



## Focused to win

Interview by Robin Gamble

Jeffrey Alexander Sutherland began his martial arts journey in 1977. He first studied judo and later sam tu-dang, a martial art based on harmony and balance. In 1989 he achieved his first black belt and in 1992 became the world champion at the sam tu-dang golden international championships.

Jeff trained in Chinese martial arts with wushu master Dr Wen Linjun, and completed a teacher training course under him in 2000. He is also certified by Dr Paul Lam to teach tai chi for arthritis and specialises in exercise for fall prevention in older adults.



**Jeffrey Alexander Sutherland**

**H**is School is the Jeffrey Alexander School of Martial Arts (JASMA) in SW London where he teaches tai chi chuan, shaolin chuan, and qigong. He says that he combines traditional teaching values with contemporary training methods.

Meeting Jeff, the first thing that comes across is his air of positivity. He says: “For me that is important in life and also in training, sparring and competing. If you get hit you haven't got time to commiserate. You just put that to the side, be positive and move forward. Even if you're taking multiple hits, during those flurries, you have got to stay focused.

“Whether you're fighting, or pushing hands it's all business. There's no happy, no sad, there's no remorse, you can't be saying 'sorry' when you hit someone. If someone hits you, you can't be waiting for them to say sorry to you. If you win a point you can't be celebrating. If you do you're distracted and then you are open to a counter attack. Whether you hit or get hit you must maintain the same attitude. You work to maintain an equilibrium.

“And that's important. Especially if you claim to be a tai chi person. You need have an understanding of yin-yang, and how yin and yang works with you as a person. Yes, we can read the classics. And we can learn from a teacher about yin-yang but we have to be able to apply the theories to ourselves. Because how it may work for this person might not be the same as how it works for the other person. I think that while many people have a generic understanding of what yin-yang is, they don't really look at themselves. When you look into yourself, and you try to decipher how it works for you, it can be a hard road because you're holding the mirror up to yourself. And there are parts of you, of your personality or your way of doing things that may be out of balance. And a lot of people do not want to address those things. So this whole notion of yin-yang is really important. It is very, very deep.”

Jeff has a long training history, and a lot of competition experiences. He has always kept notes about his experiences. As we said at the beginning he started off in judo in 1977. He says: “I have always been taking notes, for self analysis and improvement and all that. I actually found notes from February 1977. They are about a judo competition I had been in with some other school boys. I had done well, but I didn't feel comfortable with my ground game. From the age of 12 I was writing that stuff down.



“From judo, in around 1986, I went into full contact kung fu, it was kind of a hybrid style. In the 80s, there was a style in the UK known as wushu chuan. A lot of UK practitioners started there but I trained with some guys who branched off. One had his own system, which was based on harmony, balance and neutralising, it was a combination of tai chi, mixed with capoeira, some Chinese kung fu, and a few other bits and bobs.

They were a really clever bunch of guys. One was a doctor, one was an artist, and one was a martial artist. They researched the whole thing. I trained in that style from 1986 and around '89 I started competing. In those competitions, you have to do forms, and full contact sparring. It was interesting. There was one section where you had to do a certain number of takedowns within a certain period of time. And there was a really interesting sparring competition where it was three people sparring on the mat at the same time.

“It is called triangle sparring. So two of you might pair up against one. And then one of them can turn on you so you have to have all your wits about you in all directions. They call that triangle the king boxer. And I was very happy that in 1996 I actually beat my own instructor. So he got bronze and I got silver. That year I also became the world champion for that system. I liked the system, but it was very hard on the body. It was tough, tough, tough, tough.

“When I learned throwing we didn't use mats. We were in a church hall with wooden flooring, and my instructor, Everton, was six foot three and had dreads down to his waist, big ole hands. The guy could do box splits, front splits and do flying sidekicks over my shoulder height, and I'm five foot 11. The guy was an absolute beast and he used to throw us around like a rag doll. It was tough, and that toughness took its toll on my body. I had a hip dislocation though not in class, training outside the classroom with a friend. I dislocated my hip, broke my left and my right leg, and tore my anterior cruciate ligament on the right side. So I started researching. And that's when I found out about tai chi.”

In 1990, Jeff started training with a Chinese doctor, Dr. Wen Linjen, in North London. He taught tai chi,

baguazhang zhang, xingyi chuan, tongbeiquan and shaolin. Jeff started with shaolin it being similar to the styles he had worked with previously. And then tai chi chuan.

Jeff says: "His tai chi was something else.

"The first time I saw the doctor performing tai chi, I had already trained with him for a year in shaolin. As he moved across the hall he looked really heavy, like a barge, but like a barge floating on water. I was really fascinated. It was a dichotomy. I thought: 'how can he look so soft, but yet look so heavy at the same time'. That kind of attracted me to tai chi chuan and I took that up in 1991.

"Wen had learned from his grandfather. When he was six years old he was getting into fights in school. He wanted to defend himself. His grandfather said: "No, when you stop fighting, then I will teach you." By the time he was nine, he had stopped fighting at school and his grandfather started training him. On his way to school, he would go to the grandfather's house and train for an hour. At lunchtime he ran back to his grandfather's, to train again then go back to school, and again on the way home from school.

"He became the trainer for Yunnan Province. Later he graduated at Columbia University of Medicine and came to the UK in 1990. That's where I met him.

"Dr. Wen is a fighter and he was really keen to teach us about the energies. So he would come at us with his favourite move which was cloud hands. He would advance towards you doing cloud hands and he would sit down low, a bit like Tyson, but with cloud hands coming straight at you. And if you didn't get out of the way he'd get you."

A lot of tai chi practitioners are only interested in the health benefits so we asked Jeff whether he thinks it is important or necessary for them to study the application or the fighting aspects?

Personally, I don't think that you can have tai chi without the martial side. I say to my students 'imagine you are a chef. You are the world's greatest chef at making potato salad. You teach all your students how to make potato salad, and they become expert. Three generations later, your descendants go to a potato salad convention. And someone comes along and looks at your potato salad and they see these lumps in it and they ask: "What's that?" And your descendant says: "Potato." And they say: "Well, we don't have that in our potato salad."

"So what do you have in it?"

"Oh, we have mayonnaise. We have apple, we have raisins, we have onions and it tastes nice and looks good."

"But how can you call it a potato salad with NO potato in it?" For me that is like tai chi without the chuan in it.

"So the person might say: 'Well, we didn't have any potatoes where we lived. But, to pay homage to the ancestors, we present our salad in a bowl shaped like potato. So that tells you that we 'know' about potato, and one day, if we find potatoes, our descendants might reintroduce them'.

"Don't get me wrong, we can and do tai chi chuan, or 'tai chi', without the martial application, but you better know that it's not 100% real tai chi chuan.

"A person might not have the ability to practise the combat, or they may not have the interest in the combat, but it is a question of how we teach them. We can teach everybody the form, and then we can teach them the form applications. We can make it interesting. We have the three P's, 'purpose, practice and principle'. So for every movement the student has to know, what is the purpose? How to practise it? And what's the underlying principle?

Does it mean you get to be a fighter? No. But if you know that cloud hands is to catch the person's wrist on the outside gate, move it across to the ground, or, 'brush-knee-and-push' is to push their hand down, you know the application, you know the principle then you can teach somebody that and they can go into competitions.

"I can't overstate how important it is to understand about the basics. The basic drills, to know how to bring the discipline into the training. A lot of people do not train things like flexibility and fitness conditioning. All of that is important. We have our students stand in the horse stance, sitting low for X amount of time, let them suffer a little bit, build up their willpower. So I would say that the combat side, the application side is essential. However, a good teacher can weigh up how much the student needs to learn."

This is an area that Jeff constantly emphasises. The importance of training, not just the forms but for general fitness, something that is frequently overlooked.

"I think that, fitness conditioning for the body as well as the mind is crucial. Flexibility training and the jiben gong is, in my opinion, essential. Not many people really train in that way. The classics never tell us to go jogging. The classics never tell us to stretch every day. To make yourself strong. So why do they not tell us that? They are training manuals, so I ask: how come they're not telling us to do resistance training? Why are they not telling us to run up and down, make ourselves strong and flexible?

"It may well be that they take it for granted that we already are in that condition. But when people read the classics there's no mention of that. So most people don't think they need to do it.

Most of the masters don't show you that side of the training. But they did it when they were children. Like Yang Jun. Now Yang Jun is the person that I train with at the moment. I've been going to see Yang Jun since 2007. And every year I go and see him in seminars, either in Cambridge\* or in Paris. And he hardly ever tells people to practice jiben gong, but he's done a lot of it. You can tell when he does his kicks, when he picks his knee up to kick,



you can tell. And sometimes when he's talking and he demonstrates, while he is talking, you can tell from the way his body moves that he's done the basic drills.

“Yang Jun talks about when he was young, being at home with his grandfather. His grandfather would have

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friends around and Yang Jun would be under the table doing stance training for, hours; literally hours. I have seen children training in China doing four moves in a combination for an hour and a half nonstop. No supervision. No one coming over and saying, keep working. I think, in the West, we don't do those drills enough. We are not exposed to the drills. We are not exposed to the idea of doing one technique over and over again.

This series is about tai chi in combat so it was interesting to hear about instances when tai chi techniques, skills or tactics proved themselves useful to Jeff in a combative environment situation.

“Yes, a couple of times in the street, where things were going a little bit topsy turvy, I was able to apply some of the techniques my teacher showed me.

“In tai chi, if they don't move, we don't move. If they move we move first. I remember I was really fascinated by that, we did a few drills on how to make that happen. On one occasion, a while later, I found myself in a situation where I was confronted by three guys. At one point, there was this kind of a standoff moment, between me and the biggest of these. And he was getting ready to lay on some punches. I remembered the training we did. So I became totally present in that moment. Everything calmed down, everything just disappeared. It was just me and these three guys. And this notion came to me that he's about to move. So then when he then made his move I had already slipped his punch. And I was already right in. The look on his face said ‘wow, how do you get there so quick?’ I still received a beating from the three of them but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. I got a busted lip and had to get stitches, but at one point, it was fantastic. I had all three of them just like in a movie. I had my arms around these guys, heads down and I ran them off into the wall. And then I went down, and then they started laying kicks into me.

“There was something else I learned at that time. The idea of softness during combat. I was still more on the hard side of martial arts. This one guy picked up a broomstick, and came from above striking downwards at me. The system that I studied, said anything comes down this way at you, block, like a karate style block. But my tai chi teacher, said to me now that's not how you should do it. You should do it more on an angle and let it sweep past. Well the stick broke over my arm. And then my assailant pulled a knife and then started stabbing at me with it. So I learned the notion of using the angle to sweep out and not to go 90°, force against force.

“So if they move, then we move first. We can feel their energy, even before they have the thought. The energy moves first, and that's what we can tap into. That's the tai chi theory, about what's happening. But Western sports science theory says there are micro clues that you can pick up on if you're trained. And I believe it is a combination of the two.

“I see a lot of tai chi practitioners getting caught up in all this magic stuff. Tai chi practitioners in the West seem to regard that stuff highly. ‘If I look at you, you're going to go flying’, ‘I breathe on you, you drop down’. I think, that because some people have that notion in the back of their mind, it makes them less likely to be involved in the more practical, nuts and bolts side of tai chi chuan. They are less likely to develop the skill. There are some prominent figures around who act like, tai chi is not really punching, ‘we just brush our hand lightly and they will go flying’.

“Well, I don't know about that. With your body movement, you can lead the other person to make them go flying and if we want to, we can make out like it's a magic skill.

“I remember we were in China once, it was a nice exchange, but there was a guy, he was the main martial artist in this particular group, and he was dressed in combat gear. I think he was a part time military person and also a part time teacher at the school we were visiting and doing some demos. He came over and we were doing a bit of friendly pushing hands and, I kid you not, the guy literally gathered up his chi and tried to fajing me. I couldn't believe he was doing this. He tried to fling me away and of course I just stood there. He tried again. The third time I had to give him a bit of ‘face’ and moved back a little bit so it didn't look so bad. He obviously had this notion in his mind, ‘I'm going to fajing him, and he's going to go flying’. No, because that's not how we play. We play for reality. And there are people out there who have this notion in their mind that they can just pull the wool over people's eyes or just do a few moves and they're going to come out on top. I'm sorry, I know kids, 13 year old, 14 year old, 15 year old kids on the streets that will cane a lot of these people. So we shouldn't promote magic and woo-woo, but real skills bred in reality.



\*A seminar with master Yang Jun is planned for 2024 in Cambridge. No details are available at present. TCC&IA will publish these as soon as we have them.

