

TAI CHI

Dan Docherty

1954-2021

a tai chi journey

From karate in Glasgow to winning the South East Asia full contact championships: Suse Coon tracks Dan Docherty's tai chi journey

Overleaf 

TAI CHI JOURNEY

This article was originally written as part of a tribute to Dan Docherty's achievements in 50 years of martial arts, which he celebrated in August, both in person and via zoom. As the article was put together, our conversations covered footballing nuns (where I lived as a child overlooked his convent school), R.D. Laing* (that was an accidental message that appeared one night and rambled back and forth for half an hour until 'Mr Bruachladdich' appeared), the effects of 'this virus' and climate change on teaching tai chi and the invasion of China by the British. All typical of Dan's wider interests and concerns.

His accomplishments as a competitive fighter and teacher are legendary.

His first venture into martial arts was a karate course at Bellahouston Sports Centre in Glasgow in 1971 when he had just finished school. He was a black belt by the time he finished university in 1974 and went to study further in Paris. Having gained his LLB he joined the Inner Temple and read for the bar by correspondence course while still training in karate and reading about other martial disciplines.

Teaching martial arts seemed a much more agreeable way of earning a living than being a solicitor in Glasgow. He was fascinated by the sound of tai chi chuan but the tai chi chuan on offer at home was poor quality (taught by a dance teacher) and Dan knew it should be better.

Just as he was coming to the conclusion that he would have to go to the far east to train, he spotted an advertisement in *The Observer* recruiting inspectors for the Royal Hong Kong Police and saw a way to find a more meritorious teacher. He flew out to Hong Kong in 1974 and, after visiting some dodgy clubs with links to the triads (not a good idea for a policeman) George Button, the chief physical training instructor at the police training school put him on to Cheng Tin Hung. Cheng Tin Hung's tai chi was different from anything Dan had seen before, with its emphasis on evasive footwork and neigung. Dan had found his master.

Much of this can be read in *Wild Colonial Boy, Tales of a Kung Fu Cop*, which offers many insights to the relationship that developed over the years between Dan and sifu Cheng Tin Hung. But though Dan wanted to teach, he wanted to earn the right to address his master on the subject. He wanted to become an international champion to prove the art, then he could teach anywhere. There were teachers who were not champions. That was not the sort of teacher Dan wanted to be.

*Ronald David Laing (7 October 1927 – 23 August 1989), usually cited as R. D. Laing, was a Scottish psychiatrist who wrote extensively on mental illness.



Cheng Tin Hung demonstrates while Dan translates



Application with student

Chinese Full Contact fighting competitions are held on a raised platform without a rope. Opponents come from any martial art but few represented tai chi chuan and any part of the body is fair game except the groin. On one occasion Dan witnessed a young man being killed by a kick to the neck – perfectly legal. Cheng Tin Hung had brought Dan onto the board to help with translations and no doubt his honed lawyerly mind was a great asset. Gloves were worn which limited the tai chi moves that could be applied, but with only one year's training, and despite competing in the heavyweight division, two up from his natural place, he won the Chinese full contact championships, following this up by coming second in the South East Asian championships.

Honour

In 1980, Dan again made it through to the final of the South East Asian championships, only to meet Lohandran, the man who had defeated him on points four years earlier. While Cheng Tin Hung would stop at nothing to win (he offered Dan anabolic steroids, which Dan, son of two Scottish doctors, declined, telling him "I'll never take this kind of shit") he did advise him that he had done enough by the time he qualified for the final and could withdraw against the Malaysian Heavyweight champion without shame. Despite being already badly injured, Dan didn't see it that way. He said that people would interpret his withdrawal as fear which would discredit the school and the whole tai chi discipline, so went ahead – and won.

Respect

In Chinese society, you show respect to your teacher by doing anything for him but Dan, partly because he was working as a full time police officer and partly because of his own sense of integrity, made up his own mind. "If you do bad things, you'll attract bad karma," he said

Nor does Dan demand blind respect from his own students. "You can't," he said. "They have to give it to you. We all make mistakes. Mistakes you learn from if you have some intelligence. I sort of see myself as one of the Chinese errant knights, the *youxia*, who travelled around trying to avoid talking to people, meeting friends but making



The knock out (KO) of Roy Pink at the Chinese martial art full contact championship enemies.”

As Cheng Tin Hung gave Dan more and more of his time, using him for demonstrations, making him an inner door student and developing his skills, the two authored a book, which Dan published, simply called *Wutan Tai Chi Chuan*, which illustrated and explained the moves in the hand form as well as putting tai chi into historical and cultural perspective.

International

Dan was not the first Scot to train under Cheng Tin Hung – Ian Cameron had been a student three years earlier and by this time had a school in the Edinburgh area under the name Five Winds. While the two didn't always see eye to eye, Dan always regarded Ian as his older brother.

After nine years, Dan felt the time was coming when he could return to the UK and follow his dream of setting up an International School. Eschewing his hometown of Glasgow, Dan went to the biggest city in Europe which happened to be London. He took the name given by Hong Kong journalists to Cheng Tin Hung's school – Practical Tai Chi Chuan.

Cheng Tin Hung himself taught in a chaotic fashion and was never seen to do the form from beginning to end. As many students were illiterate, and as nothing was written down anyway, classes were taught using mnemonics, like chanting, with stories that were not necessarily relevant to the movement but were memorable. Hence also the square form with the yat yi san count. Dan decided something more orderly was necessary when he started his own school.

“There was a South London newspaper where I read about a centre that was looking for martial arts teachers, so I went along. The area was full of ethnic people, Middle Eastern, Indian, West Indian, it was a really interesting place. The school was an illegally occupied school building, which would have been empty otherwise. They had nothing so I taught the manager, my first student, Michael Jacques for nothing.”

Michael knew a lot of people so word of mouth, as well as leaflets and posters, brought more and more students. Dan's first invitation to teach overseas came from Ilpo Jalamo in Finland. His reputation was further enhanced following an eight page full colour interview with Terry O'Neill in *Fighting Arts Magazine*. People had never seen photographs of Chinese full contact fighting before – and the rest is history.

Dan's plans to be an internationally renowned and respected teacher of tai chi chuan came to fruition and many of his students have also achieved competitive success. He was instrumental in founding the Tai Chi Union and the Tai Chi Federation for Europe to ensure quality teaching and fair judging of competitions, though sometimes found himself at odds with fellow committee members. He never suffered fools gladly.

So what now?

Dan's answer was to quote the poet Li Bai who said, “Going up or going down is predestined. There is no point consulting a fortune teller.”

Asked whether he himself was as fatalistic he replied, “You can change things.”

Things certainly changed 15 years ago when Dan was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Remembering that his sifu had often been debilitated by diabetes, but just got on with it without complaining or feeling sorry for himself, he chose to do the same, to adopt the daoist principle of wuwei and 'go with the flow'.

“But,” he said, “things became a bit more serious.” He began writing even more. He recently added a collection of stories about his time in Hong Kong, entitled *Wild Colonial Boy*, to his books and translations of tai chi and the classics. When he died, he had been planning to publish a revision of the classics. “The longer you live, if you keep your eyes open and your ears to the door, you learn things and you see more connections,” he explained.

Tai chi chuan was a great help in dealing with his condition. Dan practised four sessions a day, neigung, qigong, form and whatever he was teaching, not necessarily slowing down or conceding anything. “The form is like a river,” he said. “The speed changes, it's not always fast or always slow; it's fast at the right time and



Dan karate

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slow at the right time.” Pre Covid, Dan and some of his students taught falls prevention classes to elderly people, which is quite a humbling thought. “It’s important to maintain your physicality,” he said. “And your mentality. But tai chi is good for that. We can learn a lot from the Chinese.”

Zoom

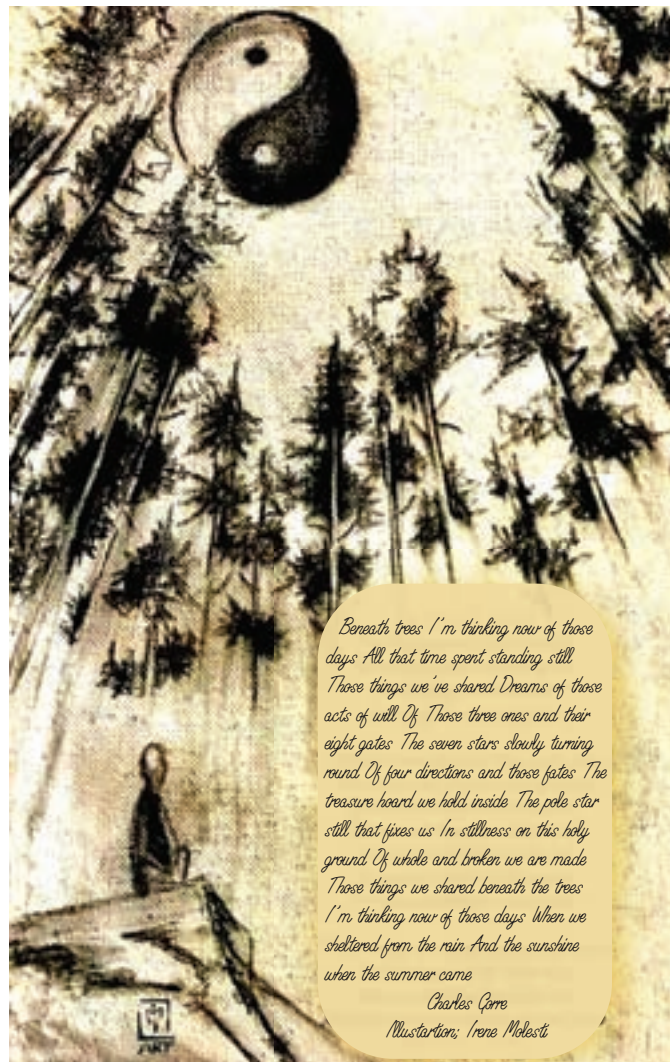
As for the future, “Zoom is the way forward,” he predicted. “It’s too expensive and dangerous to do anything in person just now. And climate change is going to affect our lifestyle. The days of travelling around to classes and festivals are over for now at least.” (And will be missed by those attendees who loved the open air classes and home cooking that accompanied them.) “Maybe people are doing their own practice. I hope so. People think they attend classes to learn but the best way to learn is one on one and you can still do that to some extent on zoom.”

Workshops planned

While Dan continued to teach in person at workshops, he had planned a series of workshops on hand and sword forms for 2022, from his home 'Docherty Towers' in London.

“Things could be worse,” he told me. “There are bad days and good days. Life is about a balance of time, energy and money. I just do the best I can each day.”

And that seemed a good place to close the interview. Dan requested a couple of changes and said there were more to come but never forwarded them. I am indebted to Caroline Izzard and Charles Gorrie for their help in improving and clarifying these words.



*Beneath trees I'm thinking now of those days
All that time spent standing still
Those things we've shared Dreams of those
acts of will Of Those three ones and their
eight gates The seven stars slowly turning
round Of four directions and those fates The
treasure hoard we hold inside The pole star
still that fixes us In stillness on this holy
ground Of whole and broken we are made
Those things we shared beneath the trees
I'm thinking now of those days When we
sheltered from the rain And the sunshine
when the summer came*

Charles Gorrie

Illustration: Irene Molesti

Caroline Izzard, organiser of the camp celebrating Dan Docherty's 50 years in martial arts.

Previously, Weedon in Northants had seen several one-day workshops with Dan Docherty. It was decided to turn the August 2021 workshop into a three day camp. In the run-up to this, Dan announced August marked his 50th anniversary of being in martial arts. How were PTCCI practitioners to acknowledge this occasion – at the same time as respecting that there were still Covid guidelines to follow – and Dan kept telling us he didn't really want a fuss?



Around 40 people attended over the three days, including some highly respected practitioners from as far afield as Orkney and the Isle of Wight. Most of the training was done outdoors, with a strong emphasis on applications and advanced training with, of course form work, drills, partner work and weapons. Being safely back together again in a training space felt good.

We planned that those who wished, both Saturday and Sunday – could stay on for food and drink in the hall – a much needed time to be together after lockdowns. It was also decided that both Saturday and Sunday evenings, a live zoom link would be another way to include people who couldn't make it to the camp, and a few people from different countries were able to connect and participate in this way.

Zoom gave a chance to share stories and experiences from the years, and show our gratitude to Dan – and to consider the future. In addition, reflecting Dan's international teaching and the PTCCI community, an online space for PTCCI practitioners was created on Dan's website for those who wished to contribute a story, memory or similar from Dan's 50 years in martial arts. Thank you to all those who helped to make this event what it was, whether that was organisational help, food and drink contributions, or generally being supportive and attending.

Thanks also go to Weedon village community for their support but most of all, thanks go to Dan for having been who you were and making PTCCI what it is.