

## An Interview with Chen Bing



Xinjia Yi Lu - It's easy!

'After ten years of training Laojia all day, everyday, it only took me 2 and ½ hours to learn Xinjia' says Chen Bing smiling at us. 'It's easy!' he adds, 'once you know the basics'. Everyone groans, because inevitably this means that what we are about to do is bound to be difficult. 'No pressure Laoshi!' I reply, for even though I know Xinjia well, keeping up with Chen Bing's wide spectrum of intricate variations and super-charged Fajin is going to require some serious focus and a relentless ability just to go with the flow. We all love it, of course, for that is what we are here for: the first International Chen Bing Taiji Retreat in Greece.

In September last year (2015) I was contacted by Roza Maragopoulou, one of my students from back in the day, who after training at Chen Bing's Taiji academy in Chen Village for a year was interested in hosting Chen Bing in her native country of Greece. Initially asking me for a few pointers we eventually decided to host Master Chen together and run an international retreat on the beautiful Greek island of Evia. This way we could bring together the many Chen Taiji players from UK, Greece and across the world keen to train with Chen Bing for an intense Taiji training camp in a delightfully sunny location.

We set the schedule to include 6 hours a day of training covering Fansong Gong (Chen Bing's unique loosening/conditioning exercises), Silk-reeling (Chansigong), Standing Meditation (Zhanzhuang), Laojia, a little Xinjia and of course pushing-hands (Tui Shou), which is one of Chen Bing's specialities. Once everything was in place, almost immediately the retreat was fully booked with students hailing from UK, Greece, France, Bulgaria and USA. Needless to say time flew by and the time for the retreat soon came around. In this article then, I include an interview with Chen Bing that we conducted with Jannis Christodoulakis from Crete for a popular Greek martial arts website. First, however, I want to talk about the key themes that underlay Chen Bing's teaching and his unique approach that left everybody inspired and happy. Along with his uncle Chen Xiao Wang, Chen Bing is for me an excellent teacher.



Aside from teaching Taiji full-time, I spend a lot of time training on my own. Over the last two decades I have found Taiji to be an extremely fulfilling and challenging pursuit that has developed my body and mind in a way that I never expected. I thought I knew how to train and move well before I started Taiji and I thought I knew a lot about anatomy and the processes of the mind, but I was in fact, quite wrong. Good Taiji training is such a down to earth and natural process and indeed so obvious that sometimes you just can't see it and there is much confusion as a result. For me, the first ten years were quite frustrating but when I look back it was when I stopped trying so hard to

achieve something, a fixed idea in my head, but instead simply focused on what I was doing and started to perceive my body directly that I found what I was looking for. All good things come to those who wait as they say. So in light of this, I really like Chen Bing's emphasis on being natural and building quality Taiji from the basics; having the opportunity to spend 7 days training intensively in the company of someone who has simply lived Taiji for most of his life is a golden opportunity to learn, improve, refine and enjoy my practise.



Like his uncle and main teacher Chen Xiao Wang, Chen Bing emphasises simplicity in his teaching. Everything he teaches builds from the ground upwards; only by training to viscerally embody the basics that comprise the Taiji principles can one fully uncover the more advanced elements/practises in a natural way for oneself. Learning Taiji is not about remembering movements, techniques or information but instead about learning from your own direct experience of how your body and mind move, operate and are continuously integrated and flowing together. It is a fascinating and fundamentally natural process completely at odds with how the minds of modern people tend to operate.

*'First, you have to look for your body' Chen Bing calmly enthuses, 'find your body!'*

One of the things I really like about Chen Bing is that his quality of movement is exceptional in every way. Natural, flowing, powerful, balanced, connected, rooted, agile, perceptive and explosive are all words I would readily use to describe the way that he moves. Also, as I mentioned before, Chen Bing exudes a tangible kind of calmness and he emphasises training this throughout all of his teaching. A busy mind, he explained, takes you away from your body and the felt senses that allow you to relax, move naturally and perceive accurately. For thoughts are just a faint reflection of direct experience. Since humans show a strong bias to living in the thinking world, a world of fixed concepts, inaccurate assumptions and extremes that create internal and external conflict, the first step in training is to address this gross imbalance. This is achieved by looking for your body, the deliberate process of continuously focusing the mind into ones physical self and paying complete attention to the experience therein.



Students hailing from UK, Greece, USA, Bulgaria and France

All of our training sessions began with Fansong Gong, Chen Bing's unique loosening/conditioning method. Consisting of a wide range of different exercises, Fansong Gong follows a theme of opening the soft tissues of the body along the main fascial lines. Not only does this build a body that is loose, elastic, resilient and connected but also teaches you how to feel the main kinetic chains within the body and how they are woven together to form the three dimensional Taiji body in a simple and tangible way. Some of the exercises are quite strenuous for not only do they create a strong stretch but also continuously emphasise developing a strong base or root in order to facilitate balanced freedom of movement from the centre that emanates through the whole body.

After our elasticating warm-ups we would then train Zhanzhaung in number of different postures, resolutely turning down the dimer switch of mental activity and looking for the Taiji body in any given posture. These basic themes of Chen Bing's teaching were emphasised no matter what we were doing and while I say that they are basic it does in fact take lots of time and down-to-earth training to manifest them. A point, Chen Bing explained, that almost everyone misses all too easily.



Chen Bing and I demonstrate Tui Shou

As well as lots of enjoyable and rigorous form work we spent two days training pushing hands, from basic patterns to applications. We looked at common problems that people come up against in Tui-Shou and how to work on resolving them. Ultimately, Chen Bing enthused, it isn't complicated, it all comes down to keeping your Taiji body no matter what. So, he added, this is what you have to work on for a long time in Tui-Shou rather than just trying to score points and sacrificing your position to do so. Fortunately for me, I spent a lot of time pushing-hands with Chen Bing and it was very insightful to feel how he moved. I can best describe the feeling of his body as 'liquid steel' for Chen Bing moves very softly and fluidly yet beneath the surface is a formidable power that you wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of. Most of the time he took it easy on me and was brilliant to work with. Occasionally, while demonstrating an application, he would smash me onto the ground which, while being painful and unnerving, gave me a clear insight into how he

would unbalance me and then very rapidly exploit my weaker position just by going with the flow and keeping the superior position of his Taiji body.



On the floor again - a good way to learn!

Below is the interview with Chen Bing that I have transcribed and edited myself - I thank Qi Cao for her excellent translations over the course of the retreat:

*Jannis Christodoulakis: Master Chen, can you tell us a little about the background of Chen Taiji?*

*Chen Bing: Chen family Taiji has around 400 years of history and was developed by Chen Wanting in Chenjiagou, Henan province. At the time there were no guns or canons and so Taiji was built primarily as a martial art but also the training was inseparable from sustainable health development.*

*The contents of Taiji training include a strong focus upon independent training and self-development that is centred around the cultivation of the three aspects of body, mind and spirit. Through the combined and balanced focus of health and self-defence, of training internally and externally by embodying the principles of yin and yang or change, Taiji is a unified and integrated martial art.*

*JC: Can you tell us about your teachers and biggest influences in your training?*

*CB: Since the time of Chen Wanting Taiji has been practised continually in Chenjiagou for many generations. Over the years Chen village has produced many exceptional practitioners and still does to this day because almost*

everybody there is training and involved in Taiji all the time. It really is the home of Taiji in China and where you can find the best players. For me, my teachers are my uncles Chen Xiao Wang and Chen Xiao Xing. They are both exceptional practitioners and excellent teachers.

JC: Do you think the way that Taiji is practised has changed over the years seeing that more people are interested in Taiji for developing their health than martial arts skills these days?

CB: Since Chen Wanting's time, Taiji then compared to now is of course a little different. It was a different time when there was much more hand-to-hand combat and so people needed to be able to use their martial skills on a regular basis. Also, it is worth remembering that different people have always trained differently and emphasised some aspects of Taiji more than others. These days, because of necessity, emphasis in Taiji has had to shift to the development of health, mind and spirit which are very much needed in modern times seeing that most people require this on a daily basis more than just being able to fight.

JC: Do you like travelling to The West to teach? Are there any differences in how people in The West and people in China practise Taiji?

CB: Ever since I became a teacher I've thought a lot about how to best teach and promote Taiji so that as many people as possible can benefit from it. One of my main goals has always been to share Taiji with people outside of China. When I travel around the world to teach Taiji I want to share something really important from my own culture. Also, I want to learn about other cultures too, to understand people better and find the commonality that we all share.

JC: How would you describe your own style of teaching and training?

CB: There is a Chinese saying that you can't just teach everybody using the same method. I try to use different methods of teaching depending on what's best for each individual and how they learn. So really I'm always exploring how to find the best way to get the knowledge across and it varies from group to group and from person to person. Teaching itself is a very educational process! For example, when I first started to teach my Fansong concept people found it very hard to understand intellectually so I had to find ways to get people to really feel what Fansong is like for themselves, to keep it in themselves and integrate it into their practise.

JC: What are the most important things to focus on during training?

CB: In Taiji the most important factor is knowing the different steps of training and their correct sequence. It's just like building a house, the foundation needs to be in place for everything else to be built successfully on top. You can't just jump from one thing to another without having gone through the right

preceding steps. In order to get quality in your Taiji training you need to know the main principles, so in order to do this you have to follow the steps. For example, people like doing Fali (explosive movements) but you cannot just focus on Fali because it will never have any foundation in the body, it has to be developed from the basic steps. In order to solve any problems you have in your training you have to go back to previous steps to iron them out. So in order to be able to do this, first you have to know the steps. This is very important.

JC: What about Zhan Zhuang (standing meditation), do you think it is important?

CB: Standing is the very first and most important foundational step in Taiji. When I was young all the children had to do standing for half an hour everyday. It was so hard for us all to keep still of course because children love to move - so we all found it very torturous to begin with! However, standing is the key is to calming your mind and finding your body and the stillness inside which is where movement comes from.

JC: What about breathing; is it important to learn reverse breathing?

CB: What I mentioned when we were training earlier is that all forms of breathing should be natural. The most usual form is the slow relaxed breath when the Dantien fills on inhale and empties when you breathe out. During fast movements when you release power it's the opposite, your Dantien fills as you exhale. Both are a natural consequence of your training and just two different states depending on the way are moving. You don't want to force or control your breath. Being natural and in a state of naturalness is the first and foremost principle in Taiji.

JC: Is there a connection between Taiji and Meditation?

CB: There are a lot of similarities between Taiji and Meditation such as finding stillness and relaxation.

JC: Do you prefer Laojia or Xinjia? Is just doing one form enough or should we learn both?

CB: Normally, I'd say it's best to learn either one or the other and just focus on that. But if you really want to learn more about Taiji and improve it's good to learn both as it deepens your ability and your understanding of Taiji as a whole. I have practised Laojia more but I really enjoy training Xinjia!

JC: Could you tell us about intention or Yi?

CB: Yi is a way for you to send a message for what you want to achieve. For example if you want to relax, your mind is the main controller and sends the



*message to the rest of the body. Yi is a way to send a message to the body in order to direct it in what you want it to do. Yi is a way for your thoughts and your state of mind to be connected with your physical body. It's the bridge between the mind, the body and what you want to achieve.*

*JC: What are the most common mistakes that people make in Taiji training?*

*CB: There are two very common mistakes that we see in Taiji. The first is that people do not know the correct sequence of training and the order of the steps. Secondly, is that people do not know how to relax (fansong) and do not realise how fundamental it is to their Taiji. Often people practise Taiji for many years but do not ever really learn how to relax and this restricts their ability.*

*JC: Why is it so difficult to relax?*

*CB: Most people don't really ever consider what it means to relax. Usually, in day to day life, people are focused only on what's outside, the external world, and use excessive force and control to carry out all of their actions. You only start to train the relaxation when you begin to deliberately focus on the inside.*

*JC: What implications does training Taiji have for everyday life?*

*CB: Taiji can be very useful in everyday life. Firstly, it trains you to develop a calm mind which is very important in itself but also enables and equips you to face any situation at any time. Secondly, by having a calm mind and the ability to face any situation, it allows you to be in better position to discern the fundamentals of life's situations and perceive the truth and falsehood or the essence of the situation or problem at hand. This gives you a more holistic viewpoint and puts you in a better position to resolve everyday challenges. Another aspect of Taiji is that over time it allows you build great confidence in yourself. This can be a big change for some people.*

*JC: Finally, are there any secrets in Taiji?!*

*CB: Yes! (laughing and every one in the room laughs)*

*JC: That's great! Thank you very much for your time Master Chen.*