

an interview with

Ian Cameron

by Ronnie Robinson

Ian Cameron could be considered one of the 'elder statesmen' of the British Tai Chi scene, being one of the few passed the 40 year training landmark a few years ago. Based in Edinburgh, where he continues to actively teach, he started his early training in Hong Kong in 1971 learning under the tutelage of Cheng Tin Hung, who was a renowned teacher of tai chi as an effective martial art.



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What was your introduction to Tai Chi Chuan, what initially attracted you to the art and inspired you to study it?

It was a book by Cheng Man Ching that first sparked my interest. His movements looked so graceful and relaxed and they made me wonder how this could work as an effective martial art. Having practiced Karate and Judo, Tai Chi seemed a world away from those arts. However, at that time, there was no way to practice Tai Chi Chuan, as there were no teachers in the UK that I could access. This would be around the late 60's.

Later, when I went to Hong Kong to work as a musician in the army, my first intention was to find a good tai chi teacher. Sifu Cheng Tin Hung came highly recommended, and he soon dispelled any doubts I may have held about the effectiveness of Tai Chi Chuan as a martial art.

What was it about him that impressed you?

I met him on a Sunday afternoon. He was having some tea with a friend when I walked in. I went through a bit of a grilling from his friend who threw a number of quick-fire questions at me, "What do you want?" "Why do you want to do Tai Chi".... This questioning went on for about an hour as I told him I was looking for Chen Tin Hung who had been recommended to me as a good tai chi teacher. I didn't know at this time that the teacher was the guy who was standing back, taking it all in. However, I was eventually told that he would

be the big guy here. He wasn't big in stature, but he certainly had a big presence. However, it wasn't until I'd been training with him for a while, that I began to realise that I had been sent to a teacher who had exceptional ability.

I always had the feeling that there was much more to him, a bit like looking into a deep well, where you never quite knew the depth, but you knew it was there. Not only was he a great Tai Chi master, but he was also very well read.

One day we were sitting in his house relaxing, when he asked me; "Do you know who taught me all of this?" I, of course, replied, "No." Pointing to himself, he said, "Me." This wasn't boasting, it was true, and it was a valuable lesson to me. It made me realise that it will always be down to me. No one else would ever be responsible for my progression in Tai Chi.

What were the first aspects that you were taught, the basic starting points if you will?

Initially, I was taught a "Square Form" which is quite different from the one I now teach. Looking back it was more like an intermediate form, it was more continuous and had no counting, unlike the teaching form now used in our system, and it was quite demanding to learn. The Square Form now has a counting method where each movement is broken down into steps of 1-2-3. I was actually taught three different hand forms.

How often did you attend classes and how much training did you do outside of the regular classes?

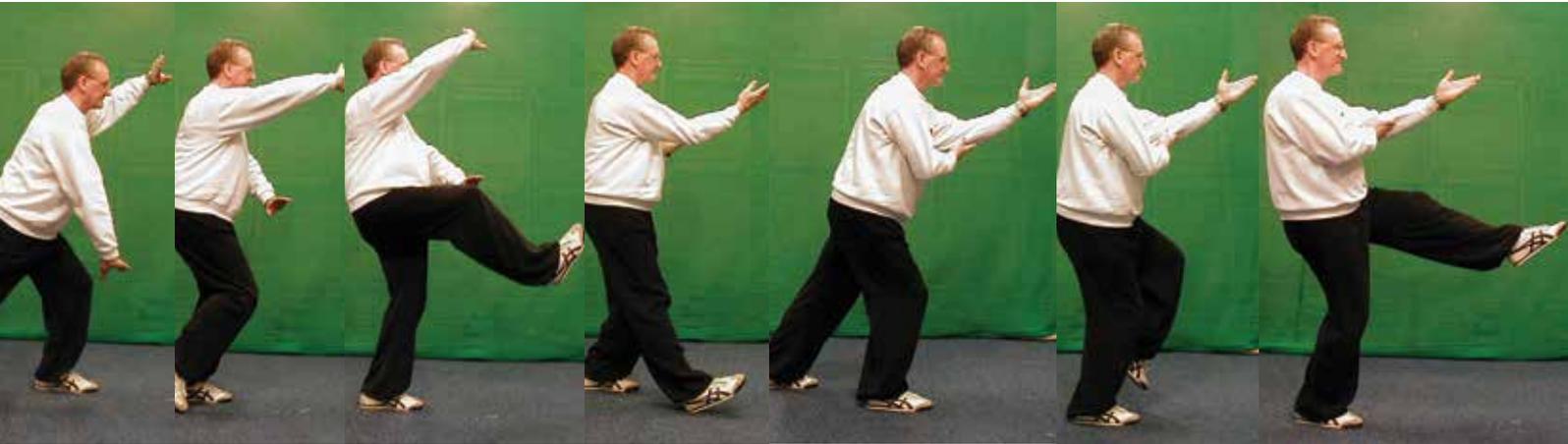
I went along as often as I could, probably four to five times a week, including every Saturday morning. When I was working in the evenings, I went along in the morning. Being in the forces there were always places to train outside of class. I trained nearly every day. Being a pale, redheaded Scot this was often very exhausting for me. With all the training and workload at one point my weight dropped to around nine and a half stone. Because of my enthusiasm to learn, I often over-did my training.

Did your teacher's approach to teaching non-Chinese differ from his usual way of teaching?

Not that I could see, as there were students learning at the same time, and all received the same treatment.

How long were you actually in Hong Kong and what were the developmental stages you went through in learning, i.e. your progression from hand to weapon forms, tui shou, san shou, nei gong etc.?

I was in Hong Kong for a little over two years, a relatively short period and that is why I was determined to be as focused as I could. It wasn't about the length of the experience, but the intensity of it that mattered. In the end, the shortness of time was a blessing in disguise as it made me work very hard to retain everything I was taught.



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The various aspects flowed one into the other and everything felt very natural to me. Each aspect was taught progressively, as and when you were ready. After a few years back in the UK I returned to Hong Kong and stayed with Sifu Cheng for a month. This was very good for me as it confirmed that I'd been on the right track with the training I'd been doing on my own.

Your system has many aspects, what is your approach to teaching them and what is the usual course of development for your students?

We all have a debt to our teachers and my approach is to keep the method of teaching as true as I can to what Sifu Cheng Tin Hung taught. I teach as I was taught. I firmly believe that to do the 'same' thing over and over strengthens what you are doing and eradicates any possible confusion that may arise. However, nothing stands still, but any changes that have evolved, have developed naturally and organically, out of continuous training rather than change for the sake of it. I have yet to see anything that's improved with these so-called 'changes.'

I don't teach short forms as I believe all you need is contained within the longer forms. We have a short form that was created for competition purpose but it has been so long since anyone bothered with competition we don't use it now. It could easily be resurrected if needed. Everyone starts with the Square Form which I see as a kind of test, as it isn't easy to learn the long Square Form. Students must show patience and perseverance. As they become more familiar with the form, they are introduced to basic pushing hands, and then more advanced pushing hands exercises and then perhaps some basic applications. Once the Square Form has been practised for a time, and the principles are understood, then the fluid Round Form is taught.

Learning forms is likened to learning to write. The Square Form is like printing, where each movement is broken down and is quite specific. The Round Form is more like cursive writing, continuous, fluid and less specific.

I think of the Square Form as a tool for learning structure, learning where to 'put' the hands and feet so you really know what

is the correct place, whereas the Round Form is about blending and becoming the postures. In the Round Form timing is developed along with increasing your ability to sense correct transitions from one posture to the next. It requires greater coordination and feeling.

Once Pushing Hands and applications are taught, the next step would be to learn weapon forms. These are Sabre, Sword and Spear. Depending on the student's dedication they are also given the opportunity to learn (Nei Gung) Internal Strength exercises.

Are there any aspects that you favour more than another?

I believe that Tai Chi Chuan should be practised as a whole. The five aspects of our system are: Hand Forms, Pushing Hands, Practical Applications, Weapons Forms (Sabre, Sword and Spear) and Nei Gung which together form an integrated whole. This is the beauty of having a system. There is always an aspect to work on, and, with experience, you will know just what you need to do. I see each aspect as part of a circle that is constantly turning. We should work to strengthen all the aspects. I also see each aspect, although integrated, as definitive arts within themselves.

Which aspect do you feel requires more attention?

Internal Strength (Nei Gung) exercises are very important for the development of Tai Chi Chuan. These exercises add essential substance to the art. But, as said before, each aspect is part of an integrated whole, and one without the other is a weakness. These are the physical aspects but the spirit is also an aspect that is important. It's the internal spirit that informs Tai Chi Chuan. This is developed over the years and, as you get older, it is having a strong internal spirit or core that keeps you going. You keep on with Tai Chi Chuan because you love it and want to carry on not because you have to. Whatever you do, it will always come back to practice. Keep looking up, not down.

Can you outline what you believe to be the various benefits of the different aspects i.e. hand form, weapon forms etc.?

Tai Chi is well known for its health benefits, and is an art that can be practised on many

levels. Each aspect has its own demands. Apart from the health benefits, the hand form teaches so much. Without good hand form, you cannot have good weapons forms, and everything else will be lacking. It is the basis on which everything is built, and it is where most people begin their study of Tai Chi.

Each style of Pushing Hands trains a different aspect of this exercise. From developing sensitivity, to testing your stance, to knowing how to return a force back to an opponent, sticking and stepping etc.

Applications practice increases knowledge of the use of the Tai Chi principle in self defence, how softness overcomes the hard, and stillness overcomes movement. Knowing the reason for the postures also gives more meaning to the form. Even if students are not all that interested in the martial, it is still useful to know what the postures are for.

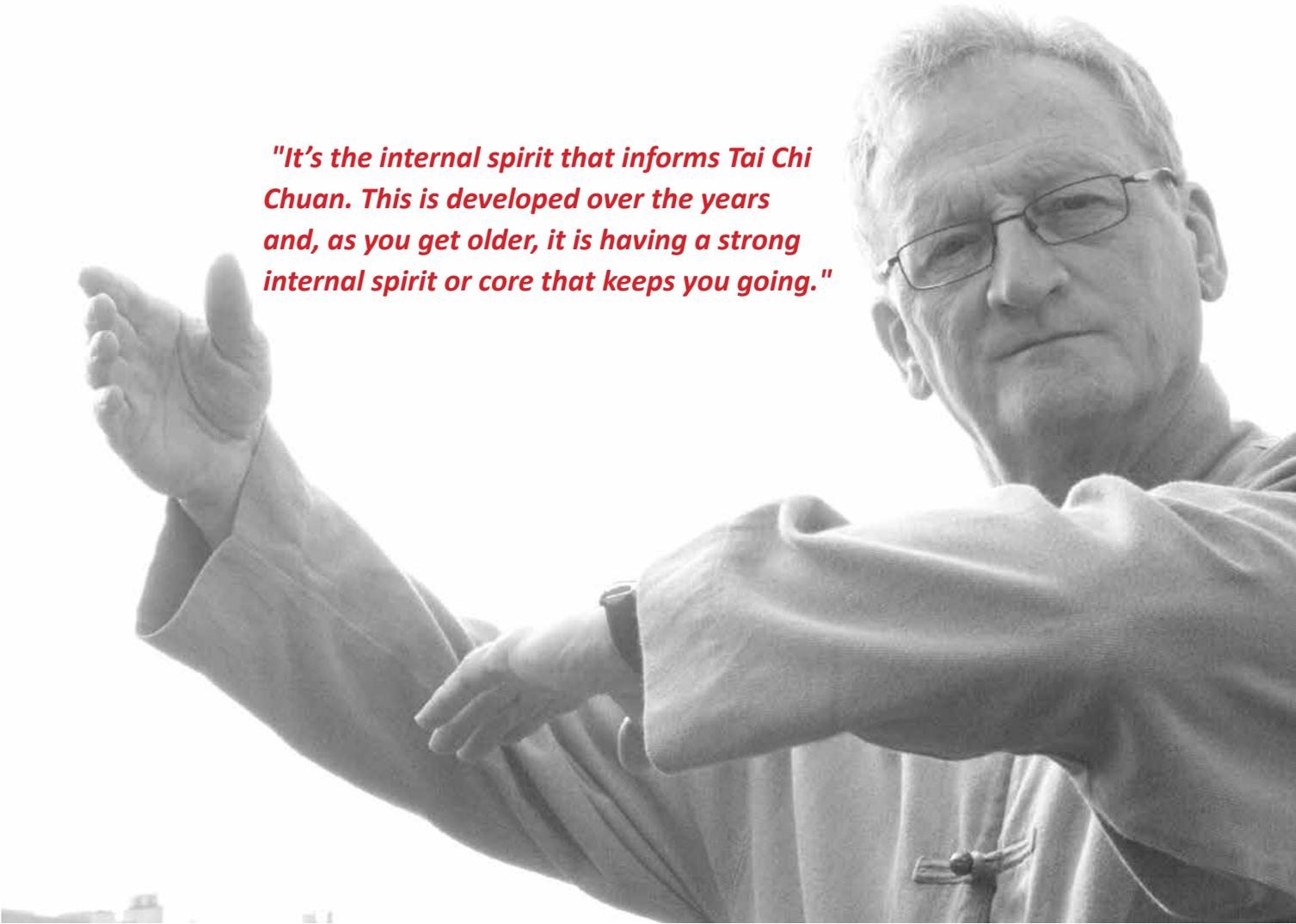
We have three weapon forms; Sabre, Sword and Spear. Each is a different expression of Tai Chi. They are more aerobic in nature to the hand form. Again though, they can be practised to various levels. You don't expect an older person (me) to do the same as a twenty year old, but the benefits are still there.

The Internal Strength exercises are, it could be said, the core of Tai Chi. They used to be taught first, but like many things, they were being abused, so the old masters decided to teach hand forms first. This was a means of getting to know the student's character better, before passing on the knowledge of the internals. They consist of two sets of twelve exercises. A Yin set, and a Yang set. The Yin set builds a strong and resilient body, whereas the Yang set is to develop the will and Tai Chi strength.

There are many reasons that bring students to consider Tai Chi Chuan, some realistic whilst others perhaps not, is there any advice that you would offer newcomers to help them to get a truer sense of what the art is and what it has to offer?

I try to disavow any fancy ideas that people may have, often much to their disappointment. I can't stand the phony mystification of the art, or those that go around posing as some sort

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of 'Warrior Sages.' It comes down to ability, nothing more. The most essential thing is to first, find a good teacher. It is difficult for the beginner to know who is a good teacher, and it is still a bit of a lottery. It is wise to look around, but even then, how do they know? A bad decision can last many years, and end with bitter disappointment. A poor first experience can influence one's view of the art itself. I remember talking to some Judo players about Tai Chi Chuan, and their experience of it was one of lying on mats with their eyes closed 'breathing.' They dismissed Tai Chi Chuan out of hand because of this. I've seen similar situations and do wonder where some of the nonsense comes from. In some photos it looks as though they have all 'found Nirvana' at the same time, amazing! I can't imagine being on a rooftop in Hong Kong, eyes shut, wandering around until you make contact with someone. They would have thought you were nuts. Perhaps it is a lack of a complete system that the need to 'pad' things out arises. Thankfully, none of the Tai Chi people I met in Hong Kong indulged in any of this stuff. They practised Tai Chi Chuan, plain and simple.

Do you see common repeated misconceptions that can impede the development of students?

Of course, Tai Chi is full of misconceptions and expectations, for instance: That just because you do Tai Chi that alone will make you 'enlightened' and wise, calm and maybe

even a 'great fighter.' As they say up here, 'Aye right!' There is not a lot you can do about these things. People will believe what they want, so you just leave them alone.

As for errors, I think we should take care and nurture our own Tai Chi Chuan and let others worry about theirs. It is when you see Tai Chi poorly done, but put over as the way it should be done, then I think it is fair to question it. We're all open to criticism, and should be able to take it but it is interesting to see the reaction to such criticism. If a weakness is pointed out look at it, don't run complaining that you've been insulted. It is how Tai Chi Chuan is passed on that's important - not worrying about bursting someone's little bubble.

Another thing that can hold students back is over-thinking or over-analysing. I recently watched the film *The Big Lebowski*. During the making of the film a world-champion bowler was recruited to teach the actors how to bowl. The star asked things like, "What am I thinking about?" "How do I do this?" or "How do I do that?" It is a story about how the champion at one time tried to apply Zen and the Art of Archery to bowling, with the greatest of difficulty. He had little checks here and there and it got so bad he could barely let go of the ball. In the end his friends said to him, "Just throw the f.....g ball man!" The same is true of Tai Chi Chuan, you learn by doing.

I get the feeling that some are always looking for something 'other,' well, there is nothing that is separate from practice, how can there be? The sooner people realize that what they are looking for, is under their own feet, then the better things will be. You can't have what someone else has. No matter who your teacher is, you have to find your own understanding. All the old practices are about forcing the students to realise for themselves. Until it is realised within yourself, then it is only information.

I do believe, at some point, we must become our own person, and not run around after this teacher or that one. Tai Chi is constant learning, and I'm certainly not against my students looking at other things and comparing what they are being taught, there is no problem there, but you must have a core practice. If you are constantly chasing after something 'new,' you will never have anything solid to stand on.

Are there common physical errors that recur in students that would ease their progress if they could correct them sooner?

The only thing that eases progress is practice. Everyone is different, and a competent teacher should be able to give correction where it is needed. It is an art to see the small things that make a difference to the whole.



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You've now trained for more than 40 years, can you tell me about how things may have changed and developed over the years.

Well, Tai Chi has grown phenomenally since those days. During my time in Hong Kong it never occurred to me, or anyone else, just what Tai Chi would become. It was never part of my thinking to "make," something of it, commercially that is. I have always said that if Tai Chi became too big, I would back off, and that is what I've done. I prefer to focus on weekly classes, and I don't advertise, relying mostly on word of mouth. I think it is too commercial now. I think why you do it, determines how you do it. Money changes everything. Popularity is a double-edged sword.

Competitions seem to be a big thing nowadays. I must confess to having no interest in them. We have competed in the past, and done very well, and would not deny my students, if they wished, to enter, but no one has been interested for a long time. I have judged a couple of times, and disliked it intensely. I don't think Tai Chi forms are there so that someone can sit in judgement of them, it is too subjective, and perhaps done for the wrong reasons. Competition is concerned with appearance, not the essence. I prefer to see someone practise with sincerity, rather than with the aim of winning a medal. The former is practising the art for its own sake,

the latter is concerned with how they look. Which is very external, don't you think? In any case, I would find it difficult to judge some of the forms I now see.

In a strange way, competition brings people together, only to separate them into winners and losers, the happy and the disappointed, those that feel they have been cheated and so on. A Festival of the Martial Arts where there is a celebration of the various arts, might be an idea.

In Hong Kong when they had a Festival of Martial Arts, there were fights, and they had demonstrations in between each bout, everyone receiving a certificate for taking part. This seemed to strike the right balance.

What is it that has stimulated and sustained your training over that time?

The thing that has kept me going all these years is a love of the art, and Tai Chi is a process, not an end. When you become a posture, that immediately changes and flows into the next. It is the becoming, and changing that interests me. It also mirrors just how transient life is. Anything that stands still or doesn't move dies. Tai Chi is a moving art, and change is its essence. It is this constant coming and going that is fascinating.



The more I practice, the more it opens up. Maintaining an enthusiasm for Tai Chi alone, and what I've learned from the practice. I can't take anything out of my pocket and say, "This is what Tai Chi has given me." I do know that my life would have been very different without it. Tai Chi, has seen me through a couple of serious health scares in the past few years, so I realized the benefits first hand, if you like.

As I alluded to earlier, it is the determination to be your own person, not in an egotistical way, appreciating others and what they do, but walking your own path. I think this comes from the time I came back from Hong Kong, and there was no-one around to practice with. I had to keep going by myself, and this instilled a determination to just keep going no matter what. I've always seen myself as a practitioner first, and a teacher second. Ultimately, you have to be your own motivation.

Finally, is there anything you would say to the young Ian Cameron as he was starting out on his training?

Not really, I consider myself fortunate to have found what I was looking for all those years ago. Although Tai Chi is a serious but enjoyable practice, I've learned not to take myself too seriously, which I think is a Tai Chi disease. I practice Tai Chi to learn from it, and hopefully will continue to do so.

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