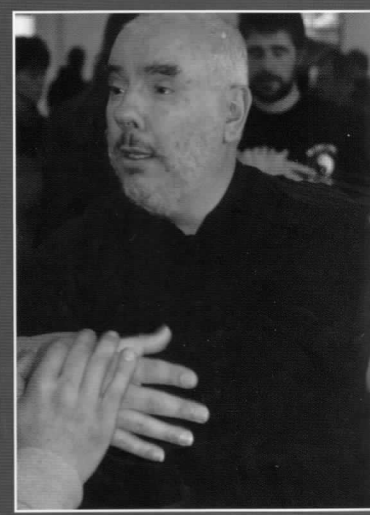
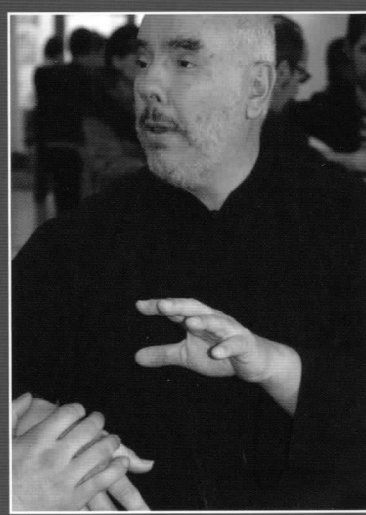
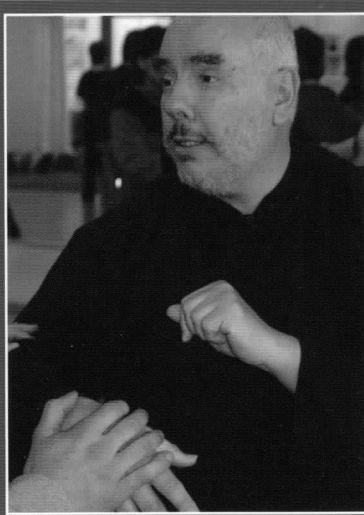
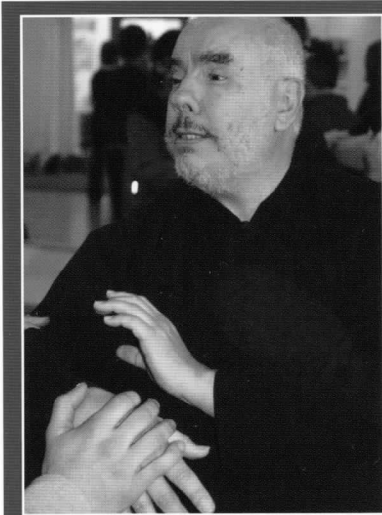


an interview with

# FERNANDO C



**How did you come to learn Tai Chi Chuan?**

Taijiquan came into my life a little "accidentally": I was studying physics at university, but when there was political unrest I had to stop for a while... and because I had always wanted to do a martial art, I started studying Karate under Jorge Casella. One day he introduced us to a Chinese master, Ma Tsun-Kuen. First I said to myself, "What's this then, another martial art?", but when I saw the way he could control us with two fingers (he was in his 60's), then I realised that's what I want to do!" I had to work really hard, because he had only a small group of students and they had started before me. For me it seemed easy to learn the martial art postures as everything seemed very natural - I soon felt more 'comfortable': this went straight to the inside, it was as if there weren't any 'barriers'. It found it more difficult to cultivate relaxation and to learn the names of the postures in Chinese...

Initially Ma didn't really want to teach, but the Chinese ambassador in Argentina told him he had to help spread Chinese culture. However, after 1<sup>1/2</sup> years he no longer wanted to continue teaching. Despite this we continued to train (often more than 6 hours a day) visiting him regularly to get advice. After 3<sup>1/2</sup> years he told us he would accept us as students; it was like "entering the family", but with no special Taoist ceremony - it wasn't as strict as I think; he had adapted to Western culture and our relationship was somewhere between these two poles. This required a great commitment on our part, he became like our 'father' and we felt obliged to him in certain ways. We really felt that he was teaching us from the heart, and thus we responded equally with our hearts.

So we set up a school (which allowed us to train with partners, important for practice and for learning), and he visited us once a month to see the class. I studied with him for 20 years, from March 1973 to March 1993, when he died. If you were to compare abilities... Well, I'm still very

'little', but I did have the time to learn something of the 'internals', and I continue to grow and to teach myself...

**How did your Master gain his knowledge of Tai Chi Chuan?**

In his case, too, you could call it 'coincidence', or maybe 'destiny' would be better: it was during the time when he was governor of a province, during the war against Japan, I think. He had gained plenty of honour and status, but felt the need to change his life... One day, quite unexpectedly, his people brought him an outlandishly-dressed man whom they had arrested because he had a "strange manner". Actually this person should have been taken to the police, and then Master Ma would never have met him... But for some reason they took him to the governor! And it turned out that this man was an authentic Taoist.... and so my Master became his pupil...

**What were his teaching methods like and how do yours compare?**

He just showed the postures two or three times and then we had to practice them. This could take weeks or even longer... Then we showed him and if we had practiced well he would give us an upgrade or a correction or a tip to continue the practice. We also investigated different uses of the posture or applications with our 'tai chi brothers' in practice. Verbal explanations were kept to a minimum during class but afterwards, during meals, he would tell a 'Chinese tale' or give some philosophical or technical explanation about the theme we were practicing (this means that the 'social' aspects were as important as the 'official training' in the learning process).

For a long time I felt I was working on a puzzle called "Tai Chi Chuan" without having any overall picture of what it was that would help me in the challenge of finishing it. At that time there were no books or other information available, and of course no Internet!! Then, I don't know how, a clearer picture began to form in my mind,

coming from somewhere inside me as if my body movements were painting it... This became clearer and clearer as time and continuing practice allowed my body to be more precise and natural, - as it began to 'embody the art', as one might say.

In my current teaching I combine the Chinese and 'western' approaches. I am prepared to show postures more than two or three times (!) and I tend to give more corrections, feedback and advice to my students. I myself come from a non-Chinese culture and I teach in a non-Chinese culture, and the school curriculum is quite clearly structured. But I don't attempt to 'spoon feed' my students either. Each person has to work and research for themselves, practice with partners and develop the art. The curriculum provides the framework, but within this framework a degree of 'creative chaos' can also be useful!

**What in your opinion is the essence of Tai Chi Chuan as a martial art, and in what way is Tai Chi Chuan different from, or similar to, other martial arts and martial sports?**

This essence involves several things. The ability to sense and interpret the energetic intentions of the opponent through his tiny and/or subtle changes of body weight and balance, his concentration of energy (Qi) prior to releasing it, and a lot of other useful information. This combines with the ability to adjust the equilibrium of one's own body and mind to any external change of pressure ("a feather cannot be added..." and so forth, as the Classics say). This all happens naturally and without rational or conscious thought, just as a large beach ball floating in the water can naturally adjust and answer to your efforts to push it under water.

No matter the force or speed of the attacking action, a natural and appropriate answer arises: absorbing the incoming force, deflecting it or bouncing it out with the elastic force inherent in the nature of the "balloon".

Many, but not all, teachers of Tai Chi Chuan assign much importance to the training method of Tuishou or “pushing hands”. However, in practice one sees many different interpretations and practices of Tuishou. How do you view all these variations, and what method(s) of Tuishou does your school apply?

**Prompted by what I have seen until now, I can list at least four different approaches to, or interpretations of, Tuishou:**

**“SENSING HANDS”.**

Here, it seems, it’s all about making your opponent move one or both of his feet by pushing and pulling him. This is done in a way that avoids any hardness or speed, and also without any regard for technique or the part of the body being pushed, both in defence and attack. The task of the defender is apparently to follow the line of the attack by giving way to the incoming force as softly as possible. This is done by pulling back, by leaning, bending or by twisting the body, at the same time maintaining a strong fixed base and keeping this at all costs. Special rules and ‘kindness’ play an important role in this method.

**“TOURNAMENT TUISHOU”.**

Rules (though different in part to the rules of “sensing hands”) are of utmost importance here and so this kind of Tuishou is defined by what you can or cannot do. Normally the target is the body above the hips and below the neck and the arms, while the aim is to make the opponent move his foot by using a strong and fast push or pull. There is relatively little regard for technique, both in defensive and offensive terms.

**“WRESTLING TUISHOU”.**

This involves low stances, with the body leaning a forward little similar to a wrestler’s posture, with hands on the opponent’s arms. The method is then to apply strong pulling and pushing in order to get the opponent out of balance with no real regard for one’s own stability. The opponents lock together and the strongest and/or most cunning person usually prevails. The option or danger of strikes is not usually considered.

**D) “BOXING TUISHOU”.**

This involves slightly higher, comfortable stances that allow one to change stance, angles of attack or to step in any direction, quickly with stability. The ‘rules’ are the Tai Chi principles. Form postures must materialize in both attack and in defence, otherwise the action is ‘wrong’ and requires correction. The force and speed of actions can vary, but in each case these are agreed by the partners (the idea of partnership is of utmost importance here, even if the opponents might seem to be fighting). Of course, ‘boxing’ does not rule out other techniques such as throws and locks.

Our school focuses on the latter approach when practicing Tuishou, because we find it leads to better development and because it creates the best interplay with Tai Chi Chuan as a whole, also including form practice and self-defence.

The central practice here is “dong jin”, meaning the process of understanding the opponent’s energy: intention, direction, speed, etc. This involves softness in order to connect, circularity in order to return the energy back to the opponent, accuracy in order to control and to deliver the attack. So basically all the terms one hears or reads regarding Tuishou must be in there, otherwise the practice becomes just a “confusing struggle” and as good as worthless. Tuishou is NOT fighting, it is NOT about ‘winning’ in that moment, but is instead a practice with its principal focus on “dong jin”.

**What about forms, and their relationship to other areas of Tai Chi Chuan? Bruce Lee famously said that classical forms in martial arts were a waste of time or even counterproductive. Some of the Tai Chi practitioners say that forms are simply a workout that have little relationship to anything one should do in a ‘fighting situation’ whilst others say that one needs only to train forms correctly, and to do Tuishou, in order to defend oneself. What, in your view, is the role of forms in Tai Chi Chuan or at least within your own school?**

Forms are the “school’s encyclopedia”. Of course, not all the entries or terms in an encyclopedia are useful nowadays, but the knowledge is still there for people to use and refer to. The postures and – just as importantly – the transitions in a form, if practiced with the correct body mechanics and mindset, can influence and guide ‘spontaneous’ movements in spontaneous situations. Many mistakes in Tuishou and other situations can be self-corrected if one asks oneself “is the movement I am doing now compatible with my form?”. ‘Compatible’ does not mean identical, of course – one can constantly invent ‘new’ postures, but the movement principles and mechanics must be maintained.

For normal people, learning an art means first getting to grips with the basics: in music, for instance, this means playing endless scales, practicing finger exercises and so on. Someone like Mozart didn’t need that... but how many Mozarts are there? Bruce Lee may have been on the same level... he didn’t need forms and didn’t even understand why others, who are less gifted, may need them. Besides this, a martial art like Tai Chi Chuan is not based on optimizing ‘instinctive’ reflexes and ways of moving but on learning new reactions and ways of moving, and thus on creating new reflexes. And here, forms and basic exercises can be very helpful. This is in contrast to other types of fighting methods which are indeed based on ‘instinctive’ responses. On the other hand, if you overestimate the practice of

forms and never liberate yourself from them you will never become an Artist, that is, a free creator. A fighting situation is, by definition, completely free and unpredictable, so you only can be ‘safe’ if you are also free: an ‘Artist’ of the martial.

Within our school all the ‘components’ of the curriculum are in balance and complement each other. They must be practiced in this way to maximize the chance of making the ‘quantum jump’ from a good or, very good performer into an Artist.

**Aside from your structured training for your own students what do you generally work on when teaching ‘open’ workshops?**

I usually focus on three issues. Firstly, the difference between the act of ‘resisting’ incoming force and using “peng jin”, Secondly, how to ‘absorb’ by leading away the incoming force (“lu jin”). And finally the way that ‘form and function’ must work together, i.e. the connection between ‘forms’ in the broader sense and free play.

My teaching follows the Tai Chi Chuan principles insofar as I can express them with my body and my mind. So in theory, students of any martially oriented Tai Chi Chuan school can learn something in these workshops, provided they can ‘translate’ the techniques and the experiences to their own technical environment and practice accordingly.

With ‘external’ martial artists, very few of them have had the opportunity to experience a genuine ‘Tai Chi way’ of defending and counterattacking, so they will benefit by ‘learning’ that contracting one’s muscles and smashing the incoming force (or alternatively ducking out of the way) is not the only way of defending oneself successfully. They can also experience that by practicing ‘slow’ you can become really ‘fast’ and that by practicing ‘soft’ you can strike really ‘hard’.

**In your view of Tai Chi Chuan, how do the areas of martial art, health cultivation and ‘practical philosophy’ relate to each other. What benefits for life do you think that Tai Chi Chuan can provide?**

The ‘Martial’ is the essence, the way: it means facing the ‘enemy’, facing ‘ourselves’; not running away, not just talking about things, and also not getting involved in senseless struggle, but instead developing practical solutions.

“Health cultivation” comprises a vast area and here I would prefer to mention just a few general ideas. The more direct beneficial influence of Tai Chi Chuan on joints, muscles, organs etc. is quite well known and I won’t examine this in detail here.

My master Ma Tsun-kuen used to say “Tai chi chuan is philosophy that permeates in through our body”. This special philosophy is based on the idea that the universe is composed by two essential “opposite/complementary” forces, i.e. yin and yang, and we are looking for the dynamic equilibrium between them.

If we achieve this equilibrium, then the many large and small ‘changes’ that life brings can pass through us without creating opposition or internal conflict. To use another image, it allows us to ‘take the wave’ as surfers do.

This improved mental and emotional balance, and the ability to respond positively to change and to conflict, also has a positive effect on our physical health: many physical complaints in many different ‘levels’ of the body are caused or aggravated by mental and emotional tension. By removing this internal tension, we benefit both physically and mentally and can better realize our true potential and individuality.