

The WuDang Way

BY LUCIA RING-WATKINS

I've always been interested in the weird and wonderful - the straight and narrow path has never appealed to me. I have a vivid imagination, and a sizeable rebellious streak. And yet somehow, I have ended up in the middle of a traditional, hierarchical martial arts clan known as the Wudang Pai as a disciple of Master Yuan Li Min. This is the story of my Way.

WHY I STARTED

Out of desire to tackle life's big questions, I did a philosophy degree, and explored human experience via western esoteric traditions and meditation. These approaches were intellectual, emphasising mind while the body was ignored or at best, treated with a separate system. In 2002, after finishing my degree, I realised my body was fallible and I had better start looking after it.

After an entire school career of dodging sports with excuse letters, I went straight in at the deep end with white crane kung fu and hurt myself in the first lesson. Reluctantly, I remembered the words of my good friend Faisal Mian, who had started training Tai Chi and was evangelical about it. I decided to give boring, slow Tai Chi a go to get fitter so I could do something flashy in the future. I looked up my local teacher - Barry MacGinlay.

WHAT TRAINING WITH BARRY WAS LIKE

When I first started training with Barry, it was a large class broken into small groups. I took to it quickly, I loved sinking my mind into my body and calming my over analytical brain. It was challenging but do-able, and the martial applications were fun. Emma North joined shortly afterwards and I enjoyed training and developing with an equally enthusiastic student.

As someone used to looking for the subtleties in life, I noticed the impact of Tai Chi pretty

quickly. From focussing on my body with detailed movement, I saw the harm smoking and excessive weekends were doing and quit both. I ended up going to Tai Chi 2, 3 then 4 times a week. My relationship with others and my environment changed as it felt like I was perceiving a lot more information in the world around me. I was well aware that what I was doing was more than just a bit of exercise – it was a grounded way of learning how energy works, both inside your body and outside of it.

INTRO TO TRAINING ABROAD

At the time, Barry was training in Asia for several weeks a year, which sounded like a fun and exotic thing to do. One time we were doing a group training drill to Gravel Pit by the Wu Tang Clan, and Barry told us about this place called Wudang Mountains he had visited, which was the birthplace of Tai Chi. It stuck with me. Somewhere around this time, one of my Tai Chi buddies called Tinge was in Thailand when the tsunami hit in 2004. She came back fairly traumatised, but talked of going back over there to help out and other volunteers who were doing the same. Still lit up with Tai Chi fire, I decided to go out there and save the world using Tai Chi. With only 2 years Tai Chi experience under my belt, I think Barry was a bit surprised.

What I actually managed to do was teach a few volunteers and locals on Koh Phi Phi some Tai Chi, contribute to some chilled out vibes, and learn some Muay Thai. I also gained the confidence to go to foreign climes on my own.

THE BOOT

By 2005, my life just wasn't fitting me anymore. Three years of training Tai Chi in my early twenties had changed me. My work at a publishing house in Soho now felt too harsh, I had a different

focus in life from the rest of my friends, and my classes and groups no longer seemed to suit. I decided to pack it all in and go travel Asia training martial arts. A trip to Wudang Shan was to be the jewel in the crown of this trip; I've always liked getting close to the source in order to form my own understanding - it's how I studied for my degree, and the same logic applied here. It was hard to find anything about Wudang Shan schools online, I could only find one address, so I would just have to go there and find out for myself.

events that link together through recommendation or coincidence, and follow this thread until it widens out into a Way. I knew I was looking for somebody authentic, who not only had a high level of skill in Tai Chi but also lived his or her life according to Tai Chi principles. I was also looking for unity; many schools separated out foreign and Chinese students and taught them separately, but I wanted togetherness, immersion and cultural exchange. I needed somewhere that felt like home, where I could train safely and comfortably as a



IN ASIA

In 2005 I set off for India, spending a few months studying kalarippayat in Kerala. After some chill time in Thailand, I went to China, where a path to Wudang started to emerge one day on a trip to a Taoist hub in Beijing called White Cloud Temple. I found a monk practising Tai Chi inside one of the shrines, and he allowed me to train with him. The temple elders decided we could have 3 days training together, and after that I would have to leave for Wudang. Training in the shrine, surrounded by towers of little gold statues was a rare privilege I won't forget.

FINDING SHIFU

Sometimes people ask me how I found the right master in Wudang. For me, I find a thread of

woman. My ideal master would also not be in it for the money.

When I went to Wudang in 2006, I checked out every school in the area, which was about 8 or 9 at the time, but Master Yuan Li Min was not easy to find. Around school number 6, nothing was quite hitting the spot so I called Barry, who recommended a teacher called Ling Tong Zi. This is actually shifu's second Taoist name, but I didn't know that then. After further searching, I finally found shifu.

CHOOSING SHIFU

Unaware as I was that studying lots of things in a short period of time was not the best way to train, I presented shifu with my long training wish list. He was the only teacher I saw who

refused it, and made me focus on just a couple of things. The connection felt right; authentic and comfortable. After mulling my choices over, I chose to train with Master Yuan Li Min, and at the height of midday on the summer solstice, I trekked over to the school. Shifu was asleep in the basement with the boys in two piles either side of him, having a lunchtime nap. When they woke up, I was napping on the ground at the far edge of the room, in line with shifu's feet.

TRAINING WITH SHIFU

The school was on a tea plantation high up in the mountains, in a village of around 100 people. Just down the road was the tumbledown eight immortals temple, an atmospheric place to train in a valley between two mountains where it is said qi collects. There were nine high level Chinese students, mostly disciples, studying with shifu at the time, who trained 5 or 6 hours a day with shifu and trained on their own in the mornings or evenings.

stake is crucial and is used to cultivate the Tai Chi powers, and internal power thus generated is not to be spent by using it martially, it's instead saved for internal transformation. You are encouraged to learn by training and experience rather than through books, and to draw on Taoism to further your understanding. Shifu is excellent at working with his environment, finding good spots to train in, and working with random props.. It's a fantastic teaching style and one I stay true to when teaching in the UK.

WHY THE EMPHASIS ON BASICS?

The Wudang style features a stable of arts, including: Tai Chi, Xingyi, Bagua, Qi Gong, Liangyi, Mian Quan and a host of weapons. However, all these arts have similar requirements in terms of what condition they require of body and mind; so if you train basics to make your waist flexible, to automatically move joint by joint, to relax your hips, to make the body



SHIFU'S TRAINING STYLE

Master Yuan Li Min's style of training has several key characteristics. There's a heavy emphasis on basic skills training where you train one exercise repeatedly until you feel it. Qi is referred to as factually as the rice at lunch, and the basics condition students to feel and control qi, develop intention, and transmit power. Standing

coagulate together and move as one unit – you can do any form. Training basics was excellent for class unity, as both a novice like myself and advanced practitioners could practise the same exercises together but have a completely different experience of them. Just a word from shifu makes the difference to adjust the exercise to your level.

When I first went to China, I stood stake on

my own in the mornings, or with my student teacher Weihai Zhang, when we felt like it. At the school these days, they stand for 45 minutes a day. The notion of growing the Tai Chi powers through standing stake and other basics based on how it feels in the body, rather than coming to know it through the impact it has on another person is hard to accept. The process is slow, and based on the Taoist notion that ‘a ruler must not display his/her weapons’ and energy should be conserved, nourished and transmuted rather than spent on harming others. While at times I have grown frustrated with this traditional Taoist approach, I have had some of my most interesting experiences while standing stake and feel it is truly vital. It is my doctor, my guide, my anchor and my friend. The martial side adds another dimension to learning and helps make for a sociable training atmosphere. Shifu teaches it sporadically, and I’ve developed this further with a little help from my friends. However, it’s not the main focus of what Shifu and I teach.

So you can imagine me, picking up and putting down logs to learn where my waist was, practising Tai Chi walking on platforms overlooking exquisite tea terraces, while blue-clothed workers dot the hills picking tea. Three months turned into six. I learned 48-step Wudang Secret Transmission Tai Chi, Tai Chi sword, and a little bagua. But these forms were just vessels for something more valuable – kung fu skill.

RELATIONSHIPS

The nine young men I trained with had a kung fu level way beyond mine. They also spoke very little English. I realised I needed to learn Chinese quickly or I was going to be lonely, and had Mandarin lessons every day. Meanwhile, I spoke to them in the language of hard work and food appreciation as they took turns cooking each night. The number of students at the school would halve halfway through my stay as they went out to explore the world. The ones who remained have become friends for life.

MOUNTAIN LIFE

Life on the mountain was simple. There was one shop, selling an array of Chinese snacks that were neither sweet nor savoury, but an unsatisfying combination of the two, and some wicked chilli peanuts. Saturday nights consisted of hand-washing clothes, and on later trips, I would sneak in a 20p beer and some peanuts if I wanted

to go wild. 2006 was before tourism came to the mountain; you needed a taxi to get down to the town and once you did it was a nightmare to get up again. But the views were truly spectacular. We went out once a week exploring the mountain, and trained at Baxianguan temple from time to time.

The peace and quiet were a balm for the soul – about 6.5 days a week. But as a city girl, there was only so much I could take before I needed some buzz. I would go and visit a friend I made who trained in town called Catharina Costanzo, and treat myself to some red bean buns and English language conversation. Catharina is the only other woman I met from that time in China who still walks this path, she teaches in Austria to this day.

Eventually, cold and building works pushed me out of the school in December 2006. I left reluctantly, and knew I would be back soon.

LIFE AFTER CHINA

Once back at home in the UK, I felt a longing to go back to China. I kept up with my training, and my Chinese language, developing it in part-time classes, one to one lessons, self-study and return trips to China. I went back to China a couple of times between 2007 and 2009 for several months, working on Five Element Qi Gong, Tai Chi and Sword. My whole life rotated around how I would get back to China. I lived simply, cheaply and without ties. An understanding friend from Barry’s class who ran a publishing house, Jessica Kingsley, employed me to help her set up a Tai Chi publishing imprint called Singing Dragon.

Meanwhile shifu was touring Europe more frequently. I took the term ‘follower’ quite literally, following him to France, Spain and Switzerland as kung fu brethren like Charles Henri Belmonte and Patxi Marta hosted events with Shifu. I trained with shifu at hotels in Geneva as well as the backstreets of Paris and met a host of lovely European Wudang fans. Friends from other circles who also practised Tai Chi in the UK, like Fas and Stuart Verity, helped me stay connected to the Tai Chi world when I was at home.

Eventually I decided to make a go of it with my Chinese Language. I really enjoyed finding Tai Chi authors to write books and using my Mandarin to liaise with Chinese publishing houses during my two years with Jessica. However, by 2009 I had gone as far as I could studying on my own and my level outstripped the courses available in the UK.

After an assessment at SOAS, I was advised to go study in Beijing. I spent a happy year out there, studying with a joy that is perhaps only known to mature students.

BAISHI

In the middle of my year in Beijing, in summer 2010 I decided to become an official disciple of shifu's as a 16th Generation Descendant of the Wudang Pai. My kung fu brothers had been gently nudging me in that direction for a year or so, ever since I asked for a Chinese name. I was told of a ritual where I would have to put shoes on shifu's feet, where I'd get a clan name, become part of the family, and shifu would keep an even closer eye on my progress. In turn, I would do what I could for the good of the clan, and spread the Wudang Arts around the globe.

I was aware it was a commitment, but the time, money and sacrifices already made meant that I was already committed. This was just a formalisation of what was already in my heart. I had to write a declaration of why I wanted to join the clan and read it out during the ceremony. For me it was because I had found a practise that made me happy from within, gave me good tools for life and allowed me to know myself and better understand the world around me. The baishi ritual itself was filmed by a local TV crew and is now up on youtube. I made my declaration in patchy Chinese, and was welcomed into the family.

From the baishi ritual onwards, shifu was stricter, and more was asked of me. It gave me a reason to settle down in London and open a school to maintain the vows I'd made. But it would be a couple more years of trials and tests before I was finally fully accepted and given a name – Yuan Wei Rong 袁微容 – and the task of being an ambassador for the UK.

WHAT BAISHI MEANS

It is only now, with hindsight, as I have watched shifu/follower connections come and go in the time I have been training with shifu, that I see what this kind of connection means. Really, it's a mutual investment, and an agreement to help each other in whatever way you can. It's a public declaration of support and endorsement that binds your reputations together. It's a commitment that enables long-term planning, and an opportunity to get to the juicy stuff - the lesser known bits. I don't think there are secrets, really, but there are certain elements of training

internal arts that people are more willing to talk about than others. It's good to have somebody you can run anything past, especially as the further you progress, the less people there are who can direct you.

SETTING UP A SCHOOL

After spending a year in Beijing studying the language, I got a job with a Chinese news agency in 2011, working freelance as a reporter while I set up my school. For those who don't know, you pay to teach in London when you set up on your own. I took it very seriously, and paid out for 3 years until I broke even. I remember one time at the beginning I followed shifu to France and missed my flight back. I had only one student in my class, who couldn't afford to pay regularly, and that night would be paying me in cookies. I paid out a three figure sum to get back to him in time to teach. The cookies were delicious.

Setting up a school in London was slow, but I started to attract a crew of students, who wanted to learn in depth, and were happy to go slow, study the basics, and really feel what they were doing. As well as local students attending my weekly classes, a little posse of long distance students assembled for the weekend workshops and retreats with myself and shifu. My students bring me much joy. Gathering enough people together to bring shifu to the UK for the first time in 2013 was a big milestone, as was the first class trip to Wudang the year after. Cristian Lopez invited me to give my first workshop as a visiting teacher in 2015, and as my confidence built I began to run my own retreats in the UK. I will give the first one abroad in Spain in April 2019.

The desire to give a talk at these retreats has made me re-examine my years of Tai Chi experience through the forgotten lens of academic rigour. It is this that in part spurred research into the connection between the eight Tai Chi powers and the eight trigrams.

HARD TIMES

Around the spring of 2017, my world as I knew it came undone. My mother, who has Alzheimers, crawled out of the first floor window of our family home and was sectioned shortly after. Shock waves reverberated through the family. My long term relationship was unable to weather the storm and ended shortly afterwards. My best friend moved away, and the local support network which had been such a big part of my life for so



long scattered. While a few key friends remained, the load was heavy and ongoing, and it felt that every piece of ground I tried to push myself up from just dissolved beneath my feet.

This is the sort of time when Tai Chi really comes into its own. I still had something inside me that made me happy and was independent of external circumstance, and I clung to it with everything I had. For a number of reasons, I was the best placed person to advocate for my mother throughout her time on the psychiatric ward and as she went into the care home. I saw much darkness, but also light in between in the cracks; the bonds that exist between people who due to memory shortage have only the present, and the kindness of the mental health staff who care for them.

As life became persistently more challenging, my priorities rearranged. I could not be doing with unnecessary difficulty, and sought joy and ease wherever I could; in my teaching, in my personal life, in my training. The classes which seemed to attract dedicated students stayed open; others closed, and new ones providing low-cost Tai Chi for those who really need it opened in their stead. I practised standing stake a lot.

One of my constant companions in trying circumstance has been the I Ching. This ancient

book of Taoist wisdom has been my companion for even longer than I have been training Tai Chi. It can be read cover to cover for general advice on 384 different life situations, or consulted as a guide for action using coins or yarrow stalks. In my twenties, I had no television, and consulted the I Ching obsessively, in exactly the way you're not supposed to. I gained very little clarity on the situations I was asking about, but I did end up knowing the whole book off by heart. Over the course of time, certain imagery from the I Ching began appearing in my dreams. In daily life, I would sometimes become aware that the situation I was in was represented in the I Ching. I'd know where I was, and what the best course of action was.

And yet, despite the Book of Changes becoming a part of my mental structure, I wasn't really combining it with my Tai Chi practise. On a trip to Scotland in 2015 I met up with Gordon Faulkner and his student Susan? in 2015. Gordon mentioned that the eight trigrams of the I Ching were aligned with the eight main Tai Chi powers, and gave an example of how one of the correlations worked. This concept lay dormant in my brain for a couple of years. Then, after giving an introductory talk on the I Ching at my first UK summer camp in 2017, I started investigating the

correlations.

The Tai Chi powers can be quite elusive. It's easy to practise a movement, but hard to grow a power. The trigrams, with their sequence of yin and yang lines can be read as symbolic instructions on the amount of yin and yang in each power and at what point each should occur. The correlation is pointed out in that seminal text the Tai Chi classics, so in figuring out why each trigram was connected to each power, I felt I was connecting myself directly to the source of Tai Chi hundreds of years ago. This puzzle swirled inside my brain for a number of month; I'd get Eureka moments in the bath, and try different things out when training to see what felt right. Split and Pluck were the hardest ones to crack, but finally I got it, and started to teach this material at weekend workshops.

Training the trigrams definitely helped separate out yin and yang, and the distinct feeling associated with each power. But what do you do with these powers if you are not going to use them to hit people? Shifu's saying to him given by his grandmaster You Xuan De is 'use martial arts to become one with the dao', and he is very clear that's the direction his training is heading in. Not for good health, or martial prowess, we train to internally transform and become one with the dao. It's a lofty goal, with strange side effects, on dreams, perception, and uncanny timing of events, sometimes called wu wei – the practise of not-doing.

But what is it to become one with the dao? How does wu wei work? My interpretation is – each person has their own Way of being. When you find and are true to your own Way, you are more capable to perceive the Way of things around you, and you become more in line with the universal Way. Then, when you move, it's like the universe moves with you. But actually, you are just moving with the flow of the universe. How do you know when you have found your own Way? You will still suffer hardship as we all must know darkness to see the light. But in the good times, it feels like a travelator, like the ground moves with you underneath your feet, and you are somehow carried along on the current of events.

The challenge is to bring this material to the cynical West while staying true to myself and my lineage, and teaching the most authentic Wudang Pai Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Sword I know how. Sixteen years in to training, I am grateful for having found a path through life, with one foot in the tangible and one in the intangible, that keeps me grounded and creates joy. I must say I feel immense curiosity towards the states I will experience in the future. As per my training, I am heading, straight and true towards the ultimate reality that underlies all phenomena, and greatly enjoying the journey on the Way.