Throughout history there are countless stories of famous martial arts practitioners demonstrating unbelievable feats, and as a result, Taiji often conjures thoughts and images of dramatic moments of remarkable kinds of achievements. Though I, too, have been witness to such remarkable martial arts moments, this story is not one of those. The story I have to tell, of my experiences as a student of the much famed Feng Zhiqiang, is the simple, genuine history of how I learned not only the practice of Hunyan Taiji, but lessons of the Heart from a master of life and humanity that would shape my future. This is my personal encounter with the teacher and person, Feng Zhiqiang.

My story with Feng begins in 1994. At that time I had already practiced Taijiquan for several years, the kind of forms propagated by the Chinese government for health. My education at this time consisted of learning from Mr. Han Xianji, a Peking Opera actor who has “deserted” China while on international tour and now was teaching Taiji in New Zealand. Then in Beijing with Mrs. Rong Suxian who had an
extraordinary ability to practice forms beautifully and even reaching to Beijing Wushu Academy and to Mr. Wu Bin.

With Rong Suxian 1993

With Wu Bin 1993

I also started a Chen style version of Taijiquan with a teacher from Guilin, whom I became friends with, Deng Yihong. According to Deng he learnt his Taiji style in Chen village, Henan province in 1970s early 80s with a teacher called Wang Xi’an, a rather famous teacher. Learning this style of Taiji was physically difficult and yet very enticing. Deng then told me of a famous Chen stylist from Beijing, Feng Zhiqiang,
whom he has long sought but with no apparent success. We decided to write a letter to Feng at that time (to a wrong address, I learned later, that Deng had) and ask if we could both come to Beijing for a visit to learn with the master.

With Deng Yihong in Guilin 1994

The letter went unanswered. The following year 1995 in Guilin again we wrote another letter, but there was no answer. I didn’t lose hope and while crossing China on different occasions looking for Taiji teachers, I finally met my chance.

Completely by a twist of luck I have learned that Feng Zhiqiang had a disciple in North America named Chen Zhonghua so in 1999 I contacted him and asked where I could meet Feng. It turned out that Chen was on his way to a Taiji competition in Dallas, Texas shortly thereafter, which I too have planned to attend. Whilst I had been searching for Feng, destiny brought me first to Chen Zhonghua, and this encounter with Chen changed my life forever, on many different levels. Some of my Chinese medicine students who know master Chen can hear his Taiji logic in my Chinese medicine teaching, it has all merged for me into One, but this I will keep for another article.

Chen recommended that I visit Feng that same year in Holland and he wrote to Feng about me. This is when my personal encounter with Feng begins.
With Deng dreaming and planning to find Feng 1995

With Feng and Chen Liansheng in Holland 1999
Feng was teaching a two week Hunyuan Taiji retreat in the outskirts of Amsterdam and when I arrived there I was immediately in awe. I have been waiting for this moment for so long. I was very short on money at that time and could hardly afford the flight. During the retreat, I stayed with a friend whom I met in 1993 while studying (briefly) Taiji in Beijing Wushu Academy with Wu Bin (Jet Lee’s teacher- heck, just fancy the story a bit). I stayed with this friend in a rather far away town, drove in early in the morning and went back late at night. At this retreat Feng, his daughter Xiufang and son-in-law Fengming were teaching two forms of Hunyuan Taiji 24 and 48 forms. The 48 being a continuation of the 24 form. I asked the organizer, Chen Liansheng, if I could get a tuition discount as a total beginner in Hunyuan Taiji and just learn the 24 form and he agreed. As the retreat started I spoke to Feng and he alerted me that Chen Zhonghua informed him of my attendance, and at lunch he invited me to his room to chat with him and Xiufang. Luckily my Chinese linguistic skills allowed me to carry a good conversation which turned into a non-stop laughing event, if it was my sandwich with yellow cheese that only foreigners can tolerate the smell of or Feng sharing with me his Chinese style lunch but would not accept half of my sandwich in return. Joking and being happy and in high spirits was his style. Since that day I became a regular lunch companion with ‘my cheese sandwich’.

Perhaps due to my previous training in other Taiji forms, within a few days, I had already learned the choreography of the 24 forms and then started to study the other side of the room where the 48 form was taught. This made the organizer unhappy and for a good reason, I wanted to learn more than what I set out to but had no money for tuition. The organizer suddenly came over “I see you are trying to learn the 48, here is your money, you need to leave!” I was shocked and embarrassed and felt a great loss (years later the organizer and I became friendly again and he is a very nice guy), but Feng stepped in and asked the organizer to let me stay. So I stayed! My heart has completely transformed from a total stranger to someone who belonged here.

After coming back to the US I found out from Chen Zhonghua that Feng had written to him, asking Chen to take me under his wing, and so it was. I, with much luck, became a disciple of shifu (fatherly teacher) Chen and started to have for the first time a glimpse into what Taiji is. From that point on and for the next 7 years, I travelled to see shiye (grandfatherly teacher) Feng either with shifu Chen or by myself as a member of the Hunyuan school. The following accounts are from this period.

www.HunyuanInstitute.com
In shiye Feng’s home April 2000

The first time I came to see shiye Feng in Beijing was in April 2000. He welcomed me to his home and I met his family. His living room was full of awards, honors, attributes but most remarkable was the centerpiece, a portrait of his two teachers Hu Yaozhen and Chen Fake. I felt so blessed. I wanted to give him some money in a red envelope in return for his teaching, but he returned it to me. It was not about tuition fees for him. Via his connections, he arranged for me to stay in a dorm room in the Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which was not far from his home. In those days I had lots of spare time on my hands (and few obligations) and so every trip to China would be one month or longer.

Four months later a Finland retreat was scheduled for shiye Feng but his daughters Xiufang and Xiuqian could not accompany him for a reason of prior obligations. They, therefore entrusted me to “take care” of shiye, translate for him and lead the class so he doesn’t get too tired, after all the retreat was two weeks long involving hard training. This for me felt as a great responsibility and at the same time luck beyond imagination. I felt a close connection to shiye Feng.
In Beijing, it was my luck that I could speak Chinese and so wherever Feng went he took me with him and I could interact with people. In the following few years every trip to Beijing unfolded in a more or less similar way. I would come to Feng’s apartment early in the morning, he would then ask “did you have breakfast?”, I would answer “no” and his wife, a warm hearted and very kind person, would serve us some Chinese style breakfast. We then departed and most often walked to Di Tan (Temple of Earth) park. There were times when Feng wanted more privacy and we would stay training at the back of his apartment building, these times were special and intimate for me. I remember one time, in the backyard, Feng, knowing that I practiced Chinese medicine, asked me to feel his pulse and make a diagnosis. We sat on the bench and I felt his pulse with great length striking a pose of an ancient Chinese doctor. Then I said “The stomach is not right.” Feng surprised “how did you know?” He then explained why it is very important to eat garlic daily and that I should not be afraid of a regular health dose of garlic. These conversations meant everything to me. Feng was like a grandfather figure to me.

Once Feng organized for me to stay in a tiny Chinese motel right next door to his apartment building, something that was illegal for foreigners at the time. One night around 2am a fight broke out between a few local people, bottles were crashing right outside my tainted glass door. The owner rushed in to tell me to lock myself in the room and turn the light out, not answer the door when the police arrived. I sat quietly in the dark until the police left. The next morning Feng said ‘let’s move you somewhere safer.’
Practicing at Feng’s back yard

When we went to Di Tan park Feng would start singing a Peking opera or crack jokes with gentlemen and ladies exercising and dancing in the park. It seemed that many people knew him and were enchanted by his charisma. As soon as he walked into the park everyone was smiling, everyone was happy. There was a spot in the park where Hunyuan students were regularly practicing, and this is also where many people from across China and indeed around the world would come and look for him, hoping to learn something or even just take a picture. Feng was not a great fan of this spot, there were too many strangers who always wanted something from him. Actually, for me this was a great lesson in humility, because I too was just looking for him for the fame and name, at least in those years before I met him. I too had such a dream to meet a great master, the kind that one would normally only read about in books. But my sheer luck brought me closer to the person and I realized my own mistake. I realized that to learn from a teacher means to learn from his person and not from fame and name. Feng was such warm hearted kind person, making everybody around him smile, he was passionate about the Taiji he was teaching and dedicated to his students, he was a person who cared for other people, but being so famous made it difficult because so many wanted something from him. Many famous and rich people also came to look for him hoping to make a connection with the master. One time I remember the owner of a famous winery came to visit and took us to a fancy lunch, and there were many such cases. Feng was also often invited to give talks and presentations about Hunyuan Taiji and Qigong. One time we went to Beijing University where he gave a talk about Hunyuan Taiji to an enormous crowd. Feng often travelled around the world and throughout China to give seminars or hold symposiums about Hunyuan Taiji. One time we went to a large gathering and symposium about Hunyuan Taiji in Zhao Yuan, Shandong province. There were so many participants, Hunyuan Taiji was popular everywhere. Feng had an extreme martial ability and this is why he became famous, but in his heart he wanted to help the multitude of people. I heard that from him many times, he cared for the old and sick, and he was very
In Zhao Yuan Shandong push hands demonstration

A student from Xinjiang province in Western China travelled to Beijing to get a lesson
happy that his Hunyuan Taiji art was able to help tens of thousands of practitioners. These big Hunyuan Taiji symposiums demonstrated that there were practitioners from all walks of life; young and old, strong and weak, sick and healthy. Everybody practiced Hunyuan Taiji to get healthier and stronger.

Giving a helping hand with the lesson

In Di Tan park I often saw shiye Feng demonstrating his skill, yet he never showed off or bragged, but was always joking and funny. Even if someone pretended to learn but actually came to challenge him, he would casually toss them and make a joke out of it, as if there was no ill intention by the challenger. He then would say “Yaron, it’s time to go!” and we would depart, leaving everyone behind, we would continue our stroll through the park.
I remember times of Taiji instruction when I went to China with shifu Chen. Shiye Feng explained Hunyuan Taiji with great detail. I never met Feng’s teachers as they passed early on, but I feel that when he instructed shifu Chen I got a glimpse of his teachers. Shiye Feng had a special glow when he was with shifu Chen. There was a sense of a father teaching his son. Through my teacher Chen, I had the great destiny of being close to Feng.
Shiye Feng teaches shifu Chen Hunyuan Taiji in Di Tan park
Teaching Chen the finest details
One time in Finland, when Feng was teaching a two week Hunyuan Taiji retreat and I was in charge of translation and “taking care” of him, at one point, breaking for lunch, we started walking out but there was another disciple left behind in the teaching hall. His wife told him “let’s go, you are getting too tired.” Feng replied “we can’t leave, the disciple didn’t come yet, we have to wait for him.” I was very inspired. Feng just felt like a regular teacher caring for his student. This kind of Taiji heart and this kind of a personality inspired me the most. This is where I found the heart of Hunyuan, which I later brought into the Chinese medicine I practice and now call Hunyuan Medicine.

In Finland Hunyuan Taiji & Qigong retreat

I remember a great lesson Feng told me in the after-hours in Finland. He took four little rocks and placed them in four corners of a one meter squared. He then explained that you can do the Taiji form on the spot where you stand at every given moment, and he proceeded to perform the Hunyuan Taiji 24 form entirely on the same spot within the four rocks. It was a great lesson in realizing first that the essence is on the inside and that flexibility in what we conceive as rigid is a must. If we are certain that walking the form from here to there is a requisite, actually it is not.
Feng often explained that when he learned Taiji as a novice he would only learn one move at a time and this needed to be practiced at length, until the essence of it was grasped internally. His teachers would not let him scatter, as if on the outside learning more and more, while that one move was not fully understood. While I never fully grasped this within the martial arts, I took this lesson into my study and application of Chinese medicine, finding the One principle and keeping at it endlessly, never letting go. This was Feng’s instruction that I carry into my medicine, and it is why I call it Hunyuan medicine; find the One principle and do not let go.

Taiji applications in Finland always full of heart and with good spirit
There was some hard training going on practicing the forms over and over
Back in Beijing Feng’s teachings were truly special, there was wisdom in his words and actions, which reached into my core. Even though Taiji gongfu is a martial art, Feng also incorporated into it the Hunyuan principle he learned from his teacher Hu Yaozhen. He often talked about this principle of universal power that allows the stars and moon and other physical bodies to rotate endlessly and effortlessly. He explained how practicing our Hunyuan Taiji forms taps into this endless force. He often taught me “when you look at other martial artists they habitually shake and vibrate pounce and jump, but it is as if they are fighting with themselves, they are hurting their own body, and eventually they will not be able to keep their health.” Feng, by incorporating Hunyuan principle into the Chen style Taiji, made it so practitioners could learn to stop hurting themselves. Here I saw the spirit of his teacher Hu Yaozhen, a Chinese medicine doctor, acupuncturist and Qigong healer, come into play. A person, in their lifetime, has a small chance of encountering an opponent on the street and for that they need to know how to fight. However, a person, in their lifetime, has a huge likelihood of encountering disease that will bring them down, and for this a person must be ready. To practice Hunyuan Taiji properly means to learn how to fight, but more importantly, to learn how to avoid disease. Tapping into this Hunyuan universal principle is the real heart of both martial arts and medicine.
The morning routine in Di Tan park included strolling throughout the grounds to a private spot so we could focus on learning and not on taking pictures with visitors. This, though understandable, was very strange, because we walked and walked, sometimes chatting and laughing and sometimes in silence and then “stop! Right over here.” Then we started practicing. Sometimes people would find him again, so we stopped practicing and kept on walking, when it was peaceful again “stop! Over here.”
Learning Hunyuan Taiji 24 Cannons
Always finishing happy in the heart
In addition to learning the Hunyuan Taiji forms and principles what inspired me too was the cultivation of close relationship between teacher and a student, and also relationships between students. It was an excellent learning curve for me. How students handled themselves, their etiquette and what was going on behind the scenes, these were all teaching me. Like everything in life there were ups and downs in relationships, but the master handled it with great craft and never wavered away from the Hunyuan principle. It was a time for me to learn how to never stray away from principle, even if there are temporary social variations. Because of Feng’s ability to stay with principle there existed great harmony within the school. When in Beijing while accompanying Feng, I often encountered Feng’s disciples, his daughters and grandchildren, some of them who came to the USA visited with me, while others I met in different countries. One thing that connected everybody was the respect to the teacher just as it should be in a traditional school.

In discipleship ceremony at shiyé Feng’s home
With Hunyuan disciples

and family
When Feng came to the USA shifu Chen and I accompanied him to San Francisco and Seattle, where he was hosted by local students. Shifu Chen had just finished translating shiye Feng’s Hunyuan Qigong book and it was coming hot off the press, arriving in San Francisco in the middle of the retreat. Feng was very happy that the book arrived and the students were elated. The local host was a bit upset because it was Chen who translated it, but this kind of jealousy Feng easily dissolved; of most importance was the benefit to the students.

In San Francisco retreat

Before arriving in San Francisco someone called me and tried to explain to me that Hunyuan Taiji is not real gongfu and if we were to come to San Francisco he will come with his gang to teach us a lesson. I gave him the address of the hotel that shifu Chen and I were staying in, and invited him to visit us. Luckily when we got to San Francisco no gangsters showed up, so there was no confrontation. Reflecting back on those years, this situation was ridiculous. Everybody just wanted to show off.
San Francisco retreat, Feng signing copies of his book Hunyuan Qigong arriving fresh from the press

After San Francisco we travelled to Seattle. Feng was teaching the Taiji Ruler and Taiji Bang (stick) exercises and everybody was excited. There were many students and disciples. At one point I stayed with Feng at the host’s house. Feng explained few things about Dan Tian and reflective light to me. I thought: “wow, so many people all the time, being alone with the teacher is so special.” In seminars and symposiums it was always like this, it was very rare to find any private time, because there were many people seeking him all the time. But in Beijing Feng was often running away from them, pulling me with him to escape from everyone. It was private time all the time. This is why I feel so lucky. It was destiny, and that is it.
In Seattle teaching Taiji Bang

In Seattle shiye Feng, shifu Chen and Gao Fu
Learning Taiji Ruler

I have learned a great deal from this wonderful teacher. He has now passed but I feel he is still with me. Whatever I say and whatever I do, he is still with me, instructing me. I am forever in debt to him. There were many “public times” and many “private times”, I witnessed the fame and also experienced the true human heart of Hunyuan Taiji. I learned from shiye Feng how to pursue the art diligently and also how to strive to become a better, kinder person. In January 2007 I went to see Feng for the last time at his 80th birthday celebration in Beijing. It was a grand event with hundreds of participants. Feng’s daughters invited me to help translate the event to the English speaking participants. There were teams of Hunyuan practitioners from all over the world, I was sitting in a small booth with a microphone translating for people carrying headsets for English only, there were other booths with other translators into other languages. I felt blessed to see how this one single man has influenced so many people in
many languages all over the world. Hunyuan Taiji has no borders, and as shiye Feng often said “it is to benefit human kind.”

At this point I realized that what I received from Feng I need to give to others, for me it meant take what I have learned from this teacher and incorporate it into my Chinese medicine - *Hunyuan Medicine.*
My memories with Feng

Laughing Buddha with his disciples
After Word

This article is written for all Hunyuan Medicine students – so we know where we come from. If there are any errors in this article it is due to my failings.

Wu Wei Non-Action

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