

David McCain's Tai Chi Background

I took my first T'ai Chi Ch'uan class taught by Charles (Defilippo) Willow in Albuquerque in September, 1979. I felt an immediate affinity for the art and as the year progressed I greatly rearranged my life to take advantage of extending my studies. I frequently spent whole days practicing. Then in 1980 five of us—Charlie, myself and three others of Charlie's students—went to Hong Kong for further study. Charlie was especially interested in finding a form that was very close to the original form of Yang Chang Fu, the great Chinese grandmaster who brought Tai Chi out of his family's secret practice to the public. We found Sifu Ng teaching the Tung lineage form in a park in Kowloon. Grandfather Tung (Tung Ying Chieh) was one of Yang Chang Fu's first students outside of the Yang family and thus the 108 movement Tung lineage form is close to the original Yang family form. Over time since the 1930s the Yang style has spread worldwide and it has changed with different teachers, especially by creating short forms.

Studying Tai Chi with Sifu Ng in Hong Kong was a marvelous experience. The five of us Americans were welcomed into sifu's Tai Chi family which extended to over fifty longtime students. (Sifu means both father and teacher.) Sifu Ng did not speak English, so his younger students translated for us. A dozen or more of sifu's students met every morning in a park to practice, and afterwards most students went with sifu to socialize over tea and dim sum (Chinese breakfast) at any number of nearby large hotel dining halls. We Americans often made excursions throughout Hong Kong and the New Territories, sometimes with our Tai Chi brothers and sisters (other Tai Chi students of our sifu). Chinese New Year in Hong Kong was especially exciting and included parties with our Tai Chi family.

I have had approximately 40 Tai Chi teachers over many years. Some were in weekend workshops and a sizable number were in regular classes lasting years. In Hong Kong I also studied a "sister art" of Tai Chi with another Chinese teacher who didn't speak English. Over the years I have four non-English speaking Chinese teachers. Also I've had half dozen Chinese-American teachers, including Grandson Tung (Tung Kai Ying) who was teaching his family lineage in San Francisco, where I studied for a year. I have found it very helpful to learn Chinese culture in my pursuit of Tai Chi study although I have never successfully learned the language.

I studied Tai Chi and Ba Gua with Zhou Rong Sai in Santa Fe, New Mexico from 1993 to 2000. I certainly gained my greatest physical development of Tai Chi fundamentals with Sifu Zhou. He also communicated his deep sense of spirit within these arts through Taoist philosophy, rituals and practices.

I started teaching the Tung lineage Tai Chi form as Charlie Willow's assistant in 1981-82. Since then I have had approximately 1,500 students in many different venues in six different states. Some have been students of mine for years and others, of course, haven't lasted long. My greatest number of Tai Chi students has come through the five different college and university programs in which I have taught.