change your shape, then you can change the force coming at you, or divert the strength of the force. I began to learn Fa Jing and Hua Jing from my uncle. One of us would push and the other would divert. We learned in a flowing way, no fixed form at all. It was whenever the opportunity arose, within the context of the Tui Shou practice, but only with Peng Lu Ji An, never with Tsai Lieh Jou Kao.

My uncle was a real purist in his teaching of Taiji. I was never allowed to read any books about Taiji other than family writings, just the Red Book [Principles of Taijiquan, written by Dong Ying Jie]. I read that book many times. Each time that I read it, I saw something else. I understood it differently as my knowledge increased. The deeper I went, the more there was to it. There was no end.

From the time that I first began seriously studying Taiji in 1959, there was no time when my practice stopped or was interrupted, even during the Cultural Revolution. In the beginning, my uncle didn't want me to learn any other martial art. But later, I practiced with people who knew other forms, and we never held back. My most intense practice period was from age sixteen to age twenty-seven. Outside of class, when I practiced with my friends, we would tell each other not to pull our punches, and to hit anywhere on the body. In the beginning it hurt when you got hit, but later it didn't hurt anymore. At this time, there was a lot of Qi Gong practice, so the force of the hit was transformed by the Qi Gong.

By this time, my Push Hands skills had reached a point where none of my uncle's other students could beat me. I began to check out other schools and styles of martial arts, and to test my skills against them. Most people teach Taiji for health, so it is useless as a self defense or for gong fu. Many teach it as a totally relaxed form. But if you want to use Taiji as a martial art, you have to be both hard and soft; you have to know how to use

both. Even if you learn it as a martial art, with all of the applications, if you don't practice it against someone regularly, then it is still useless as a martial art.

At age 27, I left my village and began teaching in Gong Fu Association classes and classes sponsored by the prefectural government. I traveled a lot, spending two weeks at a time in each place. Top martial arts experts from all over the country invited me to visit with them. I learned a little from each one. I taught every day when I was away, three weeks out of every month. The classes were two hours long, in the morning before work began. The classes were sponsored by the government and were held in public squares. I was paid by the government, but also by the students themselves, although it was not required. They gave ten percent of their income for my teaching. It was what the Chinese call "the red envelope", a token of appreciation. They valued what Taiji did for their health and their spirit.

Outside of China, I checked out many other schools. In Singapore, I tried out a lot of external Chinese schools. Most of it was friendly sparring. The hard forms are all fully committed; once they start a move, they can't pull back or stop. Not like Taiji. In the hard forms, it is only the part that is striking that is committed. In Taiji, it is the whole body, from the leg up, once you decide to strike. The jing is different. When you punch in hard form, you can bruise someone; with Taiji, you can throw your opponent thirty feet. The jing comes from the whole body; it is entirely different from the hard styles. Taiji is both soft and hard. You

have to start with soft, then go hard, which gives a tremendous burst of energy.

I have met almost all of the modern Taiji masters and observed the differences in their styles. Chen style has good explosive energy, and the old Wu style is very powerful, very strong. But none of the other styles has the rooting of the Yang style. I feel that the Yang style fits the general public better than any other style. It makes the legs really strong because you step much more slowly than other styles. The steps of the Yang style are neither big nor small; an average-size step has the most power behind it.

There is a story about Master Liu, who was a very small man, being challenged by another school in front of a big crowd. He threw his opponent out of the circle, which was surrounded by spectators standing five deep. The other man went flying so hard and fast that he shot through all five layers of onlookers as though he had been fired from a cannon. Bystanders flew in all directions. Sometimes the Yang style is so powerful that you can't believe it.

You think that you could never have that kind of power, but you can. No matter whether you are big or small, everyone can get good. It is important to have a very good teacher to watch you, to point out your strengths and weaknesses.

There are three things necessary to succeed at Taiji: You must have confidence that you will benefit. You must have the patience to learn. And finally: you must be persistent, which means constant daily practice, with no lapses.

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