

## Inside Taijiquan – an Interview with Wee Kee Jin

By Paul Alexander

One day I am sat at a computer, researching away. The next I am chatting away to Pete Dobson - a Taiji practitioner with 18 years experience - now with the "Taiji School of Central Equilibrium". Pete comes across as a geezer, a really warm guy who coaches boxing - trains with Herbie Hyde - sculpts, runs Buddhist meditation sessions at prisons, has taught Taiji at drug rehabilitation centres....geez, he needs an article of his own to do him justice. Well one thing led to another and Pete had arranged for me to sit in on an advanced Whooping Crane Kung Fu class with his teacher Wee Kee Jin. Wee Kee Jin - or Jin as he prefers - tours the UK and Europe twice a year promoting his Taiji, before popping back for a well earned rest in New Zealand. He rarely teaches White Crane, so this was going to be good.

I spent the day with Pete, Jin, Goju Ryu stylist Bob Honiball and his student Paul Fretter. Bob and Paul are being passed the White Crane system that Wee Kee Jin learnt from Master Huang and that he in turn learnt from Ru Ru Ko.

The day was split into two halves of White crane instruction, broken up by a "Pete Dobson special" for lunch. I could see from the outset that there is an obvious connection to Okinawan Karate, visible in the breathing, sinking and connection of whole body. The forms were beautiful and powerful to the eye, the Crane seemed soft, almost like Taiji....later I was fortunate enough to spend some time talking to Jin, my questions certainly got answers. Before we sat and talked, I asked Jin if there was anything that he wanted me to ask. Jin simply said, "*no, I don't mind, if you ask a good question then you will get a good answer. If you ask a stupid question, then you will get a stupid answer.*" None of the answers were stupid, so I must have done OK - although I chickened out of asking him if he could beat Bruce Lee.....

**PA:** What inspired you to start martial arts?

**WKJ:** *I started at the age of 14 in the Chin Woo association. I studied there for 4 years, then served national service in Singapore, then I stopped. When I was 24, I went to see my uncle in Taiwan, I watched him doing his Taiji form. After that he asked me to try to push him and of course I got thrown all over the place. He mentioned a teacher named Huang Sheng Yuan in Malaysia and Singapore, he said if I was keen I should look him up. So I started.*

**PA:** I understand that you went to live with Master Huang, can you tell me about that?

**WKJ:** *I lived with him for 4 years. I was training full-time, 7 days a week, 8 hours a day. No holiday, no new year. He said that I should learn White Crane and Taiji, so I learnt both systems. At mealtimes he would talk about Taiji, we would get up and push hands, then sit back down and get a drink. We would see some machinery for example, then he would ask me, "what are the Taiji principles there?". When I was there I was the only live-in student, he had about four before me, I was the last.*

**PA:** What was the strangest way that your teacher helped you learn?

**WKJ:** *In 1954, he led the Chen Man Ching school and his White Crane school into competitions. He trained his students by going into a concrete space and pouring water on the floor, then he would tell his students to push hands. If you can stay grounded on a slippery floor in a small area, it is good skill.*

**PA:** I have read your book, I found that you stress training the basics. How important, do you think, are the basics?

**WKJ:** *When people say that I am very advanced in Taiji, it is not that I am doing something different. Advanced in Taiji is that you have a deeper understanding of the principles. After 5 years, 10 years, the beginner, the advanced student, the same principles are worked on but the understanding different. I practice the forms, the 37 short form, 20 years on I will still be doing the form. 50 years.....still doing the form! What happens inside the form changes, that is why I say that advanced is only a deeper understanding of the basic principles. It doesn't mean something different.*

**PA:** You must still practice the basics then?

**WKJ:** *Yes. This is why, when I am asked what I do in my practice, I never tell, because the public will think that it is so boring! When one starts to learn simple things, they then start to go for the complicated things. When you reach a certain level you find that it is unnecessary to go on, instead you must go back. When you go back, you will find a different place to where you first were. I always say, the basics are the most monotonous and boring, the most simple yet most difficult things to do.*

**PA:** There is a saying, "learning is fun but training is boring", do you agree?

**WKJ:** *No, that is not true. That is why first, if you are to learn any art, you must first prepare to discipline yourself. If you don't have the mind or space to discipline yourself to practice everyday consistently, then don't learn. After years the practice must not be a discipline. It must be an enjoyment. If it is still a discipline then there is an enforcing factor. When you enjoy it, it is different. For me, I enjoy it.*

**PA:** So it has become a major part of your life?

**WKJ:** *Yes.....beside my wife. The Taiji principles say that you have to balance everything.*

**PA:** What would you say are the differences between White Crane and Taiji?

**WKJ:** *Before his death in 1992, my teacher told me that he felt that he had been unfair to his White Crane teacher because he spent more time promoting Taiji than White Crane. So I hoped that I could promote White Crane for him. But the more I go into Taiji, the more I realise why, in the end, my teacher stopped doing Crane. White Crane and Taiji are basically based on the same principles. If you take a diamond, White Crane is an uncut diamond, Taiji is a polished diamond. So I noticed that as one gets more refined, they don't want to do rough things.*

**PA:** So one would move onto Taiji naturally?

**WKJ:** *Yes. Taiji is something that one can do when 50 or 60 years old. Harder styles are for younger people mostly. That is the way it goes. But I must stress that White Crane is not an external art.*

**PA:** A lot of people seem to be preoccupied with whether an art is external or internal. What do you think the differences between the two are?

**WKJ:** *Actually it is a misconception. It is said that external is a hard style, internal is a soft style. The real meaning of internal is; that an external art is imported from outside China, an internal art is one that has originated from inside China. Shaolin was brought in from India, this is why it is an external art. Also, within so called internal and external arts there are hard and soft styles. So White Crane is a soft style and Taiji is also a soft style.*

**PA:** Do you still train "hard" White Crane? Have you adapted more Taiji into it?

**WKJ:** *The White Crane itself is a soft style, it is not a hard style. People mistake this because if you do White Crane without following the principles, you do the same as a hard style martial art. When my*

teacher, Master Huang, first met Chen Man Ching, he didn't believe that my teacher didn't do Taiji. White Crane should be relax, relax, relax...and also remember that the founder was a woman.

**PA:** Do you think that the fighting side of Taiji is very important?

**WKJ:** *It is not really important in the sense that the health is the foundation. At first start for health, then progress more into the Taiji, more into the martial arts. I always suggest the beginner goes for health. What is the point of being a good fighter who is always sick? Right? For the martial arts side, you must go for the philosophy side. The philosophy of Taiji is about how to be a human being. That is more important. For students who cannot decide if they want to study Taiji, I always say - if you want to kick and punch you do Shaolin or Karate, if you want to throw people around you do Aikido or Judo, if you want patience and perseverance you do Taiji. You want the best martial art, don't train or practice...get yourself a gun! It is important to stress though that Taiji is only for defence. In Taiji, overcome movements from your stillness, overcome other peoples actions with non-actions. When you reach a higher skill of Taiji, when people push you, you don't even have to neutralise, you just take the force down because it will bounce back up. The highest level of Taiji is called "receiving force". But for me this is still not the highest level of Taiji. For this you have to go to the philosophical side, when you learn to become human. You are so nice that nobody wants to fight with you. That is the highest level.*

**PA:** If you had to label the style that you teach, would it be Yang family?

**WKJ:** *It is a very strong Yang style. Chen Man Ching is from Yang Cheng Fu, he simplified the 37 form based on the Yang style. My teacher was Chen Man Chings student, but the way we do it, especially in the transitions, is different from most Chen Man Ching schools. My teacher had surpassed his teachers. When my teacher left for Singapore in 1956, Chen Man Ching told him, "in 7 years time you will be better than me". So my teacher put his understanding in. So I wouldn't want to say if my Yang style is Chen Man Ching or Huang....I prefer to call myself Taiji Quan. The style is created by man, it is only a type of movement created to follow the Taiji principles.*

**PA:** So do you think that a Taiji form is the most important thing?

**WKJ:** *The form is a set of movements created for you to be able to put the principles into your body. It is only a set of tools. In the end any movement that you do should follow the principles of Taiji. So my teacher said, "you should learn principles, not movements". A lot of people like to learn a lot of movement, but not many people like to learn just one move. A lot of people like to teach a lot of movement, but not many people like to teach one movement. If you teach movement, you will finish teaching the form, then you must have another form to teach. If you teach a principle then there is no end. The way I teach is the same way as my teachers taught. They let you feel the body so that you know what happens within the body. Being told to relax or sink can be confusing, but if I let you feel the body, then you know what is happening. Although you cant do it now, you know what should happen. Then use the mind to visualise the plan. That is how my teacher taught.*

**PA:** How is the school in New Zealand?

**WKJ:** *I don't have a big class in New Zealand because I teach in Europe for half of the year. In New Zealand, I only have students that have trained with me for a long time, 10 years maybe. They teach beginners in their schools. I don't tell my students that they must teach under my school, they can go away and teach. When their students have been training for 3 or 4 years and are really keen, then they can come and train under me. As teachers, when the time is right, you must allow your students to go out and teach. Not to encase them because when they teach, they progress. Teaching is another phase of learning, also we can get more people learning Taiji. I don't want an organisation, they tend to spend more time talking politics than they do practicing and teaching!*

**PA:** I have heard that you are fond of push hands, do you think that push hands is very important to Taiji practice?

**WKJ:** *Yes, it is a very important part of practice. In the form you try to be synchronised, balanced, connected and relaxed without any external force. In the push hands you get an external force. You learn to listen to the force coming in, more importantly you harmonize. You then ask yourself, "what were my reactions to that force?"*

**PA:** If you had to measure training between push hands and form, would you say 50/50?

**WKJ:** *No. I would say 2/3 of the time train form, 1/3 push hands. Most people get it the other way around. The form is the foundation, what you do in the form is the same as what you do in push hands.*

**PA:** Do you think that push hands should be taken competitively?

**WKJ:** *I don't mind competitions, as long as the principles of Taiji are followed. If push hands turns into wrestling, it becomes strength, not Taiji principles. In the practice of push hands I think that most people only think of pushing, but that is the product of push hands. The foundation is to receive. Learn to receive the force. If you can receive the force then you can take the force into the ground, the push comes naturally. It is why in push hands practice, in Taiji practice on the whole, if you want to get good in Taiji you must let go of your pride and ego, that is the most difficult thing. To have 100% faith in not using brute force and not to overcome others but learn to overcome yourself.*

**PA:** Do you practice with weapons?

**WKJ:** *In the White Crane we only do the walking stick. In our system of Taiji we have staff, spear and swords.*

**PA:** What is your favourite weapon?

**WKJ:** *M16.....no, sword.*

**PA:** Do you practice with weapons a lot?

**WKJ:** *No, in fact I practice on my forms. The form is the earth, the sword is the water, the spear is the fire, the sabre is metal, the staff is wood, everything comes from the earth. Weapons are only extensions of your arms, so it goes back to basics again.*

**PA:** Some of the stories about the masters of old are quite mystifying, do you think that they are true?

**WKJ:** *Yes. I believe certain things are truth, but there are exaggerations over the years, like Chinese whispers. Certain things are truth, certain things might be mystical. Teachers should be careful not to mystify things. Facts are facts, not facts are not facts. When people see my teacher on tape with people bouncing off of him, they ask me if it is truth. Then I explain to them, if he didn't have the skill, I wouldn't have given up 4 years of my life to live with him. I used to try to explain to them, but now I don't even want to try. I say if you believe its true then its true, if you don't then its not. I would rather spend my time training than wasting it on explaining to people who cannot accept the truth.*

**PA:** Do you think that Taiji has been watered down over the years?

**WKJ:** *Let me put it this way. If it has all of the principles then it is Taiji, if it doesn't then it is not Taiji. Some people might come and just want exercise, that is a good thing. But you have to explain to them the principles.....to be upright etc. Whether they want to come just for exercise or not is up to them.*

**PA:** How do you see your school progressing over the next few years?

**WKJ:** *My goal is to help people. Most people know about Taiji, they don't have to practice with me, what is important is to practice Taiji. If you do an exercise that is a martial art, it must be a martial arts exercise that can last your whole life. It is pointless to do something that you cannot do when you are 30 or 40 years old. If, when you are 60 years old, you cant do it, it means the time spent before is wasted. Also, if you do a martial art or any exercise, you must choose one that doesn't injure you. If it causes injuries, then what is the point in doing it? So for me it is not important. As for me, my schools progression, I just like to practice, I leave the school to other people.*

**PA:** What do you think makes a good student?

**WKJ:** *A student must not have a bias opinion. When practicing be open-minded, if you keep looking at lots of different styles you will learn nothing from them, you will keep looking for their faults. Try when you look to look for good in them. It doesn't matter who takes the class, you always go in with the concept - what can I learn from this person? We all have something to learn. When you know how to spot a mistake, it is an improvement, at least you know that there is a mistake. If you cant spot your mistakes, then you don't improve. More importantly, if you spot a mistake in others, ask yourself - do I have that habit? Then correct yourself. I think that it is important for a student to be open. Also to not idolise the teacher.*

**PA:** Do you think that there is a lot of that in martial arts?

**WKJ:** *Yes. When you idolise the teacher, whatever he says you follow without thinking. Blind worship. A teacher must not allow the student to idolise him. When a teacher has a student that idolises him, he gets carried away, then he starts to believe things that are not true. Best thing is to be down to earth, if you are down to earth you are connected, grounded.*

**PA:** So what do you think makes a good teacher?

**WKJ:** *In my book I said that a good teacher is not necessarily a famous teacher, or one who has written a good book. A good teacher must be able to explain and embody the principles, to teach the student what they know without keeping secrets. Do not treat the student as a slave, "this my student!", this is not your student but Taiji's student! Most teachers try to hold on to the students, you must let them be free.*

**PA:** You teach workshops around Europe, are they suitable for beginners?

**WKJ:** *In the workshops I always start with the basics. The system has 5 up and down movements, then the form, then push hands. When I am asked why I teach people who have trained 2 years and 10 years in the same class, I say that I teach the same thing, but what they understand and absorb are different.*

**PA:** So if you had someone with 10 years experience, could they still get something the workshop?

**WKJ:** *You must understand the basics of your system. If you don't understand the basics, then you don't understand the way you do form or push hands. The way that you do the basics and push hands is the same, if everything is different then it is disconnected. It is like going to study English, learning the ABC, then making words, then sentences, then essays. You don't go to English schools to learn the ABC, write in German and talk in Chinese.....it doesn't make sense!*

**PA:** Could you give any advice to those beginning their martial arts journey?

**WKJ:** *I think as a beginner you should go to many places to try out. But at some time you must make a decision to take one style that you are comfortable with, to follow one teacher that you are confident with. If you keep going to different styles, it is like trying to choose different airlines to go to the same*

*place. As long as the teacher follows the principles, then you will end up at the same destination. Some take longer, some shorter, but you will get to the same place. If you go to many different styles you will end up confused.*

**PA:** Do you think it is important to train in the mornings?

**WKJ:** *The benefit that you get from one hours training in the early morning is like four hours in the afternoon. This is because the mind is fresh. I start at 4 o'clock and do three hours in the morning. I sleep at about 9 or 10 at night.*

**PA:** Any last words of advice for Taiji practitioners?

**WKJ:** *You don't just learn or do the form, you have to understand the form. How the movements are created, how to understand the secret of receiving is the greatest work. Everything becomes connected, when you push hands I am connected, like a sponge. A sponge only goes in as far as you push it, then when you release, it releases. "Don't just learn the movements, understand the principles"*

**PA:** These words echoed through my mind as I headed for the train station. Pete and Jin kindly gave me a lift, in the car I realised that their relationship had become more than student-teacher, it was a friendship. When I had pushed Jin I just rebounded off his body, without any obvious movement. Wee Kee Jin had fried my brain, inspired me and given me a lot to think about. I train Yin Fu Bagua with He Jing Han and inside him is the spiralling force of Bagua. Inside Wee Kee Jin was Taiji. These are martial artists that embody the purity of their system. They never ask to be called "master", but never-the-less, the system seems to master them.

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**Paul Alexander, 2004.**

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