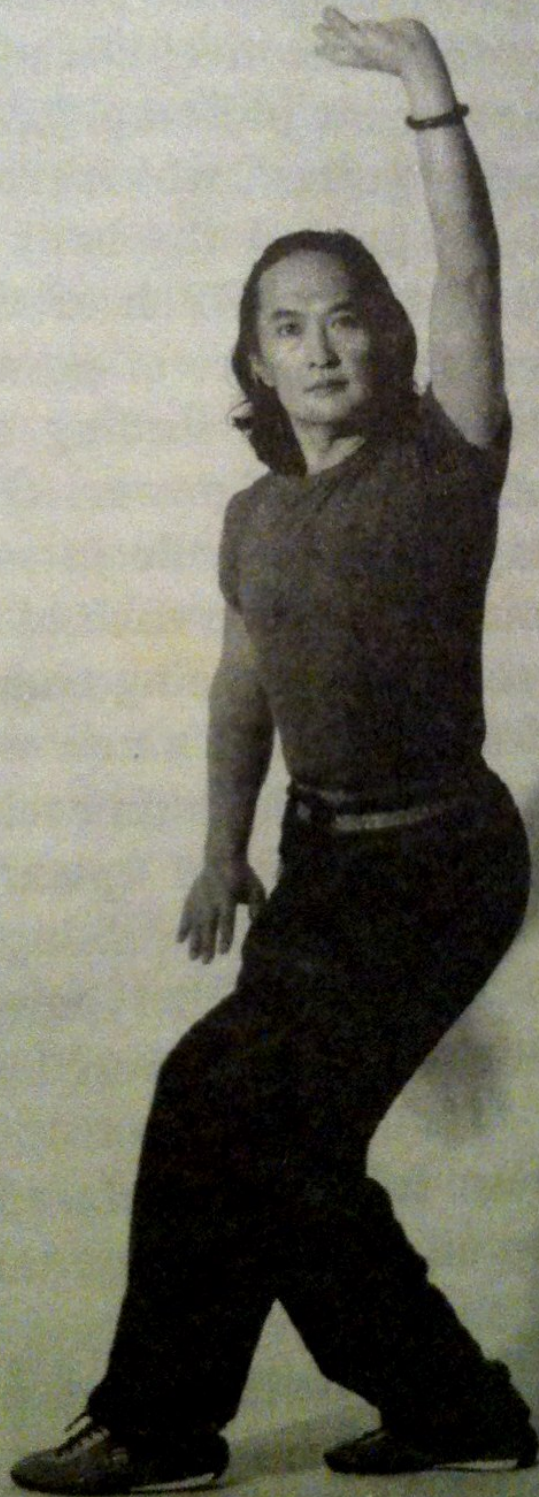


7. Master of the Eight Fighting Trigrams

After some time in Taiwan I was introduced to He Jing Han (pronounced Her), a youthful looking adept of Yin Fu style Baguaquan. His own teacher Gong Bao Zhai had been a close disciple of Yin's disciple Gong Bao Tian, and all the representatives of the lineage stressed the deep philosophy which underlies this unique art. One of its special skills is the cultivation of qing-gong (light body skill), and there are various tales about Gong Bao Tian connected to this – some have him leaping great distances, others say that at times he walked the circle so fast that his queue stood out horizontally from his head! Master He himself has exceptional skill, include being able to leap upwards from a deep horse stance without contracting his muscles. Trying just this seemingly simple method makes you realise that more than just technique is involved, and qing-gong is indeed said to rely on certain energetic manipulations rather than just physical prowess.

The first time I learned from this handsome, smiling man was over coffee and cheesecake in a downtown Taipei cafe, and it was a three hour lesson which I will never forget. Everything I had learned up until that point was given a new perspective as master He explained in great depth the essence of his teaching – how to develop the upwards rising force in the human body and how that applies to martial arts and life. He demonstrated clearly how his body was able to move primarily from tendons, sinews and ligaments – what the Chinese call the jing – which required a total letting go of all muscular tension in the joints and, prior to that, a release of all bound emotional and psychic energies. Adamant that his Baguaquan was not for fighting, it was however clear that this man had something extra-ordinary going on in his body. Just how that related to real combat was something that would take me another three years to discover, for there was a genuine humbleness and reticence about him which precluded wanting to show anything that was not genuinely useful for his students. Very gentle and peaceful he never showed his fighting ability to strangers, and rarely to his students. In his thinking the first few

years of practice should be devoted to mastery of one's body and mind, before any thought of fighting someone else, and it was



an attitude which left many in the martial arts community doubting the effectiveness of his Baguaquan. As I would discover after some time, they could not have been more wrong.....

I left that first lesson with a lot to contemplate, and an exercise to work on which involved progressively opening up the joints of the arm and shoulder. Later that week I joined his small group of students for the four hour sessions which seemed to fly by far too quickly. It was clear that everything in his system – the theory, the basic training, the energetics – was deeply connected to Chinese medical theory and Taoist esoteric philosophy. At the heart of the basics were the 'eight mother palms', which trained eight lines of force generated by a certain part of the body or specific organ such as the kidney, lungs or heart. Much of the student's work was dedicated to discovering the source of power inside of his or her own body as a reality, and then finding the pathway from there to the point of final release of power. Obviously excellent alignment of the body plays a major role in such work, as does understanding the relationship between each of the mother palms and the 'feeling' of the specific power being training. I was taught a series of nei-gong exercises, as well as a new way of walking the circle whereby the leg is raised very high on each 'chicken step' in order to facilitate understanding of the upward rising force as applied to the circle. To see Master He walking the circle was to witness perfect body control and hidden power, and as many onlookers commented it was as if he hovered around the circle rather than stepped.

"You do not walk with your legs," he declared with a big grin, "Let the force bump you up on each step, and then you can follow that force and really go!"

It was demanding work, and I believe that without all of the training from Serge it would have been beyond me. Very few of Master He's students put in the hours of daily work which would have been necessary to achieve a good level in his Baguaquan, but the more that the art unfolded the more I loved it, and I began to devote a lot of time seeking to unravel it's mysteries inside of my body.

Theoretically the Baguaquan system is like a tree. A student goes from the tips of the branches to the roots and then back again from the roots to the branches and leaves. That is, through the physical motions one can really understand the deep principles, the essence. It is a method of understanding, first of one's own body and then by extension of the working of the Universe. The student understands the world because he understands its underlying principles. Because he understands how the eight trigrams change he knows what can happen in the future, a reality as equally applicable to fighting as to daily life. But Master He was against developing a fighting mind, saying that if someone wants to fight he puts his mind outside of himself and towards his opponent. In that moment he cannot fully control himself. Instead of this, the real Bagua man just does his usual movements and keeps his integrity, letting the attacker bump into his frame.

When this was explained to me it was clear that this keeping of integrity was possible and desirable on every level of my life. Don't seek to manipulate anyone but myself. Let others do what they want, just be myself always and in every situation. A simple theory, but the real test was to come some time later when I became deeply involved with a woman. That period of my life made all of my street fights seem like child's play. But that is another story, for another time.....

Each lesson with Master He, be it training in the park or sharing lunch around the table, was sure to uncover a whole new perspective on whatever one thought Baguaquan was all about. With both words and actions he would take us deeper than I thought was possible, and then deeper still. One time we were discussing the progression of training in his system, and what he taught me that day remains in my mind as one of the finest explanations of how one can evolve physically and spiritually through internal martial arts practice.

"The goal in the first stage of Baguaquan practice is to 'Lead the Qi by the Li', that is to lead internal energy by the external movements. This means that we lead our internal energy flow by our external movements. Therefore the practitioner should put his mind-focus on himself even in the warm-ups. So the practitioner

should pay constant attention to the question - What are the differences in the body when the movements change? This is also important because the most of the movements in Baguaquan are structured by multiple spiral twists. These kind of continuous circular movements are fine and go deep into the body. The connection between the mind and body of the practitioner will therefore become fine and deep. This is the first step in realising 'Shen Xin He Yi', Body and Mind Unified.

"In the example of 'Push Palm Walking', or the classical on guard stance of Bagua, the bottom of the front palm is pushing to the target as the centre of the palm is drawing back. These two opposing powers should be controlled, steady and in balance. Every fingertip stretches up in its own direction. The wrist pushes the palm to turn towards the outside of the body as the elbow turns towards the inside. This results in the lower-arm and upper-arm twisting individually, the relaxed shoulder joint letting the arm push forward as the shoulder-blade keeps close to the spine. And these are only the principles of one arm! The components of the rest of the body have their own principles. These principles also act to place the body in the 'opposite but steady' state. The practitioner can 'feel' this only when his 'mind' is there. But this feeling is not focused on a specific object. Rather, it covers everything, like the two eyes in circle walking which function as two mirrors that can receive every object without seeing. The calmness in the movement is the key of internal practice."

I sat fascinated by his explanations, appreciating every word and motion as if it were a precious gem of martial wisdom. *The calmness in the movement is the key of internal practice.....*

"The next stage is 'Control Li with Qi' - lead external movements by internal energy. After achieving success in 'Lead Qi by Li', one is ready to 'Control Li with Qi'. In this stage of practice, the practitioner will feel his internal strength and the depth of his energy. He will then find it interesting to go further in the practice, with 'Lead Qi with Yi', Lead Energy with Mind. Their body will be like a door which opens wider day by day. Some practitioners will stay in this stage, developing increasingly fine body-mind control skills. Some will go through the door, passing

from the external world to the internal world, from the physical world into the spirit world. Here they will start a new stage in their research. As my master said, we use the art to develop the human being in Baguaquan. But what is this 'human being'? This answer one will know from one's body when one really arrives through solid practice!"

And solid practice was what we did a lot of, with sessions lasting several hours in which we would work just one or two of the basic exercises or concepts. The word basic does little justice to what were, in effect, difficult problems to be solved by one's whole body-mind. One skill I loved was leaping up and down on the spot, with each step raising the knee as high as possible. Watching Master He doing this I couldn't understand how he could leap so high with such seemingly little effort and movement, all the while relaxed and smiling.

"Let the force take you!" he gestured, and then grinned, unable to put into words the feeling that was needed. I did the exercise once again, feeling that it was closer to the real thing.

"No, no....!" he smiled in that joyful way of his and offered me his left hand. "Hold this, just do the steps and follow me....."

Without another word he bounded ahead in a straight line directly along the wide path on which we were training. I felt a great force taking me and as my legs pumped up and down I could feel I was leaping higher than I thought was possible....and yet there was absolutely no sensation of strength coming from my teacher's hand. We leaped like two deer down the entire length of the path. At the end I turned to him, exhilarated.

"How....what is that force?"

My Baguaquan teacher grinned. "I don't know how to say! The problem is how to make the body ready to receive it....how to make the kwa and the joints loose enough so that the force can move through you freely."

"That was amazing!" I was genuinely awestruck, and had a flash of intuition that this was indeed how the Baguaquan masters of old had practiced, all their art infused with this energy as if plugged into an invisible power source. When I said this Master He laughed.

"Oh, I am too far from the skill of the old ones.....I am just beginning."

Imagine, then, after another twenty years of practice.....

Soon after that the training began to take a new direction as Master He began to gently pull in my arms in the various postures of the Eight Mother Palms. These postures, held during the circle walking, are the energetic heart of the system, developing clear lines of force running from an organ or body area to the extremities. He explained to me that it was vital to increase the space in between the joints in order to let energy flow freely there and to facilitate looseness. Later every joint in the body, including the space between each vertebra, would be systematically worked, but for now I was challenged with just the shoulder, elbow and wrist. Once the correct feeling was found with my teacher's help, I then had to recreate it by myself, using certain visualisations that made the interior of the body naturally open up. It was perhaps during the third week of this training that I had an outstanding experience which remains in my memory until now. The hours of training that day went by as normal, my own work assisted by Master He periodically providing external impetus to open my joints. Later I left the park and began walking home through the streets of Taipei. Completely unbidden there came upon me a cellular sensation of enormous freedom and openness. My body-mind became huge and vast, not from external growth but rather from the opening of everything that had been closed. A hundred spaces blossomed in the blink of an eye, each one a reservoir of tremendous potential and energy. Simultaneously great joy emerged from deep within and I laughed loudly for no reason at all. At home I recorded the following poem.....

Opening joints is
Opening the mind and
Opening the heart,
Allowing space for all the
Energy to flow and all the
Awareness to reach
Everywhere.

Sometime later Master He said to me, "There is really no end to this opening.....it just goes deeper and deeper and deeper, on and on and on....."

Another man I learned much from and shared close friendship with over time was a Czech Chan monk (yes, that phrase must be a first!) named Guo-Ping, a student of Master He who helped me a lot over the years in Taiwan. When I asked him how on earth an expert in computer sciences from the Czech Republic had ended up as a monk living on a mountain in Taiwan he told me his fascinating story.

"By some strange coincidence I became a Buddhist monk at the age of thirty two. Why? Well, my Buddhist master tricked me, he was simply cleverer than me and he wanted me to become a monk. Sure, I studied Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism and so on from the age of fifteen, both theoretically and practically, but I was not very advanced. Although I graduated in computer science, later I was lucky to get a job in the Oriental Institute of Czechoslovak Academy of Science and to continue to pursue my interest in the field of internal arts. My Buddhist master somehow found me and bought an airplane ticket for me to study with him here in Taiwan. Who would refuse a similar opportunity? But he was just the last step, of course, for there were many steps before and you know, it was not always my choice to take them.

"My father was a boxing champion of Slovakia and I got his training, however I was never really interested in any kind of martial arts. It happened that two years after I became a monk I started practicing Six Harmonies Shaolin boxing and then later the internal martial arts of Bagua, Taiji and Xingyi. It's difficult to explain why I was drawn to do this. Probably the most important reason was that after fifteen years of practice and especially due to intensive practice after I became a monk, I discovered that all my previous meditations and internal trainings were simply wrong. I still consider it quite a nice achievement to find out that one did his work for over fifteen years incorrectly! Although I was a Chan/Zen monk (my master holds transmissions in both Soto and Rinzai traditions), I practiced mostly the

Theravada meditation system since I practiced that before I became a monk and also because I consider it to be more sophisticated. The usual attitude of Theravadins (in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and so on) is that the human body is impermanent and it is not worthy to put any special emphasis on it's development – it is enough just to keep it functioning.

“In Buddha's system of meditation there is simply no place for the training of the body. Although Buddha acknowledged outer reality, with regards to Buddhist training everything is in the mind and everything is the mind. But Buddha came from a clan of warriors and he therefore undoubtedly received a strong martial arts training from early childhood. That means his body was well prepared for spiritual training by his previous martial training and his body was even more well trained during the first six years after he became a sramanera (a person who leaves home and family). During these six years he practiced severe austerities with various teachers and he almost died. Buddha did not speak about the body, he simply spoke about what is beyond the body for those who had already mastered it. Just an example, it is documented in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra (11, 23) that Buddha once became seriously sick and almost died – but because he felt he should not die without informing the monk's community (and he was away from them) he simply suppressed his sickness by his will and became healthy again – now who can do that today? Is it not a magnificent example of what it means to understand ourselves?”

“When I practiced meditation intensively after I became a monk, I discovered that I simply cannot take the same road, that I am not prepared enough for the true spiritual work as Buddha taught. Not that I could not meditate – but my meditation would not lead to any serious achievement because of the blocks in my body and mind. Sounds like another variation of the Buddhist monks of Shaolin Temple and Bodhidharma? Well, people make the same mistakes.....and yes, Bodhidharma was also from a clan of warriors. Just coincidence?”

“Another reason why I started to practice martial arts was a discovery that it is solely my body that is the mind that Buddha talks about, that there is no difference between body and

mind...again something that is not usual to most westerners with an almost 'genetically' inherited distinction between body and mind. That sounds like maybe nothing special, it is like reciting common knowledge but this is not an intellectual knowledge! And there were also some other minor reasons – I was thirty four and felt my mind becoming more rigid so I hoped that by keeping the flexibility of the body I would also be able to keep the flexibility of my mind too. Now, it is easy to say 'I did this and that because of this and that' but generally it is more or less a process similar to martial arts – the circumstances make some force or pressure on you and so you just naturally generate some power and then this power leads you, you are just riding this power....it is not that you want to become a monk and practice martial arts, it just comes naturally when your time and wisdom come, it is like a bird's singing – you cannot avoid it, you cannot not sing, you simply jump on the forces produced by generations of previous monks and you simply ride on the forces produced by generations of previous martial artists. It is not easy to see them and catch them, but be sure, they are still here around us, it is the transmission our teachers got from their teachers. Even if it sounds like from a bad gung fu movie!"

I met Guo-Ping at a time when I was avidly researching every little detail of martial arts practice in Taiwan, and was thus curious about all of his teachers and studies. He helped my spiritual progress too, for sitting on the back of his motorcycle as he weaved at breakneck speeds through the already crazy traffic of rush-hour Taipei was enough to test my ability to deeply relax and surrender to the Will of the Lord....

During his first year of martial arts training he did almost nothing else. Just martial arts in the morning, martial arts in the afternoon and martial arts in the evening. Guo-Ping was the first western student at the Chinese Culture University and the schedule was heavy. Practical courses included jibengong (foundation training), Chinese wrestling and chin-na, Shaolin and Lohan boxing, the internal arts and many external systems plus more than ten kinds of weapons. Theoretical courses included

human anatomy, history of martial arts in China, psychology, physiology, and biomechanics.

After school hours he also studied with teachers of Fujien White Crane boxing and other systems. Starting at six in the morning and ending at ten in the night he was often so tired that he could not walk properly. During weekends he went to practice with Madam Fu Shu Yun, a student of the famous Yang Cheng Fu, and with other renowned teachers.

“My school teachers even took me to mainland China for intensive practice with famous masters like He Fu Sheng, one of the graduates of the famous Nanjing Martial Arts Institute. We spent one month together in Fuzhou, at a gathering of old friends and classmates from the Institute, and this time made me realise that wushu is a state of mind, culture, friendship.....not just fighting.....they were recalling how all the classmates wanted to practice alone with the teachers at the school and get something special to make them one step ahead of the others. To see those old masters showing their boxing was simply great and it was clear that they loved martial arts.

“I also spent a week with Li Chang Xin in Beijing, a retired welder who was a disciple of the famous Guo Gu Ming. Famed for his great internal power, Guo would often use the ‘hanging a picture on the wall’ power in real fights. The enemy would be projected against a wall where he would seem to stick for a few moments before sliding down. Li was a very friendly man, sharing watermelon with everyone after each training, but during the practice he was as sharp as a knife and very tough. After the first session I wanted to quite, it was that painful! But I went back and learned some of his Baguazhang. As a fighter he was awesome, and he had perfect body alignment and great internal strength. Even though blind in one eye he could use his one good eye to pierce straight through me.

“But you know, after those five years at the University I quit everything. I met Master He and was overwhelmed. He is one of a very few who can move himself from deep inside. I also formed a small group of students that I teach internal arts to, mostly

Buddhist and Taoist meditations, some qigong and jibengong. It is an experiment!"

I lived with the smiling, gentle Slovak monk for a while, and delved into his collection of Buddhist and Taoist texts. At that time I couldn't get enough esoteric and martial knowledge, and was happy to hear my friend espouse on what he had learned.

"Buddha's own system of meditation basically contains two main groups of meditation. The first one is called Samatha and it is pure concentration, the second one is Vipassana and it is insight based on analytical method of discovering the root of Dukkha – a Pali term that is translated into English incorrectly as suffering. However Buddha always used Dukkha as adjective and it also has some other nuances of the meaning than just simply 'suffering', including the road into what he called Nibbana (Nirvarna). All religions have Samatha (concentration) meditations but only Buddhism has Vipassana (insight) meditations because Vipassana was Buddha's own discovery and therefore it uses the characteristics particular only to Buddha.

"An emphasis on cultivation of mind instead of body of course does not mean that Buddha and Buddhist monks do not use their bodies. Some elder monks told me fascinating stories about accomplished monks they knew – these monks were able to use qing-gong (light body skill) in exactly the same way as it used in martial arts, passing hundreds of kilometers in a few hours, and similar 'fairy tales'. But are they really just fairy tales? In my opinion it just means that they did not have a problem with their bodies. Unfortunately I have that problem – I cannot do with my body what I want.....I still cannot fly! And I suppose there are only a very few people in the whole world without similar basic problems.

"I think that this was exactly a main reason for the origination and development of Mahayana Buddhism. Usually it is translated as 'Great Vehicle' (for many people, contrary to Theravada which is the only survivor of the Hinayana schools ie. 'Small Vehicle'). The origin of Mahayana is not clearly described by historians of Buddhism. But the real reason is that most of the

people were simply unable to grasp the essence of Buddha's teaching because of the changes in environment of the human body and mind. To put it simply, they could not go anymore in the way of the Buddha! Therefore Mahayana meditation systems changed Buddha's strategy and some schools adopted special or esoteric techniques like qigong, yoga, energetic workouts and so on. That is the better solution – the worse one is that some schools of Buddhism simply disappeared because they were not able to communicate with people of changed 'inner environment', or they became a religion like the Pure Land School which is obviously contrary to Buddha's position of a teacher of a practical system of achievement of a state without Dukkha (suffering) and not of a religious leader. Mahayana Buddhism adopted these new techniques from the indigenous culture of a particular place – from Taoism in China, from Bon in Tibet, from Shamanism everywhere in Asia. Therefore I think all Asian inner arts bear similar principles."

And how, I enquired of my friend, did the internal fighting arts relate to Buddhism?

"Internal martial arts usually work on the principle that in the beginning the student works from outside (from his body) to the inside (like qi and so on), and after he learns his inner environment then he works from inside to the outside, to express his internal aspect outwardly. Buddhist meditation, on the other hand, was originally strictly an internal method, without the necessity to use anything else except mind. Because of the inability of many practitioners to grasp the mind, Mahayana uses different principles of training. For Buddha and Theravada, everything is just mind. Mahayana started to use a connection between inner mind and outer reality in a sense that external objects also became the source or origin of knowledge, be it sound (which is how Boddhistava Kwan Yin reached her Awakening), other people or even physical movements.

"Taoism has always used both these methods, various body visualisations that are inner work as well as various breathing exercises or body movements that are a part of external work. But in the end of the Taoist road is knowledge that all those energies

and body is just mind. So martial arts classics say – Use mind, not strength. Take for example Chan/Zen and Taijiquan – both require years and years of ‘relaxation’. Why ? After the years of practice one can achieve the same feeling when the consciousness is expanded outwards. In martial arts then you can feel the hand or intention/mind of an attacker which goes through the bubble or expanded consciousness to your body so you can avoid an attack from behind or fight blind-folded multiple attackers because you can feel how their intention penetrates your ‘expanded consciousness’. In Zen you can use this expanded consciousness for direct perception of reality, people or things, because you are becoming them, because your consciousness is melted with theirs, you ARE them. That’s why the sages understand other people. And that is why both Zen and martial arts are not about intellectual knowledge but about directly perceiving reality. Aren’t they just the same? Just look at Master Chen Yun San, he is one of the best examples of people who combine profound skills of Buddhism and Taoist meditation with the superb fighting skills of Taijiquan.

“Yet, there are exceptions, rare people like my second Buddhist master – he is an analphabet, he cannot read or write, he knows just few Chinese characters. He spent ten years continuously closed in one room, just meditating and writing calligraphy, always writing only one of two characters: Chan (Zen) or For (Buddha) – he did them hundreds of thousands of times each. He never practiced martial arts, he laughed almost to his death when he saw me practicing, yet he is one of the deepest people I met in all my life. We spent a couple of years living together in a small temple in the mountains, and although he talks very rarely he is able to penetrate one’s mind in a way that any person with attacking thoughts would become absolutely helpless. There is no way one can fight him. He does not need to practice martial arts at all yet he was the winner of all our bouts. He simply is not from this world – he lives his way, alone in the mountains, forgotten by the world and forgetting this world. He is like that dead cat from the Zen koan – the most precious thing.”

(Explanation – when some Zen master was asked what is the most precious thing in the world, he replied, ‘a dead cat’.)

And what had the years of inner work and martial arts practice taught my bright eyed monk friend, I wondered?

“My personal experience with various spiritual systems and my experience with other practitioners is that to achieve serious results just by purely inner practice – like meditations – is simply impossible or extremely rare at present time. Even martial arts are so unbelievably complicated that it is simply impossible to discover their system by oneself. Not to mention meditation or internal alchemy. Therefore I consider bodily workout, a work with our own bodies, to be one of the best sources for understanding our own mind.

“Internal martial arts are predominantly a method of education. In its narrow sense or at a general level it is an art of kicking and punching with internal power, an art of knowing how this power is generated from the body, how this power is transferred through the body and how it is expressed externally. In its broader and main sense it is an art of self-knowing, knowing the relations between oneself and outer environment and knowing the outer environment. Therefore I believe all internal arts were created on the principles which lead a practitioner to understand himself as well as the world around him. And if he understands himself and the world around him, then he can use this knowledge in any way he wants – be it fighting or anything else. If he does not understand himself, his fighting will always be only the fighting of a blind man.

“So at the end of all three, Buddhism, Taoism, and martial arts, is the same knowledge. Do you understand? If yes, then you also know how to use it – then use it for the other people so that they can be happy and healthy. If not, then go and practice more. It is so simple.”

My years in Taiwan were full of adventures, some stranger than others, and every so often there would come out of the blue a chance meeting with someone who would leave an indelible mark on my memory. One such meeting was on a wet Thursday night as