

A Reflection on Master Dong Yingjie

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Dong Yingjie (1890-1964)

Dong Yingjie studied with Yang Chengfu (1883-1936), one of the most famous and most popular teachers in the Yang school. When Yang moved to Canton, Dong followed him. Of all the students who followed Yang only Dong had a literary education, rare for devoted Tai Chi Chuan students in those days, and Dong edited Yang's first book which was published in 1931. Some years earlier Chen Weiming, a scholar, practiced with Yang and then wrote a book about Tai Chi Chuan.

Dong originated from Hebei, but in his middle age he lived and taught in southern China and Macao. He later moved to Hong Kong and taught on Hong Kong Island.

One cold rainy day in May 1950 Dong started a class for beginners on the Kowloon side. Fifteen people had signed up for the class, but only five or six, including myself, attended. It was my first class with him. He showed us half the set that evening. We practiced indoors that night because of the rain. Later classes were held outdoors on the rooftop, which was a flat concrete surface with a low concrete wall around the edges. At the end of the first class Dong explained that because he could not come to every class his son, Dong Fuling, would teach some of the classes for him. There was no public transportation after six in the evening, and after class I walked the eight miles home to Shatin, New Territories.

Within a few months the class had grown to 30 students. And then I began to practice at Dong's house every Saturday morning. Usually he watched me practice, made a few comments, and corrected me. Then we talked a little while. Each time I left his house Dong would say with a smile, "Well, you need to practice more." I studied his Tai Chi book and practiced for many hours each day. In this way I learned Tai Chi Chuan from Dong.

Dong seemed to be very lonely, though he had many followers. He understood Cantonese but did not speak it. I was just a young teenager at that time, but I spoke Mandarin as Dong did; I seemed to bring to him a liveliness, a certain excitement. Dong kept other students at a distance, as was properly respectful, and even his relationship with his son was a distant one. Dong was very kind to me in many ways; our relationship was less formal. I was very straightforward with him and asked a lot of questions; more often than not Dong just smiled and replied, "Through practice you will find the answer yourself." Dong often reiterated that nowadays people are not serious in their learning and practice because they are too greedy; they skip over things, and they are concerned with what is fashionable, not with refining the art. Dong advised me to do the Tai Chi Chuan set only, over and over. He said that when I could do it well, then the other things, push-hands and everything else, would come. Dong

taught me mostly the Tai Chi form and push-hands. Dong stressed that through practice and reading the classics, you will learn; too much theory and discussion will not clarify anything. He felt that people talk and theorize too much; their words may sound impressive, but if you watch them do the set it looks rather bad. Granted, he said, that the old masters discussed theory, but they studied and practiced the form so they were able to do better than people now who want to intellectualize all the theory, but actually they do not practice, they just drill, go through the formality, so they never really learn Tai Chi Chuan. Too much theory does not replace the value of practice of Tai Chi Chuan.

Dong constantly emphasized the importance of practice (practice is not drill), "If you practice, you will understand." I had memorized the classics and sometimes I would ask him questions about them. Frequently he replied, "Yes, that's it! But you still need more practice." He would smile and continually encourage me to practice more.

In a way, then, all these years I have been teaching myself. After so many years of practice and learning I can see that too much theory and too little practice results in poor Tai Chi Chuan. Of course, this does not mean we cannot have an intellectual explanation of Tai Chi Chuan. But it is only through practice that one learns it.

Dong taught many different forms because he was a professional teacher who had to make a living. But he felt that most students put too much emphasis on the quantity of sets they know, boasting about learning dao (knife), push-hands, sword sets, and so forth, rather than on learning any of them with quality.

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Dong's approach was to respect your teacher, be humble and be patient; if you do that, you will learn, there is no way you cannot learn. But you have to practice, practice honestly, and feel what you are doing.