

Interview Tony Ward – Sydney – 15th December 2011 by Anneke van der Loos

On my way to New Zealand where I have been training regularly with Wee Kee Jin, I made a stopover in Sydney to be able to get a better understanding of Tony's approach to Tai Chi. I did push hands with him early 2011 and this experience of not being able to feel him but straight away being brought out of balance myself, made me curious of his methods.

What was your first experience with Tai Chi?

I'd been doing Karate classes for many years and my brother took me to his tai chi class. I came across the concept of hard and soft in Karate, but Tai chi was softer and a different concept altogether. I saw it as process, as life. During that time I was also studying Chinese Medicine and Aikido.

And what was your first experience with Push Hands?

I practiced push hands for a number of years and learned how to be connected within the body. I thought that was it. However an encounter with a student (James) of Master Huang opened my eyes. We did some free pushing. I tried everything I could to catch his centre and push him out yet he remained very calm and relaxed, nothing I did seemed to effect or land on his body to allow an issue. Then he smiled and politely asked if he could push me. A bit shocked he then proceeded to knock me all over the place. But like never before, he took away my balance and seemed to completely control me. I thought I had a pretty good base but seemed to remove it and gently throw me everywhere. I say gently because it actually felt good as he bounced my whole body around. From that point on I became very interested in this system of Taichi and of course his Teacher, who turned out to be Master Huang.

When did you start training with Master Huang?

You could not just join, after about 4 years training with James and Joseph (another student of Master Huang) armed with a formal letter of introduction, I first met Master Huang in Taiwan in 1986. The following year I travelled to Malaysia. And from that time I tried to see him at least once a year. He was already in his seventies so time was precious. Therefore I let go of everything I was involved with at the time, including Aikido. I've never really looked back, meeting him totally changed my life. When I first met I shook his hand, he gave me an empty hand which sent me flying one meter in the air. And he laughed!

What made the biggest impression on you?

I had read many books about softness over hardness, be like water, how to live, etc. Everyone said the same things, however I felt hardness in their push. Not with Master Huang. For me the big experience was that he gave me something solid to feel and potentially push, like a hand or an arm, but then made that solidness disappear into a hole, without losing the connection. He remained "sticking". This feeling of connection became for me a thread I wanted to keep following.

How did he teach?

At the beginning I was able to film him a lot, apparently not so common in those days. He created an atmosphere where you felt at home, you cared for each-other, learned from him and shared your experiences. He made you feel everything, was very open and did not hold back information. Time and time again he would repeat the same information. And the things he did were so good. I always felt that and I was so fortunate to have met and then to have been pushed many many times by someone with the incredible ability of Master Huang he truly showed the ability of softness overcoming hardness. For me a sign of authentic Tai chi.

You began teaching according to his system and transmitted the knowledge. Are you still teaching like he would? In the beginning you maintain the same teaching structure, but I soon starting doing things a little differently. Not so much changing the exercises but finding the principles of the movement and accurately identifying these principles in all our movement. Although I am really fond of The traditional methods, I found I could not so easily apply this way of teaching in these

modern times. Take the slow form as an example this, for me is a huge body of work and it takes most beginners a couple of years just to learn the bare bones of the external form and then another half dozen to get any understanding of the internals and this is the stuff that really matters with Tai chi, this is the stuff that really sets it aside from other exercises. Now it's a big ask in these speedy times to say just give me ten good years of your time to get to basically the first door. I think it's up to today's teachers if we want these arts to really survive and thrive we have to constantly question and refine our methods of teaching and practice.

I have been training with you now for a couple of days. I have experienced your approach to the loosening exercises and Tai Chi ball, which has allowed me a deeper experience and understanding of the principles. To a very subtle level. How did you come to those insights?

I started developing this 8 years ago. I did not change the exercises. But I did take exercises like the Tai chi ball exercise and broke it down into many elements to observe better what is going on. It has deep meaning "tai chi ball". It comes across as very deep to me, something about this I wanted to explore and discover. This approach actually comes from Master Huang : " Take any movement and break it down into many parts to find the deeper meaning."

I started to do this this to all exercises. And put a question mark on those that did not seem to maintain the principles throughout, it usually came down to my lack of understanding of the exercise itself but the only way for me to get there was and still is break it down into its parts.it then becomes more obvious those that really do not maintain the principles throughout. With Master Huang I could see he always maintained the principles. So I began exploring. For instance, I wondered if one could do the loosening exercises while stepping. Exploring this was very enlightening and really demanding like how to maintain the central equilibrium in movement.this became a link to the fixed and free push hands most of the other partner work.

Can you describe the essence of your classes?

The first important thing for me is to relax, then find and become aware of central equilibrium, a central point of balance on the central axis of the body. Then be able to move freely and maintain this balance at all times. As the body opens the Vertical and horizontal connections become apparent, and the movement becomes rounded internally and externally and spirals in and out through the arms and legs. This spiralling or coiling then opens up possibilities of space and and movement or energy potential that at times I can only describe as overwhelming. inward and outward around the internal roundness can open such space and possibilities that it is overwhelming. The possibilities seem to have no limit. Too much for one person in a lifetime. An important learning tool for me is to play, to set up an environment that is non threatening in a dangerous way but is constantly pushing the boundaries. I think it is important that my students learn, that I give them something to push and let them push me. It becomes a relationship of receiving and giving. The more you receive, the more information you obtain. The possibilities are endless. That is why Tai Chi is an art form. With your movements you open spaces, you never had noticed before. Always in motion, never the same, not stuck and always alive. I have no preset structure in my classes; I let each moment determine what is needed to develop understanding.

You also do a number of standing practices. Are these from Master Huang?

Standing exercises are amazing. Master Huang also used standing practice during form classes. I find practices beneficial on so many levels that I teach them on the own. Once Master Huang drew a small corner then pointed out to me: "this is all any teacher can give you". He meant that you have to find or discover the rest of the square for yourself . The standing exercises contain all the principles, and they support all movement. Find stillness and the central balance point of your body around which everything moves. It makes you aware which parts of your body are necessary for movement and which parts solely for standing upright. There is a connection with the mind. No

chatter in your mind. The only way to go to the source and find out what is happening is through the body. *What do you find is the most important lesson people can learn from Tai Chi.*

To become connected to their own nature. To become oneself. To be healthy in all aspects. To live in balance.

What do you find unacceptable in Tai Chi?

To misuse your strength physically and psychological. When people do that, they are making it difficult for themselves and others by working completely in the opposite direction. It shows little respect.

What is important during a class to have a good understanding of Tai Chi?

Be present. Be aware.

Tony Ward will conduct a weekend workshop 23-26 october 2014. Venue: from 10am to 4pm.

Fee will be 300 euro for 4 days. One day €90. Two days €160. Three days € 240.

Payment before 1st of october: Bankaccount of A.M. van der Loos te Bergen.

NL 25INGB0002803452 BIC: INGBNL2A.

Please indicate "Tony Ward" in description. Register by email: avdloos@gmail.com

Place: Jakes Dance Factory, Kruislaan, Amsterdam.

Parking is possible at the Jaap Eden Carpark (€0,10 hour)

Trainstation Science Park (10 min. from Central STation) is on 10 min. walking distance.

From trainstation Amstelpark leaves bus 40 to the Kruislaan.