

# A tai chi fighter

Interview by Robin Gamble

Barry McGinlay is a world tai chi champion, a European gold medalist, and has coached international, world, european and national tai chi champions. He has also competed in kickboxing at an international level. He is an instructor of the Longfei Taijiquan Association of Great Britain under the lineage of master Li Tianji and frequently trains with master Simon Watson. With over 30 years of experience, Barry is dedicated to teaching all aspects of martial arts and has been a tai chi and qigong practitioner for 18 years.

He has also studied hap ki do for over 30 years and has been teaching the discipline for more than 15 years. He is the head instructor of the London School of Hap Ki Do and is the founder of Tai Chi Life, a vibrant contemporary school based in the heart of London

**B**arry McGinlay is a martial artist with a strong base in the hands-on and competitive realms of tai chi, so I asked him how he feels about practitioners with seemingly miraculous powers of qi?

“You have to put your money where your mouth is,” says McGinlay. “Nowadays, if you want to test your tai chi there are a lot of ways to do it. For example in kick-boxing, sanda/san shou (Chinese kickboxing) or shuai jiao (Chinese wrestling) and tui shou/push hands competitions. In the past perhaps there weren’t so many opportunities. Now there are lots.

“But some people want money for old rope. You see people trying to feed this excessive spirituality but not having the minerals with the martial stuff, you need to mix it up. People feed this stuff more and more and some of these people are really good at marketing. These days a lot of energy is spent on marketing and people want to believe they can move you without touching you.

“Good for them perhaps but sooner or later it’ll come around. I remember being at the big Hannover tai chi gala and there was three hours of free push hands and maybe 200 people. A great chance for skill sharing. But you get some tai chi gurus who are there to teach but when the chance to freely push hands comes, they just sit there and don’t want to get involved. That’s not my thing. You need to get hands-on, you’ll win some and you’ll lose some, it’s only natural.”

One thing that triggered Barry’s interest in martial arts was growing up watching Bruce Lee’s movies. He told me that it made him want to learn different styles of martial arts. He started boxing at St. Pancras boxing club, and then learned judo in Scotland.

He says: “I came to London at 11 and got into judo again, then some aikido and then hapkido in 1980. At the same time I did kickboxing and then freestyle kickboxing and I did competitions. Then I broke my leg in a motorbike crash and I got into wing chun. Because of my leg I thought: ‘let’s focus on the upper body techniques in wing chun’.

“I trained in wing chun intensively for five years and learned siu lim tao and did lots of sparring. Later I got into tai chi. I was with a teacher for ten years until he started getting too ‘guru’d out’ for me. This is when the empiricism starts to take a back seat and you can’t ask questions any more and a sort of cult feeling develops in class. So I switched to bagau zhuang and trained quite intensively and then did some silat.” [The collective name for a number of martial arts from South East Asia. Mainly street fighting systems.]

“At the same time I had a Korean hapkido teacher who introduced me to the diamond sutra, a foundational text of



Mahayana Buddhism. So also I had this scholar warrior approach and wanted to challenge and test myself in different scenarios and systems.

“Then I went back to kickboxing in the World Association of Kickboxing Organisations (WAKO) rule book. (You might have heard of Don ‘The Dragon’ Wallace and Bill ‘Superfoot’ Wallace, they were famous WAKO guys.) I was asked to do a trial for the UK team and I competed internationally. I also acquired a 2nd Dan in hapkido.”

McGinlay believes that practitioners shouldn’t be afraid to step outside their skill set and learn another system, or to compete. He says that he meets a lot of teachers who won’t step outside their martial arts system which leads me to wonder when they are doing their field research.

“In kickboxing I did world championships in three different countries and I came away with a bronze in the worlds,” he says. “In tai chi I’ve competed in the UK mainland, Europe and Asia and I learned a great deal from it. You even see some skullduggery, and naughtiness that happens in the competitive environment. More recently I’ve taken up Brazilian jujitsu and I find I can transfer a lot of my skills from Chinese martial arts into it.”

We know that many tai chi practitioners are only interested in the health aspects of the art. But he feels getting into aspects of the martial side can still be helpful. He says: “They don’t have to be fully submerged in the martial element but partner exercises will improve their sensitivity and awareness. They can have someone testing their structure which will make their solo practice more solid and complete. When we go through the form and implement skills from partner work it improves the awareness of the form work. You can think of it like getting double helpings, you know, double the benefits. Practitioners who combine partnered application work and forms will be stronger, they won’t be on a one way highway. They will understand both sides of the coin, form and application. It is important for teachers to give students that opportunity to learn both sides of the art.

“How well you present that concept is down to the skill of the teacher. I think of it like this: when you are a parent you learn to trick your children into doing things that are really good for them but that they don’t want to do, like eating vegetables. It’s tricking in a good sense. As a teacher you sometimes need the same skill. Students often say they don’t want the martial aspect, then next thing they say: ‘hey, look, I’m doing push hands and I’m enjoying it and I didn’t think I would’. They did not know they needed the applications but they ended up liking it.”

The mention of being a parent to your students raises an interesting concept. Barry told me that he thinks of it as bringing life experience to a teaching practice.





“Now, this is no disrespect to those teachers who aren’t parents but life experience as a coach is important. As a parent you need to offer compassion and compromise. The same with teachers and students, you can learn from your children and students. I am interested in this dynamic.”

Any interview about tai chi in a combat environment inevitably leads to the question of using tai chi in a street fight. So has tai chi ever helped Barry McGinlay in a combative environment?

“Yes,” he says, “there are a few, some on the street and other places that have been close quarters and intense. I haven’t always been the person who I am today. I have been a different kind of person and sometimes strayed from the right path. For me martial arts has been like martial arts therapy. I grew up a bit rough and I was looking for something deeper in martial arts. I encountered a lot of things on that path.

“Most recently in London, I saw this guy who was hooded up on a bike and clearly pursuing a woman, I guessed to mug her, it made me very uncomfortable. So I stood and watched and eventually said ‘Oi! leave the woman alone’ and he replied with ‘f\*\*\*k off’. He changed his course and came cycling towards me. As he came closer I saw he had a big knife drawn and I said ‘Wooh, hang on’. The scenario had changed drastically from fist vs fist to fist vs blade. So I put myself behind the bike rack and moved around to put a barrier between us, then dived into the pub and came out with a pint glass and said ‘OK, let’s go!’... nothing happened. The thug said: ‘We’ll go to Primrose Hill and have a one-on-one,’ and I said: ‘No we won’t’.

“My point is, after a lifetime of martial arts you are always monitoring the situation at a micro level. Importantly, the woman didn’t get mugged, or raped. She experienced a member of her community looking out for her. I didn’t get caught up in my story of being a martial



artist ‘I’m gonna take him out’ and rush in and get stabbed and a punctured lung or kidney. You need sensitivity and awareness. First rule is *if you are there, don’t be there*. It wasn’t even. It was knife against fist. So the situation changed. But what happens afterwards is you think: ‘This is crazy, why didn’t I do this or that or so and so...’ But most importantly I did what needed to be done and there was no violence.

“A lot of other scenarios in my past have been short and sharp and it wasn’t beautiful, more just a reaction. Also being able to talk people down. On many occasions I’ve managed to defuse things. I’ve learned this from tai chi and being around teachers who can talk and articulate themselves. I believe the voice is a really important weapon and should be used long before physical violence.”

There is then the question of what a tai chi person can do to improve their combat efficiency. McGinlay’s advice is to go and spar with lots of different people. He says: “In the question you’ve already insinuated that they are practising combat. So now, go and spar. Like in BJJ we’ve got an open-mat. Anyone can come and ‘roll’ which is sparring within the BJJ rule set, black belts with white belts and so on. So go to open push hands, san shou or shia jiao meet ups and express skill and share it. Share notepads with other practitioners.”

According to McGinlay the one thing that holds back combat efficiency in tai chi practitioners is fear. Fear of getting hurt, fear of looking stupid, fear of making mistakes, of not looking good. Fear of going outside the box of the form. “And fear of hard work,” he says. “They don’t want to work hard. They come to tai chi thinking it’s easy. It has a big name to live up to ... supreme ultimate. Real progress is not easy.”

These days people who want to engage in martial arts





have lots of options. We have BJJ, muay thai and MMA among others. It can seem strange that anyone would take up tai chi as a martial art. According to McGinlay it is because it comes across as the scholarly approach to martial arts.

“There is also the warrior aspect to it. It’s like the thinking man’s martial art. And when we talk about it as a martial art, a martial art should have weapons. BJJ doesn’t have weapons, modern muay thai doesn’t have weapons. But it must have a weapon to be a martial art, or it’s just a sport. If you are learning a martial art, you need weapons, learning fighting is different, fighting is not martial arts. Martial arts is a culture and a philosophy. Like budo, like Taoism, like Buddhism. There isn’t philosophy in raw fighting. So if you want something more, something that includes philosophy you might consider tai chi.”

“Talking about BJJ, I’ve been surprised how much carry over from tai chi I’ve used. Tai chi gives you such a strong foundation. I can’t say all of my benefits are from tai chi, but neither can others who have cross trained. So many people cross train. Even those ultra authentic guys in Chen village saying: ‘We are the original and authentic tai chi’. Rubbish. They do sanda, Chinese wrestling and so on. So it’s difficult for me to answer that question because I’ve learned different styles.

“But that has given me the ability to take things apart and put them together. Tai chi gave that to me. I’ve competed in world championships and kickboxing and against people who are way bigger than me, and tai chi gave me that too. And I’m not riddled with injuries like so many of my contemporaries. I put it down to my high interest account in tai chi, my ‘body bank’ is my tai chi and qigong. I swear by it. So for longevity it’s amazing. In the immediate sense you might not get quick benefits like in krav maga or MMA, but they’ll come later. With tai chi it takes longer to understand it. But those principles help me and I put them into BJJ.”

McGinlay thinks that, in combat, tai chi shows economy of movement, is relaxed and very direct: “Beauty and the beast,” he says.

“A lot of people talk about whether it’s wrestling and striking and I think it’s a combo of both of them. You see beauty in the form and beast in combat. Pretty and ugly. Prettiness of the form expressing the beauty and then the ugliness of the application. It’s ‘heavy hands’. I learned a lot from Simon Watson and Alex Kozma about that. Ugly, a beast and very direct.”

Finally, McGinlay talked about shen fa and zhong power, two big discoveries that he says that he has made in the past two years. “Shen fa is not just in the limbs,” he says, “and zhong power is shock power. Also allowing myself to relax my body more, and not mistaking that for being collapsed. Relaxed but at the same time being fast

and agile, and knowing when to put that heaviness on. I’m learning more freestyle push hands but with strikes added. So it looks a bit like chi sao, from wing chun. Heavy hands striking the body.

“That’s something I learned from Simon Watson and his teacher master Wang. Master Wang and Simon have that combat aspect in their body and can show and teach it in a really simplified way. Not complicated. I often see tai chi being taught in a complicated way and it shouldn’t be. I’ve learned a hell of a lot from Simon Watson and master Wang. Simon is interesting because he hasn’t done anything but tai chi. He is really under the radar but very effective. 🙏🏻



**Barry McGinlay**

### Dedication

Barry McKinlay wrote: I would like to dedicate this interview and my experience of tai chi and qigong over the last 20 years to Richard Watson of Longfei Tai Chi Association, who has recently passed away. Both Richard and his son Simon have been a huge influence in my learning and development of pushing hands, tai chi forms and weapons and my deeper understanding of tai chi and qigong culture, the history and philosophy of Chinese culture and its place within martial arts. I could not have achieved the level of understanding I have without the guidance and support of this great partnership of father and son, which is very rare to see. Richard was such a humble gentleman, very knowledgeable about many things not just martial arts but also about family life and how to have a harmonious, happy family life. This very much shone through his relationship with Simon, his son, and Karen, his daughter in law. Richard and Simon not only taught me a lot about tai chi and qigong, I have been indirectly shown how to be a good human being. I would like to thank the Watson family for all their generosity and everything, they have shared with me.

Thanks,  
Barry.