

An interview on T'ai Chi Ch'uan sword form and duelling with Tom Daly, a senior student of Maggie Newman, herself a senior student of Cheng Man-Ch'ing.

*By Redmond Entwistle*

R. Why did you think of starting to learn Tai Chi?

T. It wasn't a thought on my part. I had an acting teacher. I wanted to act, and she said Tai Chi is the best exercise for an actor because it teaches them how to let go of resistance. She thought all actors should do it, because it teaches you about resistance, your own and other people's, which it does.

R. How long was it till you began studying the sword form?

T. It was about three years after I joined her regular beginning form class. Which is kind of young. Another major teacher whom I respect, said 'you're doing sword form?!' And now I know why he would say that. At three or four years into learning I didn't have the root, which you really need. So seriously you're not ready after three, four years of studying Tai Chi. The best you can do is learn the choreography, which is a good start.

R. Could you reiterate some of Maggie's main points of practice?

T. Maggie would emphasize that all of the swords in the group should be at exactly the same angle. That always felt like a revelation. A lot of times people don't even match their bodies to each other in the regular form, and now you're matching your body *and the angle of the sword*, so that one sword isn't too high or too low, they're all in sync – like the Rockettes.

R. But not like a marching band? I remember her saying it's not like a rigid formation.

T. That's correct, it's not rigid, but you're glued together doing this thing. The whole group is working as one, and internally you're working as one. And then your sword must match what their swords are doing. So all rules of the regular form apply.

R. What were other key phrases of practice, like the 'cutting edge'?

T. She was very specific about when it's cutting and when it's not. 'Accommodating the sword' was a big one. She would say it, but she wouldn't elaborate on it. And it's a little hard to understand. There's 'folding and unfolding', which is also form-like. But when she says 'accommodate the sword', I like to rephrase that as 'the sword does you'. And you're just there to help it go where it needs to go.

I was reminded of that when I had surgery on my legs and I couldn't do the sword form down in my legs. But I could accommodate the sword. That's what I practiced

for several months and ONLY that. I would walk it. I would move the sword through its exact pathway, but I wasn't doing any formal stance. The sword is in the air and you're not even there. But no formal leg stance. Because of the operation it wasn't possible for me to do that. I did this walking form for about two and a half months.

I had to conceptualize the form so that I could do it that way, from the perspective of the sword itself, and not from the body. Now it was the sword itself that was guiding me. And the sum result is the form seemed to almost zoom by. Not that I was going any faster, because I wasn't. I think what happened is that because you're paying so much attention to this little part and that little part, to get it exactly where it's supposed to be, my focus became really united with the sword. It sounds so hockey to say 'I and the sword are one', but you had to be right on top of it, much like push hands.

R. Can you describe the quality of fencing with Maggie?

T. I probably should discuss what fencing entailed in Maggie's style. Most people I've encountered do not fence the way she taught, but it is highly principled! There are a few basic rules:

NEVER leave the partners sword.

Keep sticking and following.

NEVER attack.

NEVER change the pace of your movement or rush your partner.

NO clanking swords (the swords never leave each other even for a millisecond.)

Maggie would do two modes. One was that she was just pleasantly agreeable with you. I remember her one day, she was just going back and forth with somebody. It was very gentle. And in retrospect I know that she was really focusing on being with the person. And she would often say 'I could stick and follow all day'. That was pleasurable, sticking and following. Which it is. Most of us think that getting a strike is pleasurable. But she was very much about sticking and following. She could be happy with just that. Sticking and following in reality is a big deal.

Now when she decided that we were really going to play, for want of a better word, an aggressive game, she had an ability to turn her sword back in towards you in a microsecond. Using the connection of the two swords, she knew how to pivot around that connection, but you didn't feel it. The place of contact didn't change, but her sword tip comes right at you and then she's just going to walk forward. But she's still following the point of contact. Not jabbing, not forcing you. No pressure on the sword. You just saw the sword pointing at you and her walking forward.

She never said to do that, she never told us how to do that. She was always trying to make us work on sticking and following. And then if that went on too long, she would say, 'that's too sing-songy.'

You don't have to be aggressive. But you do want to make a point. So you don't want to just swish the water between the two of you. That's good for beginners and we did that for a long time. But then you have to learn how to not attack and still get a point.

That being said, she was very honest in her play. Mostly she got me, once in a while I got her. I don't think that mattered all that much to her. One time she struck me and I asked, "was that an attack?" Bemused, she answered, "Yes".

R. So how would you say a point is scored using principle?

T. The swords pivot around the point of contact. You can't violate the point of contact. You're not stopping and you're not leaving the point of contact, or accelerating to lunge at your partner.

Rule number one is that you have to stick at that point. It's circular by the nature of our bodies, and the nature of walking. So when you yield you're turning the whole orientation of the body while you're still following them. They're not forcing you, because if they did, then that creates a strike against them. There are some people, and she had trouble with them, whose technique is about keeping you out. They weren't strong, they weren't forceful, but they always positioned themselves so that you couldn't come in. That was completely the opposite of what she wanted. I do have some exercises where the goal is to keep your partner backing off because you keep pointing your tip right at them. It is a skill you also want to have. The key is when and how you use it.

But what you really want is to invite them in, because that's the most seductive scam. They think it's ok to come in, I welcome you in. Let them come in too close and then you have something. They may get you. This is a game of vulnerability, not a defensive game. When she wanted to come at you, she could pivot around and you just had to retreat. THEN you were usually preoccupied with getting away. Game Over! As soon as she had you running you're finished. You don't want to be ahead of them or behind them. And that feels very vulnerable.

Ken Van Sickle had a very interesting comment about the Professor, 'he was in real time'. Which meant Professor was right now. He didn't care about the attack or running away, he's just right now. She was very good at being right now. And then as soon as there's the slightest possibility of her pivoting around, which you didn't see, because you're on bad automatic pilot, and she's not. Bad automatic pilot is either you're in the past or you project into the future.

To begin, you need to feel comfortable. In a more aggressive game you need to be “present”, in the moment. The only way to learn that is to do a lot of repetitive practice and then begin to weave into a game where getting a point begins to matter.

Essentially I conceptualize getting a point without attacking - that’s the conundrum - is not by focussing on getting a point, but by attempting to always move forward. Just keep walking forward. This is not possible if they are walking forward. If they walk forward, you yield, let them go by and you go back to walking forward.

And what happens that makes this so effective? If they haven’t learned quality yielding, they get nervous. Then they start to try to get away. Now they are running away and they are effectively changing the pace of the walking. You just stick and follow and keep moving forward right with them. The strike presents itself. And while this description dumbs it down a great deal, essentially this is what happens.

R. Which Tai Chi principles do you see as of particular importance in the sword form?

T. Maggie said early on that the form is your relationship to the universe, push hands is about your relationship to a person, and the sword is about your relationship to an object. How do you communicate between you and the object. And then through this object to another person. This is unique to the sword form.

R. How are the sword and fencing related to non-doing?

T. “Non-doing” is very hard to articulate because of the nature of words indicate “doing”. And non-doing takes place when all the small parts are no longer the object of your attention. It has to be a bigger vision of the game, the two of you.

Initially lots of work goes into small tiny places that we tend to give far too little attention to because we don’t think we need that. So this is in effect, doing. Then onto the next small moment, more doing. But then you let go of the first three, and focus on the fourth. After a while, you don’t focus on any of them. Just be with the intent of the two partners, the balance of the two partners, the connection of the two partners. The less you need to be aware of, because you are now simply in it, the less you do.

Some hints that indicate doing: Tension in the arm. Insisting on the path of the movement. Being behind the curve of the timing, or in front of the curve.

Putting that aside, you can play a round where you work the technical points carefully. Mostly that is skill building and “doing”.

But then I like to say, ok now you’re going to do it for real, now that control and specificity goes out the window, and now it’s the whole body and whole intent to be with them EXACTLY. This can be fast or slow. You’re not adding excess force, but you can assume you are holding a weapon. You can’t think about every little placement of this and that.

When you play a more energetic game, it's keeping all the gears well connected, all the principles are in motion, your body-mind is well oiled. You're intention to get a point is heightened, but not at the expense of being connected together. Even the word intent is a little strong. Your connection to them has to get even finer, because now the game may be faster and more aggressive. It becomes rather thrilling. But the thrill is in the connected changes, not the points.

And in this kind of game, points appear. They come to you.

R. You developed a few exercises about the quality of contact with the swords.

T. Rule number 33, no clanking swords. That's harder if I'm beginning the round and I come sweeping in and you pick me up, that's usually a clanking moment, 95% of the time. So do it until you don't clank!

Another is duelling two inches apart. But here the swords don't touch. For some reason it feels like your following and sticking is better than if you actually touch the sword, because you have to pay so much attention to the distance and the point of contact. It's not going to be perfect either. You'll slide around a little bit, but you go back to trying to make that perfect thing and I don't know why that helps, but I feel it. It feels like it really should. Aaaaah, this is how it should feel like! Probably because your intent to get them has dissipated, leaving your intent to really be with them without violating them with any pressure.

R. Maggie was very invested in non-doing transitions. Can you discuss this in relation to the sword form in particular?

T. Maggie didn't really use the word non-doing. Her work in transitions was about ALL OF YOU participating in that transition. This amounts to the same result, however.

Ultimately, after some training of the choreography, you have to find that movement of the sword through non-doing. Most people don't do that, they don't understand that, may not even want that. Unfolding is sort of a non-doing thing. I'm not opening my arm in a muscular way, I'm letting it go where it's going, based on momentum, turning, sinking, extension through the sword, air support, all of these things help you unfold.

In duelling, the tendency to 'do' with the tip is usually the first mistake people are going to make. Formal western fencing has the tip going straight towards the partner. To pull you away from that, Maggie used Block and Sweep, and Falling Petals as the main move in sword duelling, which amounts to leading with the hilt!

My question is often: how do you do 'non-doing'? It's a koan of sorts. I think you have to enter into it in an indirect or oblique way, you sort of have to trick yourself by approaching the exercise with a different purpose or technique. You can't DO non-

doing. So we practise the form embodying other words, less precise words, words that could send you down the wrong path, even. So I like to use words like allow, or release, or polish the stone, or expand in all directions. Be a rag doll. Be an old man. Be anything but a good student when attempting new ground. Let go of the fear that you may be wrong. Trying to be right all the time or correct can KILL your form. It killed mine for 20 years!

R. How would you rate your level of sword form?

T. I've joked with you that it sucks! The question is a little unfair - I don't get around as much as I should. I'm more of a hermit. After recently teaching everybody in these workshops, I'm thinking that the fullness of the chi needs to drive it more than the technical knowledge. Even "relax" is almost technical. I tend to practice the sword form in a way that is about correcting and perfecting. That gets in the way.

The other thing is the sword duelling. There's just not a lot of people who are doing this kind of sword duelling. In a way, good duelling is like juggling balls. All the balls are in play at the same time and you need to attend to each one in its turn at the right time. I think I do that well. That's where experience helps. If I fumble, I discover a new ball that needs to be incorporated into the act of juggling. I think I'm good at identifying WHAT needs to be addressed and then finding a way to address it. Some of the most simple exercises, the least "exciting" are the most important to build skills that really matter. Most of the exercises I've created are my own exercises, but they all come from an observation of what I experienced with Maggie. They are designed to increase skills that are required, not "moves" that one robotically replicates.

When I duel I just attend to the process at hand and I'm not really judging my skill or yours. That's an after-thought.

But basically my skill is sufficient and I can see the fine points well. I would say I need to learn more about letting chi drive the interaction. I don't say that with some agenda of appearing humble. And as you can tell, that doesn't stop me from having a lot to say about it!

Tom Daly trained under Maggie Newman from 1982-2014. Maggie Newman was a senior student of Professor Cheng Man-Ch'ing, and Tom was Ms. Newman's assistant from 1985-2014. Tom began teaching his own classes in 1985 and currently teaches at the YMCA as well as private group classes in Chelsea, NY. Tom has also studied with many Cheng Man-Ch'ing lineage students including Ben Lo, Lenzie Williams, Mr. Liu, Steve Rose, and Wei-Ming Yuan.

Tom taught sword and push hands workshops in London and Rotterdam in November 2018 and will be returning to Europe to teach workshops in Summer 2020.

Tom was interviewed by Redmond Entwistle who was also a student of Maggie Newman's and now teaches Tai Chi in London.

