

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION IN KUNG FU by P. Farrell

Over the years I have studied kung fu I have been very fortunate to meet with and learn from great teachers, from the time I studied with Rose Li in the early days to being accepted as a student by Master Chu Siu Woon, and more recently to studying Sun Style Tai Chi with Sifu Bob Melia and being introduced by him to Sifu Dave Martin and Master Lei Shi Tai. In addition, I have been in the advantageous and privileged position of having my own brother John Farrell as my Sifu. If I have gleaned one thing during this time it is the importance of tradition if one wishes to be given or understand the deeper teachings and become an effective kung fu practitioner.

Although Miss Li's approach to the student – teacher relationship appeared informal and more “Western”, in the first instance Miss Li accepted students who wished to learn but would teach Tai Chi only on a basic level. Then, if people showed interest they were free to join her more in-depth seminars on the “internal” aspects of Tai Chi. Her warmth and openness heralded a new era in the often jealously guarded transmission of Kung fu, in particular the internal arts. Nevertheless, her small stature and approachable demeanour still commanded the traditional respect afforded to earlier Masters of the tradition. Upon reflection, although Miss Li did not have favourites and appeared to give the same teachings to all, individuals who thought of her as an ordinary teacher received only ordinary teaching, but to those who treated her as a teacher who carried the lineage of Yang style Tai Chi and appreciated her generosity in passing on her vast knowledge, received the lineage teaching as though they were directly from the founders. Perhaps this was not due to anything extra that Miss Li taught but to the humility and consequent openness of the students which allowed them to understand and connect with the deeper aspects of the art.

Although Miss Li freely accepted Western students, without having them prove their determination with some physical feat, students still had to show their dedication and resolve by becoming proficient in aspects of Tai Chi, before she would teach Bagua. To proceed further, students would need to become proficient in both Tai Chi and Bagua before learning Hsing Yi.

During the time I studied with Rose Li, I was also studying Wing Chun Kung Fu, accompanied by my brother, with Sifu Alan Lamb. Around this period my brother John heard about Master Chu, and after much investigation located him and requested to be accepted as his student. Master Chu accepted John as a student and only after many years of traditional training, hard work and dedication was he given permission to teach the system on his own (John now has the honour of being Master Chu's Dai-to-dai or senior student). Later, having seen my brother practicing I was enthused by this powerful style of Kung Fu and wrote to Master Chu asking if he would accept me as a student. On the day, by invitation, I went to meet with Master Chiu and was greeted by Ming, one of his students, who asked me who I was etc. and reported back to Master Chiu. Without a glance my way, Master Chu instructed Ming who came to me and showed me how to stand in a characteristic Hung Kuen low horse riding posture with the instructions "Mr Chu wants you to see you do this"; which I did for 30 minutes! (I had to keep resting – I'm not that good). Eventually, seeing my extreme discomfort, and following a conversation with Master Chu, the student approached me and said "Mr Chu says you can lean against the wall" which I gratefully did – for another 30 minutes! During that time I desperately wanted to sneak out never to be heard of again but my brother John was practicing in the hall and had I left he would never have let me forget it!

Eventually, Master Chiu came over with his student and with a look of pathos (or was it disdain) indicated to me to rest and via the translator asked me some questions about my martial experience to date. In desperation, and realising I may not be accepted, I played my trump card and swiftly told him I was John's brother; that clinched it! However, that was not the end of it. My time with Master Chiu was interspersed with such tests if one wished to prove oneself and proceed along the path – not for the faint hearted!

During my time with Miss Li and Master Chu therefore, in addition to the art itself, I learned the importance of tradition both in the mechanisms of practice and relationships with the teacher and other students. Although Miss Li's approach was perhaps more gentle and informal than that of Master Chu, each in their own way clearly showed the importance of tradition if a student wished to move forward. Without tradition we get to the stage we are at today where anybody with a couple of

years training (from anybody with a couple of years training) can take on the mantle of a teacher and begin to teach a misinformed, misunderstood and watered down version of their chosen system. For me the old ways are particularly important in these days of gigantic egos, easily accessible mind and body therapies and disposable coffee table books on how important you are (I'm sure they have a place). Tradition ensures correct transmission of a system of Kung Fu by knowledgeable, suitably disciplined and hopefully, humbled individuals (that doesn't mean to say you can't have pride in your knowledge and system). Without tradition, students will be taught Kung fu that reflects the lack of knowledge and egotistical (and deluded) notions of teachers with little grounding and deluded notions of their abilities.

Rightly or wrongly, as a result of traditional training, I try to apply the following tenets to my kung fu training:

- Show gratitude to the teacher for his/her openness in teaching the art.
- Respectfully request teachings, assistance and continued observation until such a time as I am told I am good enough to do it on my own.
- Accept teaching with humility and respect. If something is confusing or doesn't correlate with what I know or think I know, ask for clarification in a polite and non-threatening manner.
- Never try defeat the teacher (that's not to say we cannot test our development)
- Practice to the best of my ability and capability.
- When offering the teacher payment or gifts do so in a respectful manner.
- Respect my fellow students and never try to defeat them (that's not to say we cannot test our development)

These days we are used to demanding value for money and our ego may say "why shouldn't I do this..." or "I am paying for lessons and I can decide what I do or don't do..." etc. but we should try to realise that non of these things we are taught or are asked to do are for the benefit of the teacher, they are all for our own benefit to develop the knowledge and the qualities of a true kung fu practitioner.