



MAT



Many Paths One Destination

Nine Martial Artists Share Their Journeys

Contents

Prologue	1
Pam Soldoff	6
Wayne Boozer	15
Josh Waltzing	26
Didi Goodman	35
Robert Nomura	46
Neil R. Hall	49
David Michael Cunningham	60
Richard Northwood	69
Chris Bennett	74
About the Authors	85

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A Note on Language Usage and Spelling

This book is an international collaboration of nine members of M.A.T. Chat (Martial Arts Teachers Chat). As the authors come from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, both British and American spelling and language conventions are used so stories remain consistent with their national origins.

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Prologue

The internet is a powerful thing. Over 2008 and 2010, through the medium of Twitter, it brought together a number of like-minded martial artists from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia who regularly commented on each other's "tweets" and shared ideas, experience, and the occasional "G'day" along with observations on music, the weather, and life in general. 2010 found many of these martial artists emigrating to Facebook, and over time re-finding each other there. It was David Michael Cunningham who brought a number of the friends together in a Facebook group, which was named M.A.T. Chat (that is, Martial Arts Teachers Chat).

There are many groups on Facebook for martial artists. Some focus on particular martial arts, others on promoting martial artists, some are about competitions and events, others about particular countries, and so on. There's even one for funny martial arts stories and videos. The groups themselves are just like the internet: vast amounts of unwanted - and sometimes downright offensive - information, in the midst of which, all too rarely, there sparkles the odd diamond of useful insight. And that's where M.A.T. Chat is different.

David only invited people who already knew each other, and who already got on well, and ensured that the discussion remained private and confidential. It's small, friendly, and filled with people who talk to each other on a daily basis. It's a great place to be. Somewhere you can say "what part of the foot do you work with most in a side kick?" or "I'm opening a class for over sixties and if you can give me some tips I'd be really grateful", or "does anyone do any really cool marketing around Christmas time that we can learn from?" or "hey, something really miserable happened to me in class and I feel lousy about it - help!"

It's the wonderful way of these things that over time someone says "why don't we all get together?" And so we got to talking about that. While mulling over the cost and practicalities of this certain-to-happen but still-distant M.A.T. Chat get together, Wayne Boozer put up a post about his research interests, which finished with "this could be book-worthy...." During the ensuing discussion, Chris Bennett said: "why not create a M.A.T. Chat e-book with each member contributing a chapter of their own journey and insights into their martial art..." And that's where it started. With some inspiration from a set of thought provoking questions posed by Chris Bennett's colleague Sue James, nine of us committed to finding the time to write our stories and three of us - Chris, David and I - volunteered to edit the contributions together into a book.

Chris scheduled a Skype call of the editors. I had to race out and buy a microphone and a webcam and make sure I was at my desk at the appointed time, with all the bits in place and switched on. A meeting involving people in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia is a bit of a challenge to organise, but Chris managed to persuade David to get up early, Chris stayed up late himself, and I was able to sit comfortably at lunchtime and chat to them both. We shared out tasks and set some deadlines. I was truly energised, though still a little doubtful about a deadline for first drafts just some weeks away in October 2011. But thanks to Chris's great organising and motivating abilities, I found myself having quite literally to clear my desk with a sweep of the arm and set down to writing to avoid the embarrassment of being the only person to miss the deadline. With Chris keeping our eyes on the calendar, we managed to get through the editing process and actually file all our second drafts with only a few days' extension – and all before Christmas.

As I look back on the process, I realise that to get all our contributors to produce two drafts in such a short space of time requires not only great organisation, but also a genuine desire to do it on the part of the contributors. This is one very busy group of people, who might be teaching martial arts full time and doing all the work of running their organisations alongside their teaching, or working at a day job and then teaching and training in martial arts evenings and weekends. There's not much time to spare. To get such a degree of commitment is testimony to the will of martial artists (we face a challenge, we deal with it) and it is also a testimony to the will to share our stories with others.

And the stories are truly fascinating. Reading through them as an editor, I was struck by the commonalities among us. Themes are repeated over and over. Sometimes, what emerges challenges popular misconceptions about advanced martial artists – beginning with the one that conceives of advanced martial artists as able to flatten a crowd of opponents but unable to write anything intelligible, moving or even useful.

The stories are human stories. Not stories of legends that have lived supernatural lives. We haven't come to martial arts through the passing down of secrets within our families. We haven't been singled out for greatness by a passing monk. In fact, a surprising number of us credit the movies of Bruce Lee and the "Kung Fu" television series of the 1970s with being our earliest inspiration! Doubtless, there is a generation out there who will be giving similar credit to "Karate Kid" or "Kung Fu Panda" in time to come.

We are ordinary people with families, illnesses, jobs. It's striking, for example, how often the contributors talk about their families and the support they have received from those close to them. It's often said by martial artists that you cannot be a dedicated martial artist and lead a full family life, but this is something we do – and our family life is an important part of us. That's not to say the pressures of family, work, training and teaching are easy to balance – as Robert Nomura says, "I guess this is why Shaolin monks live in solitude and aren't allowed to have wives" – but we have plenty of evidence in our journeys that it is not only possible to balance these things, but to embrace them.

It's often thought achievement in martial arts requires some kind of inner steel, a dedication, personal discipline and a determination to achieve your goal no matter what. Indeed, that's probably true. What comes across from our contributors is that this alone is not enough. The contributions are filled with stories of inspiration and practical support from others – quite often not martial artists – that have made the difference. In my own contribution, I talk about the people who actually got me to class in the first place, and who out of the blue offered me training space in the Chinese Community Centre in London's Chinatown, without which my own martial arts school would never have existed.

It is also true, though, that there is a pervading sense of destiny in our journeys. As Pam Soldoff says of her time before martial arts, "I was always a martial artist. I just didn't know it yet". It's as if we were fated to find our way into martial arts, however hard we might have tried to avoid it. And, once in, the very act of training seems to take us over. From Wayne's long hard hours of training to Chris's schedule for each day, we just love to take part. It's that special atmosphere – the special stillness within coming from movement without – which Didi Goodman captures so well with the phrase "the Zen of training."

We also love to teach. As Josh Waltzing points out, teaching helps us to learn. Perhaps we learn more from teaching the art than we do simply as students. What we learn is reward in itself, but more than that is the wonderful reward which comes with seeing our students succeed, often achieving in their lives as well as their martial arts more than they could have dreamed. The contributions bring an insight into the joy and reward of teaching. More than anything else, they are an inspiration to the would-be teacher. Yes, it really is that good ...

And if you're thinking of teaching, there are some interesting things to bear in mind. We're not a particularly young bunch – with apologies to the sprightly Josh who at twenty-nine is a whole lot

younger than some of us. It hasn't stopped us teaching. Richard Northwood, Chris, Pam and I all started martial arts proper well into our thirties. Those of us who are full time teachers had other careers first. The conception that you have to start training at three years old, become a teacher in your teens, open your own school by the time you are twenty, and become a master soon after, just doesn't fit with the reality of our stories.

For the older ones among us, we have worked hard at our training – Pam was superbly fit and fighting competitively when her opponents were less than half her age! In the end, though, even Pam has had to accept that age and injury take their toll. But we haven't given up. We've responded, and adapted. As Chris says, "perhaps true mastery is finding your way around 'impossible' circumstances."

It's not just age which we have to deal with, of course. Some of us have had to overcome tough childhoods, as David and Josh depict so movingly in their stories. For others, it's physical conditions. Wayne describes overcoming his lack of height and monocular vision to achieve an outstanding position in a field which would seem to make either one of these an insurmountable obstacle. Didi describes how she succeeded in the face of the almost unrelenting prejudice facing women in martial arts. Richard recounts how he struggled to come to terms with the impact of a murder he witnessed. Almost all of us talk about injuries, and many of us talk about losing instructors and long, sometimes enforced, breaks in our training.

It's interesting that none of us have started out and remained with a single instructor. Most of us have changed instructors several times. Also, once again challenging popular conception, most of us have changed art or drifted from one art to another. Even when staying with a primary martial art, most of us have studied at least one other, and often more. The claim that "all you need is your own martial art, it has everything you could require" is not one you will find here.

Two of us have even gone so far as to design our own martial arts – David's Hebikido, developed from a sharing of ideas with other military martial artists when he was on deployment in Iraq, and my own Ensodo, designed for older students and launched to mark my fiftieth birthday.

As well as moving from one instructor to another or one art to another, many of us have had breaks in our martial arts training. Robert, for example, had five years out of training before getting back into it in a regular way. Others have had to cut back or stop altogether through injury, pressures of day jobs, moving from one place to another, military deployment, finding the places where we

trained closing down, or having an instructor who left the association to which we ourselves remained committed. The path is seldom smooth and, as instructors who see many students come and go each year, the contributions here provide the reassuring thought that some of those might well return to martial arts in the future and look back fondly at the time they have spent with us.

So, despite a world full of pressures, interruptions, challenges and distractions, what exactly keeps us going? “Stay hungry,” says Wayne. The love for what we do remains fresh and not only do we learn something new every day, we *want* to learn something new every day. We have found Didi’s “Zen of training” in the practise of our arts, and an immense joy as teachers, seeing those around us achieve things they never dreamed they would. It is truly a wonderful life.

Whether you are new to the martial arts, a student, an aspiring instructor or a school owner, we hope that, in sharing our journeys with you, we have given you something from which you can find inspiration.

Neil R. Hall

England

January, 2012

Pam Soldoff



Pam Soldoff is the owner and lead instructor at Basalt Family Martial Arts in Basalt Colorado. She primarily teaches traditional Taekwondo. Ms. Soldoff is also an amateur Muay Thai kickboxer and includes Muay Thai classes at the studio. She has been practicing martial arts since 2002. She has a First Dan Black Belt in Taekwondo but has cross trained in Silat, JKD, Kali, Sevat, Wrestling, Gi-Less Jiu-Jitsu, Capoeira, American boxing, and Muay Thai. Her son Calvin (also 1st Dan) and husband Chance also instruct at the studio.

My students call me Ms. Pam rather than the more formal Mrs. Soldoff. I come from a strange lineage of martial artists. In the first half of my training, until I received my “school black belt,” I was a Taekwondo traditionalist.

In the second half of my training I found a wonderful crazy man known to his students only as “Sir” or “Sir Pat,” as he refused to be called Master. But I digress

I am sitting at my desk in my own martial arts studio, *Basalt Family Martial Arts*. In just a couple of months my studio will have its first anniversary.

My dojang sits seven thousand feet up in the Rocky Mountains, on the banks of the Roaring Fork River in Basalt, Colorado. When the windows are open I have to raise my voice to keep it above the rushing sound of the water. When I am here alone I can quietly focus my mind and body and work on forms or meditate, while listening to and looking out at the rapids pouring along.

And, in summertime, the tourists float by in brightly colored rafts. They point and wave at my students in class ... the students have to try hard to stay focused and not run to the windows to wave back.

When people ask me where my studio is, I usually just say, “right next to Aspen.” Everyone knows Aspen; ski town, Hollywood getaway, glitz and glamor. Well, Basalt is Aspen’s poor country cousin. You can’t get to Aspen without driving through Basalt.

Here in my studio I teach Taekwondo and Muay Thai (Thai boxing). My son and husband are my helpers and sometimes a few of my upper belt students help too.

So here I am, starting the tale of my journey till now; the present time. But how did I get here to this place in time? The question has been posed. I am fortunate to have traveled this path to this place. Getting here was not easy and the forks in my road have been many. The thing that makes my story different from others is that I began my martial arts journey when many are closer to the journey's end.

The first time I ever thought I might want to do martial arts was when I was around 18 years of age. But more than two decades would pass before I would even start my training.

My younger brother is a lifetime martial artist. Of course Bruce Lee was his hero. Mark was built like Lee and, although Caucasian, he had the same dark piercing eyes with a hint of humor and gentleness.

Mark was proud of the fact that he weighed the same as Lee, 125 pounds, and tells about how disappointed he was when his weight moved closer to 128 pounds as a young man. Through the years Mark has studied TKD, JKD, Kali, Panentuken, Guided Chaos, Silat and a myriad of other arts. He is certified in more than one, has recently begun learning Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and has been into various martial arts since he was very young.

This one day he was making a Bruce Lee style Kung Fu movie and I was cast as one of the evil minions. He impressed me so much, as he used his Kung Fu and 'beat up' all of us bad guys.

My part was getting round-housed into a pool. Although I had watched him do martial arts in the past, this one day made me really wish that I knew martial arts too! It looked exciting and he had so much fun doing it! I made a mental note that one day I would do this – I started a "bucket list" young.

Of course my whole life seemed bent on side-tracking me. I had many other things in which I was involved. From a young age I had owned horses, so I horse trained and barrel raced. In my early twenties I began off-road truck racing, water skiing and, after a year in college, I decided to go to a tech school to learn to be a welder specializing in MIG and TIG welding.

I have always enjoyed adrenaline producing activities and I am not known for going into things half way.

I made State Championship Show with one of my horses, I was the first woman to drive the 100-mile off road race for the March of Dimes (1980) and I was the first woman ever to graduate from Hennepin Technical College's welding program. I was the first woman to be asked to join the State

Industrial Advisory Committee and I was the only woman to belong to the Mound Minnesota Gun club where I competed regularly in target competitions with hand guns and .22s (about 1986).

And as a teen I dabbled in a semi-pro wrestling group as well. I do not consider this any part of my martial arts training, though I could make it look like I was an amazing ground fighter and could fly off the top ropes onto “unwitting opponents.” The official boxing and wrestling authorities muscled us to stop our club, but it was of course “sports entertainment” – all untrained and “set-up.”

The next chapter of my life, my “mid adulthood,” consisted of work and child-raising. I opened a welding shop after working in the industry for a few years. This was in Minnesota; I had yet to move to Colorado. Working as a welder was profitable and I enjoyed running my own shop. It was called *Pam’s Props* because I specialized in repairing boat propellers.

My daughter Kelly liked to sit in the office of the shop and draw and play while I worked. I particularly loved it when a new customer would come into the shop area. I would flip up my welding hood and get a kick out of their surprised looks when they saw there was a woman under the hood. I was affectionately called “Ms. Hard Body” around town; welding made me strong physically and mentally.

One evening, while I was working alone in my welding shop, a man came in and tried to attack me. I picked up my little *Makita* grinder and slammed it into his face so hard he immediately took off running. Good thing I didn’t have any martial arts training yet; I could’ve killed him!

After that I took out a concealed weapons permit and carried most of the time. As a woman alone, much of the time at my own business, I thought it was a good idea and I had my share of stalkers. But I still didn’t have time to take on martial arts training! I looked at myself as pretty bad-ass already Years earlier a union group threatened to blow up my truck, with me in it, because I “stole” a job from a man. I laughed at them. I was only twenty and quite naive. I really should have been a little scared.

Sometimes life carries you along like a cork adrift in a quick river. I find it a great analogy because of where my studio stands now. I am a decision maker; I always do things with much purpose, without much hesitation, and I rarely have regrets. Sometimes, I feel like I start out as a tiny snowflake on a mountain and end up a powerful raging avalanche.

I moved to Colorado in my early thirties after a brief ski trip to Vail, Colorado. I fell in love with skiing and the mountains instantly. I remember flying back to Minnesota and wiping away a tear because I felt like I was leaving my home. I knew I had to go and be there.

Everyone has heard the John Denver song, *Rocky Mountain High*, and these lines say it all for me:

*He was born in the summer of his 27th year
Comin' home to a place he'd never been before
He left yesterday behind him ...*

I had to delve into my new passion, SKIING.

I moved to Vail within the year. Sold my welding shop, took my daughter and moved to Colorado – the Rockies. There I skied almost every day of the season.

I worked at a sporting goods store. After eleven years as a welder I wanted a change. I learned how to tune skis so I could work in the ski shop during winters, and in summer I worked behind their gun counter since I had an extensive knowledge of guns. So here, nineteen years ago, is where I met my husband Chance – yet another serendipitous thing, “Chance.” He got a job at the sporting store as well.

We skied together nearly every day of the season and hiked high lonely glaciers in summertime, where the slopes retained their snow. A pro mogul skier, fifteen years my junior, he was bound and determined to make me into an expert skier FAST.

He took me to all the secret ski spots deep in the back country. I had to get good fast, or our little ski outings had the potential of getting a little “death-y.”

One place I recall was nick-named *Hair Bag Ally* – obviously you needed some to ski it. It was a dry creek bed, with rocks and fallen trees crisscrossing all the way down its steep zigzagging slope. I would stop, teetering on log or a rock and staring open mouthed into the gaping gully of the ally, while Chance would call up to me from far below, “Just GO FOR IT!” Deep breath . . . JUMP!!

So, as you may be able to see from this perspective, all of these experiences throughout the years were leading me steadily (however serpentine) towards my ultimate path of martial arts – though I still had no idea that this was where I was headed.

In my first forty years I was building this great base of strength, skill, focus, balance, bravery, dominance and perseverance; everything I did was in preparation for who I am now. It seems so clear looking back. I was already a martial artist. I just didn't know it yet.

Remember Mr. Haan in the new *Karate Kid* and Stephen Chow in *Shaolin Soccer*? They both said the same thing, "everything is Kung Fu". Even making steam buns, hanging up a coat or climbing an icy glacier.

Chance and I were married six months after we started dating. When I became pregnant with my second child, my skiing fell by the wayside and I devoted myself to taking care of my baby and my older daughter. I still skied some, and the mountains were my love. I hiked, snow-shoed, played with my kids in the mountains. We were a mountain family.

My daughter was a prodigy artist – all she did and cared about was drawing. But as our son grew up we looked for athletic outlets for him. Skiing? No, he didn't like it, too cold. Soccer? No, he didn't like the team thing. Football? Hell no! He didn't like being crushed into the turf.

One day, when he was in second grade, he asked if he could do Taekwondo because there were classes being taught after school in the gym.

I thought it was a fantastic idea and signed him up immediately! Calvin loved being in TKD right away. He always insisted that I come and watch him, which I did because I was quite intrigued.

I attribute my finally starting martial arts to the lead instructor of Independent TKD, Joe Levey, a young, sparkly eyed tubby guy who you never would suspect could move faster than lightning and kick over his head.

Every time I brought little Calvin, Mr. Levey would say to me, "Come on, join in, it's fun; you will like it!" He almost never missed a day when he didn't needle me to join. But I was intimidated and self-conscious, so I watched intently from the sidelines.

For six months I just watched and absorbed; then one day I decided it was time. I don't exactly know what possessed me. I think I had learned enough from just watching to know I could start without feeling too inept! But that was a golden moment for me, the day I joined in. The quote comes to mind:

The teacher opens the door, but you must walk in.

It felt so right and so perfect and I loved it more than skiing and barrel racing combined. In skiing there is speed involved and a certain degree of being out of control that you have to enjoy. With barrel racing, although you are the controller, the horse is the athlete. With Taekwondo, suddenly I was the athlete, I was in complete control; my need to use my strength could be put to proper use and I enjoyed the militarism of it as well. But, at forty-two, I knew I had an uphill battle ahead. Years were looming ahead of me to train, yet each year I'd be a little older. It's the same thing I think about now, years later.

A student asked me the other day when I would be a "master" and I kiddingly said, "Hopefully before I'm dead!" and it was a truthful answer! I tend to beat myself up a lot about not starting younger. Luckily I have always been in relatively good shape, so I didn't have to fight any weight issues, and I have always been strong through being both a welder and a tile setter for years.

One of my biggest hurdles was a mental one which, as I dare say might be the case for most practitioners, was learning patience. A black belt seemed so distant. But, as with all my passions, I threw myself into training. Of course at that time I didn't realize that a black belt is but another beginning!

From the moment I began, I lived and breathed Taekwondo. I realized that if I was going to learn I needed to make up for a LOT of lost time. I practiced non-stop and attended classes twice a week. I lived for the challenges; I loved the new found camaraderie and I loved training with my son Calvin and practicing together. I NEVER missed a class.

Of the group of us who started together, six of us are still friends and get to train together every now and then. Everything was great until I lost Mr. Levey Jr. and Mr. Levey Sr., right after I tested for my blue belt, and then my other favorite instructor too – and I was left with an instructor I really didn't care for.

There are so many life lessons to learn while training in the martial arts. One of the more important lessons I have learned is that instructors come and go. You learn as much as you can from each one before things change. Either they need to leave, or sometimes you learn all you can learn so have to move on. It's hard in both scenarios. I guess it's an acceptance of the inevitability of change and loss. The road will always be the same as you continue your journey, but the landscape will always be changing. You must persevere and continue on. It's a microcosm of life. As, I have come to learn, are all aspects of training.

After gaining and losing a few more teachers, both my son and I tested for our “school” black belts, which were un-certified.

Suddenly I decided I needed to do something new. I hit a point in my training when I decided I didn’t care for belts. Something kinda snapped inside and I veered away from traditional Taekwondo.

This is when I came upon the person I consider to be my martial arts mentor. The one who had the most influence in my training: my wild and crazy instructor for four years, “Sir Pat” Carmichael. To put it in my son’s words, from a recent essay he wrote regarding his journey to black belt, “During all the years my Mom and I trained with Sir Pat I was never not afraid of the man.” Reason being, Sir was not gentle. But did we ever learn how to fight!

Sir Pat was rather a martial arts phenomenon. A rebel, a non-conformist and exactly what I was looking for in an instructor at that time.

He was a 3rd Dan TKD black belt who scorned the traditions of the past; he purposely would not test for his 4th Dan because he didn’t want anyone to call him “Master.” He had the Kanjis for Taekwondo tattooed on his chest and Bruce Lee’s face tattooed on his calf. His hair was buzzed short, his nose was a fighter’s nose and scars combined with piercing blue eyes made him an imposing figure, despite his stature of about five foot ten and 165 pounds. He did security and bodyguard work in his spare time. His lineage of trainers included Ernie Reyes, Walt Bayless – so many big names I can’t list them all.

I took a specific Muay Thai kickboxing class from him twice a week - me and twenty twenty-two year old guys ... I took a MMA class twice a week, I took a weapons class twice a week – it was a wild combination of fighting arts that even included Capoeira.

I also trained in Brazilian Jui-Jitsu with Jeremy Stone and Justin Ellison in long weekend clinics to improve my ground game.

Although young, Pat was blessed with the ability to absorb martial arts like a sponge. He was a Jeet Kun Do expert, a brown belt in No-Gi Brazilian Jui-Jitsu, a trainer/coach (and X-pro fighter) of MMA and Muay Thai, and could use all weaponry with skill. He was also a student of Sevat, Silat, Capoeira . . . I can go on. You could argue he was a jack of all trades but a master of none, but it wouldn’t be true!

So, once again I delved into learning all these varied things. I trained twice a week with twenty tough men so I could be an amateur kickboxer. I had a goal to fight in a big venue in Grand Junction before I turned fifty. So I kickboxed non-stop.

When I had ribs broken, my husband really started to protest. He did not want me to take a fight. But of course, being the eternal rebel, that made me want to do it even more. I was offered a fight at High Desert Martial Arts.

Sir Pat was also a promoter and had been trying to find me a fight. Finally one came through; it was *Desert Rumble 2*. Because it was a novelty – a girl fight – my fight got dual top billing and was broadcast on local television. I could never find my own fight on YouTube, but the main top billing I can find.

Up until the fight I had three months to train. Night after night training, coming home and collapsing into bed. It was hard on my body – broken nose, teeth, ribs – and hard on my marriage too. My poor husband expressed a feeling like he was losing me to martial arts, and I don't blame him. I was REALLY focused on my training. I can see now that he probably felt left out to quite a degree. He complained that martial arts changed me. Yes it did. I was already a headstrong, dominant sort of person and maybe became more so with all the fighting I was doing. But all was for the best in the end. Looking back now I do feel guilty about those years, in a way. But as I said, all part of the journey and all for the best – and “No REGRETS!”

The kickboxing match itself was certainly a highlight of my life. The excitement of the weigh-in, the doctor's check, the hand taping – then there's nothing like hearing your name as you're walking out to that ring and climbing the ropes with the lights blaring down and the crowd going crazy.

Yeah, all those months of training were worth it. In the end the ref called the fight, seconds before the first round bell. TKO. I lost due to a bad nose break . . . too much blood, so he called it. That really ticked me off! I was ROBBED! All I needed was a little stop-up in my corner; my opponent was gassed and I wasn't even breathing hard. Just bleeding to death . . . ha ha, oh well . . . I was only a little disappointed. I fought a good fight. My opponent, by the way was six feet tall and twenty-two years old. No excuses . . . but I wish they coulda found me someone like five foot six, or five seven, as I'm five four.

Around two years after my “big fight,” due to the economy, Sir Pat's studio was going to have to close its doors. But a few months before that “Sir” got myself, my son, his daughter, another student of his and three ex-students of Independent TKD (those who came up with Calvin and me) all

together and told us all he wanted us to test for our Kukkiwan (certified) Black Belts. I was surprised that my reaction was excitement – as was the reaction of everyone he asked!

And so the seven of us began six months of difficult training in preparation for our big test. Come that November (6th November 2010, about a year ago now as I write this), the Kukkiwan test was very memorable. Grand Master Cavins from Sahn TKD presided to grade us, along with three other 1st Dan Black Belts and one 2nd Dan, while Sir Pat called the test.

It was exhilarating, exciting and made me realize that I still very much cared about Taekwondo. It had all come back around in a circle for me. Appreciation for the pure traditional techniques found its way back into my heart. And I realized I wanted to teach it. I had been student teaching for Sir Pat during the couple years prior to the Kukkiwan test.

Watching my son get his belt tied on by Sir Pat is another memory that is permanently tattooed on my heart. I was overwhelmed with joy for him and for me.

As soon as I could I opened my own studio, which is where I am, right now, in this time and place. It is my perfect dream life. I gain so much pleasure teaching children and helping adults with fitness. The best part of all is that my husband has joined my classes and loves learning TKD and Kickboxing (yeah, I do still love my Muay Thai) and my son is an assistant instructor too. What could be better? Nothing!

As far as I know, I have tried *everything* else.

Wayne Boozer



Sa Bom Nim (Master) Wayne Boozer has been running the Tang Soo Do school, Texas Coast Karate, since its inception as a simple karate club in the Houston, Texas area, in July, 2009. Since then, the club has grown into a legitimate school where classes are now taught in two areas of the Houston Metropolitan area.

Master Boozer has been practicing Tang Soo Do since being introduced to it in 1995 and continues to train under the guidelines of Grandmaster CS Kim and the International Tang Soo Do Federation, of which he is now a member of the Technical Advisory Committee.

If you would have told me that I'd be running my own school full-time, just three scant years ago, I would have told you that you're out of your mind. Funny how life works though, because here I sit on the threshold of leaving steady full-time employment to run Texas Coast Karate in the heart of Houston, Texas. What was once a pastime became a passion. The school sprang from that passion and my spirit – indeed, the spirit of all the students there – continues to fuel it. Honestly, I still don't feel like a master of anything, but more like "senior student" instead. It's been a wild journey thus far and I can really look back at my training, which is still just in infancy, and smile.

Back in late 1994 I moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from Washington DC, fresh off of around two years of Shotokan instruction under a gentleman by the name of Master Donald Covington. Master Covington ran an independent Shotokan school in the residential area of Mitchellville, Maryland. Quite honestly, he was the first instructor to truly impress me since meeting and spending a brief period of time training with Deddy Mansyur Sensei at the University of Houston in my undergraduate years. Mansyur Sensei is under the Kanazawa lineage and still teaches at the University of Houston campus to this day. As my previous formal experience with martial arts had only been with Taekwondo (back at age ten) and I scarcely knew the difference between arts at the time, it just seemed to be a neat thing to do since the interest was still there.

What Mansyur Sensei had done was foster a desire to seek out a knowledgeable instructor in "linear" martial arts – although, at the time, I had no idea what that was. I think that's what led me to train under Master Covington while I lived in the DC area. Master Covington was an even-tempered and rock-solid former Marine, who taught both Shotokan and Aikido. After a year of training with him, you were required to start the Aikido training alongside your Shotokan in order to

learn “the soft with the hard”. I still appreciate that approach. I also still have fond memories of training at “Champion Martial Arts”, although the school no longer exists there. My destiny led me to the deep-south and to Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

I was fresh into my first marriage and the martial arts bug was still welling within me, so I immediately began seeking out traditional Shotokan schools in the Baton Rouge area. I was, in fact, successful; but I didn’t get a very good vibe from the area school so, after a couple of classes, I decided to start again from square one. My journey eventually led me to shake hands with gentleman named Dale McKey, who ran a Tang Soo Do school and trained under a local “Kyo Sa Nim” by the name of Randy Chontas. The meager school was run out of a hollowed-out area in the back of a fitness center. The classes were small and Mr. McKey was the only real instructor there. Still, the way he carried himself impressed me. You often hear that those with good martial arts training show it in the way they carry themselves. I recognized that quality in Mansyur Sensei. I recognized that quality in Don Covington. I recognized it in Dale McKey. I joined.

For obvious reasons, I was attracted to Tang Soo Do because of the similarities it shares with Shotokan Karate. The art is, in fact, largely the Korean interpretation of the same Okinawan-origins. While there were some striking differences in the basics of motion, I knew I had found a good home. Not only did the techniques appear to be on equal par with Shotokan, but I also soon discovered that the Korean kicking prowess added in matched well with my athleticism. Such would be my chosen martial art for years to come ...

Years later (sixteen years, to be exact), I find myself still “pursuing mastery” in the art of Tang Soo Do. Interestingly enough, my studies have led me largely back to the unspoken Okinawan and Japanese origins of what we study and also to places and time periods before that. Indeed, I’m often asked why I still choose to train in just one art, especially with the plethora of MMA venues and other various arts out there. Quite honestly, I’ve come to the realization that it takes a lifetime to master one specific martial art and there’s still plenty of undiscovered and need-to-be-researched material in Tang Soo Do to keep me busy into my later years.

At the time of this writing, I’ve achieved a long-standing goal of nomination to the Technical Advisory Board of the International Tang Soo Do Federation – the organization to which I’ve belonged since I first began my studies and practice. That gives me more to do as well. Sure, I love learning new techniques and evolving as a martial artist (to quote a dear friend); but after 16 years, I’m constantly finding that my own techniques still need refinement and perfection. I’ve found that I’ve come to treasure the philosophy that goes along with the Tang Soo Do black belt (which is

actually blue). According to that philosophy, the color black symbolizes that there is nothing more to learn. Midnight blue, on the other hand, means that, while you may get close, you still have not yet perfected your technique. There is still more to learn.

I'll be practicing Tang Soo Do until I die.

I have often referred to the following experience as the defining moment in my training thus far; but in order to understand the experience, I'll have to give some candid background.

Back in 2007, I was being pulled in multiple directions. I had a thriving martial arts class at an inner-city YMCA that boasted almost thirty students, I had a good job in the Baton Rouge area working for a company I had been with for more than ten years, and I was very much in a good place with my training. I was four years out of a divorce and pretty much doing things at my own pace. Life was not without its little inconveniences, but I was overall in a good place.

2007 marked a pivotal year in my training, as it was the year that I was eligible to test for the rank of 4th Dan which, in the International Tang Soo Do Federation, is the first master's rank. I was terribly excited about this crossroads in my martial arts journey and was, at the beginning of the year, spending a lot of time in preparation for the test that was to come in October.

All was well with the direction of things at the time; but if you read carefully Grandmaster Hwang Kee's original text on Tang Soo Do Soo Bahk Do, you will see a couple of pages dedicated to the subject of *ryu pa*. This concept, defined, means "natural change". Sometimes things happen and it is the natural change of these things that keeps life going. Compare it with the natural death of a tree, which falls into a river and changes the river's course. That's *ryu pa*. My tree fell when my instructor of almost a decade made the decision to leave the federation I hold so dearly. Although he had hinted about some discontent in the past, he had always told me that such a decision of his would be up for discussion before he acted upon it. I can still recall sitting across from him over lunch at a local Chinese food restaurant when he broke the news to me.

Now, one thing that my first instructor in Tang Soo Do had always taught me was to develop and mature my own relationship with Grandmaster CS Kim, leader of the International Tang Soo Do Federation. Over the years I had taken that advice to heart and by 2007 I had a good relationship with the man, including phone calls and letters. It was actually Grandmaster Kim himself that asked me to test for the rank of Kyo Sa Nim back in 1999, before the "E-Dan Only" rule was instituted years later. On a side note, I think that is one of the things that make the ITF so unique - the approachability of the senior master. To this day, I still call him just to say "hello". Needless to say,

when my instructor at the time chose to leave the federation, having my own strong relationship with Grandmaster Kim and other seniors, I respectfully made the decision to break away from my own parent school and follow the federation on my own. It was probably one of the toughest decisions I've ever made regarding my training and, in my opinion, a test of my loyalty.

That conversation and consequent separation were in the spring of that year and I was left, largely, to train on my own in preparation for that test of tests, which was widely heralded as one of the toughest challenges within the federation. Still, fourteen years of preparation would not go for naught. I endeavored to ready myself on my own, making for a long and lonely six months.

Things happened within those six months. Things changed. I left my comfortable job of twelve years for greener pastures and a shot at management. I had begun to date again, and had developed a fantastic relationship with a woman who would soon become my wife. I began to feel the pull of new job responsibilities and this, in turn, began to pull me away from the class at the YMCA that I had spent two years cultivating. At the same time I was trying hard to concentrate on training myself properly for what would be the most important test of my life; the opportunity to reach the master level. I was all over the place.

I remember reading the "invitation to test" letter over and over again during that period, trying to convince myself that this was really going to happen. I was on the threshold of a fourteen-year goal. Everything that I had done in martial arts, in Tang Soo Do, was leading me to a single point in time. In retrospect, this was part of my motivation for staying behind when my instructor left. *Always finish what you start* is one of our articles of faith. In October, 2007, amidst everything else going on in my life, I made my pilgrimage to Monroeville, PA for the three-day adventure of my life.

An ITF masters' test is one of those things that you have to experience in order to really understand. As I recall, it was two grueling ten-hour days of training, followed by the actual test on the third day. I was in a relatively small group of about fifteen or so and, after we had all arrived, the days to come would forge a bond between the members of the group that continues to this day. The two days of training included a meticulous polishing of everything that we had learned to this point, done over and over again. Halfway through each day, we would get an approximately thirty minute lunch break. I was part of a small group that had broken off from the others to talk about the experience as it was happening. Amidst the smiles and laughter, we were all terribly sore and worn down; but no one complained because it was all an accepted part of the training. By the end of day two, I felt as though the past fourteen years had been compressed into forty-eight hours, as we had covered every aspect of our training led by a number of senior masters and Grandmaster Kim himself. Basics,

hyung, weapons, one-steps and self-defense all swirled in my brain. My body, on the other hand, was wracked with pain. I often tell my students about the night before testing, when I was lying in my hotel bed with my legs covered in heating pads, wondering where I'd get the strength to endure the performance demands of the next day's exam.

Somehow, that strength came.

By day three I was running on pure adrenalin. While sore and limited in motion because of the soreness, I was so excited about the moment – the chance to show and prove that I was worthy to take that next step – that I hardly noticed the pain. I was there for a reason; we all were. Ours was the test of 2007. I remember the quiet excitement of the morning and the nervous looks we all gave each other before lineup. I remember the thumbs up we had gotten from visiting family and friends before the test commenced. I remember my inner spirit yelling at me to pace myself, deepen my stance, and show the testing board what I was made of. This was a personal goal that I was going to live to the fullest, no matter the result, and I had practically stepped out of my own body to watch myself do it.

As I look back on the experience, in retrospect I think Grandmaster Kim and the senior masters actually used the first two days of training to test our mettle. They wanted to see who would push hard and push past their limits. They wanted to see who would endure the experience without complaint. They wanted to see who among us still had gas in the tank when it was time to put everything on the line for the exam. Indeed, I think it was possible to pass the master's test even before the actual exam. Getting out there and gutting it out on exam day was just icing on the cake, and no amount of soreness was going to take that away from any of us who passed.

I still have quite a bond with some of the people that tested with me, as the unique experience forged friendships that even transcend the respect we have for one another in training. Every gathering is an opportunity to retell the story to one another and relive the past experience we all share. In July, 2008, I became the first person to be promoted to 4th Dan master by Grandmaster Kim's son, Master YD Kim, at his school in Arlington, Texas. Since then, I've actually moved to Houston and run my own stand-alone school, Texas Coast Karate, in mid-town. Looking back, I can almost trace the departure of my instructor from the federation as the catalyst for a lot of changes that occurred in my life in a relatively short period of time. I went through a lot of emotions back in 2007, including anger, resentment and fear – and I even questioned my motivation to continue training. I've since made peace with a lot of things and I now think that if none of that would have happened, then Texas Coast Karate would have never been born. That's *ryu pa*.

When reflecting on my influences, I think about the subject of lineage a lot, primarily because in my particular journey I have more than one influence, both past and present. As I get a little older, I realize that understanding and accepting my influences, all of them, is part of the journey to mastery; and it also tends to keep me humble as well.

I'm usually the first to remind a student that my first love was Shotokan Karate. While my first exposure to formal training was at age ten in the art of Tae Kwon Do under Master He Il Cho's organization, I really didn't start to sink my teeth into the lifestyle of the martial artist until I met Deddy Mansyur Sensei. It was on the bare floor of one of the rooms in the student union that I had an opportunity to be influenced by a man directly influenced by the second generation of Shotokan and related styles from Okinawa & Japan. As a matter of fact, at the time of this article, the man still trains with Kanazawa Sensei himself. It wouldn't be for another twenty years that I would realize how much Mansyur Sensei's influence had affected my own views on training and teaching in such a positive manner. I'm happy to say that he and I have rekindled our friendship since my own return to Houston in 2008, and we still chat occasionally on the phone.

When I moved to the DC metropolitan area in 1992 I settled on Champion Martial Arts, which was heralded by former Marine, Master Don Covington. Master Covington was a very physical instructor and steeped in both Shotokan Karate and Aikido. The falls and rolls that I teach my own students are direct descendants of what I learned under Master Covington; and it was within the walls of his school that martial arts became a lifelong pursuit for me.

After moving to Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1995, I discovered the man who would become my first Tang Soo Do instructor, Dale McKey. Kyo Sa Nim McKey is now retired, having survived a bout of lymphoma; but were it not for his meticulous methods, the transition from Shotokan to Tang Soo Do would have been a much more difficult journey for me. While it has been quite some time since "Kyo Sa Nim" McKey has donned a uniform, I still regard the man to be my senior many times over. He and I still keep in close contact with one another, as I am the only remaining International Tang Soo Do Federation black belt that he produced.

Now, the beauty of being in a close-knit federation is that many of my present influences are close enough for me to train with them, or at least to call should I ever need advice. Actually, I could go on and practically write a book about all of them if I so chose. Still, with so much more to cover, I'll give the abridged version.

Master Mike McGee – Zachary, LA

I have often told my students that my personal approach to teaching children is a direct result of studying this man. While, over the years, I've put my own personal swing on strategies, no one person has been a greater influence on how I handle a kids' class. Master McGee taught me that the easiest way to capture and keep the attention of children is to have more energy than they do. I took that advice to heart; and years later, it still shows.

Masters Joe Goss Sr. & J.r – Johnstown, LA

By lineage, my personal approach to Tang Soo Do probably most closely reflects Joe Goss Karate School. As a matter of fact, it was one of Master Joe Goss Sr.'s students that originally moved to Baton Rouge and began teaching Tang Soo Do there. Master Goss, Sr. (or 'Grandfather' as I affectionately tend to call him) is a literal encyclopedia of functional martial arts knowledge, and even today still instructs the Pittsburgh-area police force SWAT team in gun and self-defense tactics. In addition to Tang Soo Do, Master Goss Sr. also holds rank in Judo, which shows in his approach to class. I can never train with this man enough. His son, Master Goss Jr. is a direct product of his father's teachings. I think I first saw him perform hyung when I was a green belt, and it genuinely set the standard for me. That standard still exists today if you should ever see him in action. Few have more spot-on technique than that man, and both he and his father know how to use hyung techniques in self defense. There's a lot to be said about that in today's world. Fortunately, at this time, I still get an opportunity to train with both of these gentlemen once or twice per year. We are all very close.

Grandmaster (Choong Jae Nim) CS Kim of the International Tang Soo Do Federation

For what I do, and my approach to martial arts, this man is at the helm. Grandmaster Chun Sik Kim (or Choong Jae Nim) has been a close friend, mentor and leader for the International Tang Soo Do Federation. Long ago, Dale McKey advised me to develop my own relationship with our federation's very approachable senior master, and I am a better man for it. Choong Jae Nim, before the institution of the federations "Kyo Sa Nim eligible at E-Dan" rule, approached me personally as a 1st degree black belt and asked me to start actively teaching. To this day, we still contact one another on a regular basis, if only to say hello. There are, quite honestly, too many qualities to list regarding why he remains such an influence technically, strategically, and philosophically; but I often tell my own students that I'm on the "Grandmaster Kim aging plan", as a testament to his longevity in my beloved art of Tang Soo Do. Not only is his technique one to emulate, even in his later years, but I can still call the man for fatherly advice.

I could write a ten page dissertation literally dissecting every single influence that shows in the way that I presently do things. Still, those in the list I have here are the influences that I draw from on a weekly basis. I have friendly relationships with all of my deepest-running influences in my approach to martial arts and, as I get older, I find that carrying on a legacy like that may very well be the key to immortality. Hopefully, as the years pass, the techniques and philosophies of my influences will show in the way my students do things as well. Being a vessel for passing on knowledge is perfectly fine with me.

It is not always easy. Tang Soo Do, much like its sister art, Taekwondo, is steeped in a lot of foot-fighting techniques. I often joke with my students that I consider myself to be the last choice for studying Korean based martial arts. I say this because of the observed characteristic, the distancing principles that must be considered when fighting in this manner. Indeed, you have to give a Korean stylist room to work ...

I, on the other hand, am both short and near-sighted. A battle of kicks against an opponent of taller stature and similar abilities is a most-challenging hurdle for me. This, combined with my monocular vision, makes fighting from a distance far from the best strategy for me to utilize.

I read somewhere once that the immortal Bruce Lee was nearsighted and was actually born with one leg slightly longer than the other. This, from what I understand, eventually formed the basis for his very unique fighting stance in Jeet Kune Do. I actually took this same philosophy and applied it to my Tang Soo Do by learning to be a close-quarters fighter. This of course goes against some of the generally accepted tenets of my chosen martial art; but as I continue to practice, I find that overcompensating for distance and fighting in-close actually works particularly well for me. It's made me selectively more aggressive and helped me to develop an understanding of the sometimes undervalued hand-techniques of Tang Soo Do. In order to accommodate the "selective aggressiveness", I've trained to be particularly strong and muscular for my small body frame. This is a basic tenet of my approach to training (and my primary motivation behind the weight training) because I know I won't see everything being thrown at me. The strategy, which I'm finally sharing in full here, is to tie up and overwhelm – which is quite the opposite of a Korean fighter's usual tactics. It makes for an interesting approach to Tang Soo Do, believe me.

I take a very jovial approach to my classes which, while physically challenging, also give me an opportunity to share my personal philosophies with my students. One of the subjects that we often revisit is the subject of stature. Regarding the subject of ho sin sul (holding, self-defense), much of what I was taught came from a man that stands about 5'10" to 6' tall. After studying under him for a

number of years (no pun intended) we both realized that the mechanics of making a technique work properly was often different for me, standing only at 5'2". Today, I find that I can teach a technique for both someone of my stature and someone taller, and explain the differences between the two. Somehow, I've managed to turn my height and limited vision into true attributes.

So much for overcoming difficulties. What then are the biggest assets to improvement? I'll start this off by saying that there is no magic potion to proficiency in martial arts. It takes practice, it takes work, and it takes attention to detail. To cut right to the chase, I dare say that the attention to detail extends beyond actual technique learned in class. You must pay attention to YOU.

I say this because I was raised by a dietitian and my first unconventional loved-sport was bodybuilding. The combination of the two helped me better to get in touch with what my body was asking of me at any given time. This can mean any one or a number of physical improvements that I'm trying to make during the course of my training, and can vary from wanting to put on an extra five pounds of muscle to see how it affects my punching power to noting subtle changes in the flexibility of a front kick. I feel, after twenty years of training, like I know what my body needs to improve and (more importantly) what pushes me too far.

Cross-training is a huge part of my philosophy – a subject that I'll revisit a little later – and I sincerely believe that only part of one's training is done in the training hall. Much of a student's individual improvement depends largely on how the student spends time outside of the school.

Without repeating an earlier story, I'll go on to say that when I tested for the rank of master I learned that physically pushing myself to my limits allowed me to step into a greater realm of understanding about my art and my ability to express the art to others. Needless to say, I now find reason to push myself just that hard at least once per year. I find that with that approach I continue to improve in ability.

So what supports me? What is my current focus? I'm at a crossroads right now. I'm literally on the threshold of leaving my day-time job and teaching full time. This has been a two-year journey for me, and well worth every step of the way. I feel that I need to say this regarding that particular question because it'll help with my answer. Taken from the point of view of a member of a strictly-regulated federation, there is a constant need to improve or maintain skill level at all times. Simply put, you never get an opportunity to coast.

In 2012, I will be testing for the rank of 5th Dan in the International Tang Soo Do Federation. At the time of writing this, I am planning my next course of action for training myself in preparation to have

a good showing at that exam. This constantly forces me to take an introspective look at my methods, my cross-training venue and my technique. When I am between promotional exams, I have to recertify for rank annually. This keeps me on a tight schedule. You may even notice the cyclical nature of my posts on my training blog as “that time of year” comes around. I literally revolve my life around it.

In 2010, I was appointed to a position to the International Tang Soo Do Federation’s technical advisory committee, making me the first African-American on the board. This, in my opinion, was the ultimate compliment to my first instructor, Dale McKey. I still preach to my students to “become obsessed with details”, and I really think that’s what Grandmaster Kim and my senior instructors noticed about me throughout the years. You can look at something as simple as Facebook and you’ll see me recording practice on everything I’ve learned from day one on a weekly basis. To me, that’s the only way to gain proficiency in martial arts; constant, unyielding practice.

I make a point of this because I drive my students in the same manner. I have consistently told them that I am always improving, but to use me as their bar and then pass me up. All too often I have seen instructors become complacent with their abilities and retire from pushing themselves hard. Rest assured that I am always focused on something regarding training and preparing for the next exam.

Ten Years from now, I will be forty-nine. I’ve often said that I’m on my Grandmaster’s aging plan, and Choong Jae Nim CS Kim of the International Tang Soo Do Federation showed few signs of aging until he was over seventy. Needless to say, I’ll still be pushing myself physically to see just where I can take things.

Now, if you would have asked me ten years ago about school ownership, I would have laughed at the idea. Now, here I sit on the threshold of running Texas Coast Karate full time, focused, and determined to make it happen. With a little luck, a few blessings and hopefully some wisdom, that new-found dream will come to fruition. I’m bucking the system, actually, by building a traditional martial arts school around an adult population; which is rarely seen in this day and age. I know I can make that happen and be a success with it.

In my ten year projection, the question of rank is probably the least concern. I just want to continue to practice Tang Soo Do. Recently I read the book *Shotokan, A Precise History* by Harry Cook, and it proved to be a profound study into the world of the martial artists that largely shaped the face of traditional arts today. As much as I hate to make an ego-driven statement, I must admit that it

would be nice to leave such a mark. Such influence actually means more to me than the most successful school.

One of my personal philosophies is in regard to “personalizing” your respective art without violating the basic rules. I sincerely believe that everyone has the ability to leave their own stamp on what they do. Hopefully, ten years from now, I’ll be well on the way to leaving mine.

If I could leave you with a “golden nugget”, I guess it would be too much of a cliché to say “stay hungry”; but you have to “want” to get better. You have to never be satisfied with your abilities. My wife often gives me funny looks when I say this; but I have told her on more than one occasion that “every day I don’t train is the day someone else trains more than I do”. Fortunately, both she and my kids understand. As a matter of fact, my wife has often said that I seem to be at my happiest when I’m in uniform.

Yes, that’s obsessive; but in the world of martial arts, it can work for you if you know how to direct that kind of energy. Find excuses to push yourself. Find reasons to challenge yourself. Step outside of your comfort zone as often as possible and watch your perspective change. You will grow as a martial artist if you make the conscious decision to never be “comfortable”. That, I think, is really why I continue to improve. In my eyes, I’ll always be that white belt who just started training and wants to be as good as the masters instructing me. If you never lose sight of that, then you always have room for improvement.

. . . and you stay hungry.

Josh Waltzing



Josh Waltzing is the Head Instructor of two Taekwondo schools in Central Minnesota. Training in the martial arts for over fourteen years, he has earned a Third Degree black belt in Taekwondo as well as advanced under-black belt rank in Judo, Hapkido, and Kumdo. Besides teaching martial arts, he earned a teaching license through the State of Minnesota in High School level Social Studies. At twenty-nine years old he is married and has one three-year-old son with whom he loves to share his joy of learning.

Why does one start martial arts training? I have heard that, regardless of the reason, it is for confidence. I started martial arts training because I lacked confidence in myself. After training for a long time and becoming an instructor, there is another reason that I continue to pursue martial arts. I do not want anyone to ever have to go through the experiences that I did as a kid. Being able to teach other students to defend themselves and become more confident is why I continue. If it were to be distilled to a single word, I would say the reason I continue to train and teach is: confidence. I know that martial arts training develops confidence. A confident student is less likely to be a target of violence.

In Jim Collin's book *Good to Great* he says that every great company must have a "Big Hairly Audacious Goal." My B.H.A.G., is to change the world and create a world that is safer for everyone; safer for the awkward kids who have few friends, safer for the overweight people who struggle with their self-image, and safer for all those who want to better themselves. How am I going to do that? Through the study and teaching of martial arts, through the implementation of the lessons of courtesy, integrity, self-control, perseverance, indomitable spirit, determination, discipline, and focus as taught in Taekwondo.

My goal over the next ten years as an instructor is to change our town. I want to create a community that is more respectful, focused, dedicated, and driven than the one we currently have. Martial arts change lives: I have seen this in so many instances and now I want to make my community know it too! In the next decade, my goal is to bring the community back to a time where people respected each other – not because of what they do or the amount of money they make, but because they are people and because they have families and people who care about them.

There will be difficulties, challenges and obstacles to overcome, but I am not new to these. Everyone has obstacles they must overcome and it is in doing so that we become better people. Martial artists are akin to most people; they have experienced many setbacks and it is these tests that make the good ones. The ones who learn to live their lives by their art, incorporating it into all decisions and perspectives. In my life I have experienced some of these same impediments but have never let them deter me from accomplishing what I want.

My story starts in a small town in rural Central Minnesota in the early morning of September 5, 1982. My early childhood created a sense of insecurity about myself that has not entirely gone away. Before I was five-years-old we lived in at least five houses in five different towns. Moving around like this created a desire to belong and fit in with the people around me. This insecurity means that at times I expend a considerable amount of effort to make sure you like me. I think about it a lot and try to figure out a way that I can remedy the situation.

This insecurity is why I am not a very good salesman, but a great teacher. My father-in-law is an amazing salesman and we have discussed what it takes to be a great one. Salesmanship is the ability to talk to anyone and not care whether they buy, to know that it is not about this particular customer but about the number of customers you see. I know that pleasing everyone all the time is not possible, but that is hard to accept. Teaching allows me to learn from you, because I can watch for a longer time. Once I know you, giving you what you want is easier and you will appreciate me more, insecurities and all. These insecurities led me toward martial arts, I believe, and as you will see it had to do with one major historical example.

History has always been something that has been a big part of my life. I blame my parents and family trips around the country. We have gone to almost all of the major tourist attractions and historical sites of the Midwest United States and much of the Western United States. However, as much as my parents hoped to foster a love of the United States and its history, the most interesting part of the world for me has always been Asia. My first interest in Asia was Genghis Khan; how he grew from someone who had nothing and was left in the wilderness with his mother to die, to be the greatest conqueror in history. Victory after victory showed the Mongols that, regardless of upbringing, they could be powerful if they worked together and understood how to take advantage of their enemy's weakness.

That story was inspiring to learn as a seven-year old being beaten up every day after school right in front of the teachers and school administration. In every school, at every time, there has been some kid who is awkward and overweight. There is the kid who gets along better with adults than with

other kids, who prefers to read books than play sports. That kid was me for a long time and it attracted bullies. You know those polite terms that clothing manufactures use to describe sizes; petite, junior, misses, and big and tall? Of all of these, the term that is the most damaging to the confidence of a young child is “husky.” We know it just means fat, and no amount of clever word play will ever make it better. When some children have to see this every time they go to buy clothes and they have to try on size after ever increasing size, their confidence starts to deplete quickly. It makes a student very self-conscious – and that is just one more thing bullies rely upon to find their targets. For me the bullying was more physical than mental; they pushed me around, broke backpacks, tore jackets, and left bruises. I think I actually prefer that kind of bullying to the kind I see in schools today. The Cyber Bullies of today are far more vicious than my attackers. Regardless of the tactics I tried, nothing changed. The bullying continued and I made a vow to never be powerless again. It also developed a desire in me to lose weight and become a better person.

Desperately, at times, I searched for the magical secret in books, movies, and magazine articles that would stop the attacks. Mom and Dad told me to ignore them, but that didn’t work because the bullies just pushed me down and kicked me on the ground. I tried to avoid the wait for our bus, so I would wait by the school building until the bus got there. The problem with this was that the bullies rode my bus too and they began bullying me on the bus.

There were no martial arts schools in our area that accepted kids, so I started sports. I played many sports, but the sport that appealed to me the most was wrestling. I liked wrestling for two reasons. First, it was only ever one on one. On the mat I would never have to deal with multiple opponents at the same time, like I did when I was being picked on and bullied. Secondly, I was a big kid by that time – not huge but bigger than many of my classmates and big enough so that, on the wrestling mat, I was bigger and stronger than the opponent.

Taekwondo training for me started when I found a flyer for classes starting in my high school. By this time the bullying had stopped, but the effects of that experience had not subsided. I was still extremely self-conscious and insecure, so I was still searching for something that would build my confidence. I didn’t feel fat any more but I didn’t feel skinny either; I was what I called “athletically overweight.” Classes were only twice per week and, although I wanted to train more often, unfortunately that was all I could commit to at the moment. I was still playing sports and I could not drive myself to classes because they were fifteen miles from my house and I did not have my license yet. I had convinced my Mom, brother, and high school friend to start with me but only my friend stayed with me in classes for a few months. I was hooked immediately!

My first instructor was a former United States Army sniper and his classes were very strict. It was difficult for a fifteen-year-old kid, but I loved it because it was intentional. If you put in the time and effort, if you worked hard and did what you were told, you would advance in rank. With rank came respect and, more importantly, greater confidence. I learned to do things to the human body I didn't know were possible. Each class, it seemed, I learned to perform techniques designed to cripple, maim, and kill. It was no laughing matter but serious business and we approached it that way. Yet, with each belt, I learned more about myself than before. With each belt promotion I was tested in ways I never expected. Then, just over half way to black belt, my instructor left and another took his place. This new instructor was from the same school system and taught the same material but did so in an entirely different way. It was more fun while at the same time being just as intense. He is a man I came to respect highly and admire.

My instructor is a fifth degree black belt in Taekwondo and has been invaluable in helping me grow as a martial artist. His guidance helped me to become a much better martial artist because he showed me the other side of training. Classes were not only about achieving some objective and learning some requirement for belt testing. Training could be fun and you could learn valuable skills while at the same time really enjoying the class. He showed me that you could actually learn valuable skills by jumping off the wall.

While I was a colored belt at about the three-quarters of the way to black belt, I suffered a Level-3 tear to the medial collateral ligament in my left knee. This could have caused complete abandonment of my goal of black belt. I followed the doctor's advice and did not train but I still attended class staying on the side and taking notes, writing down as much material as possible. This time spent writing was one of the best things I ever did for my training. Tearing the ligament in my knee has meant a few new things that I have to worry about. I have to be concerned about spinning techniques or techniques that put a lot of pressure on my knee joint. This new focus proved to be beneficial, however, because I have been much more cognizant of the injuries of others and how to train with them or overcome them.

After five years of training I became a black belt and started teaching. Suddenly it was no longer about me, but was about teaching others. Now the quest for knowledge and the desire to be the best instructor for my students is the driving force. It is about teaching them something that will give them the same feelings I had as a student. Giving students the rush of learning a new technique and imagining how that will help them with their challenge. Some of the most exciting things I have learned over the last several years had to do with teaching. Martial arts for me has become about

teaching with the intention of creating great martial artists who are amazing people in the training hall and out.

It is ironic that teaching is my profession because it was not even on the radar when I was young. I started teaching as a colored belt in Taekwondo classes, not really by choice. My instructor said that if I was coming to class early I would help out too. Then I started assisting by holding targets and gradually I started teaching. About six months after I completed my black belt exam he told me I was becoming the head instructor. I was now totally in control of the school. I love every part of being a teacher, the planning and the teaching but most importantly, I love the “Aha Moments” students have. It does not matter if the student is six or sixty-years-old, the look is the same. It is a look of pure excitement and joy. Teaching also does amazing things for your confidence. I thought I was confident before being the head instructor but it climbed much higher afterward. As an instructor you have to be able to tell the students confidently why they did something wrong, what was wrong with it and what they need to do to fix it. You cannot be meek and timid; you must be strong and confident.

Once I realized how much I love being a teacher, I enrolled in my local university’s Teacher Education program. Problematically, my “local” university was about an hour away from my house, so it would be at least two hours of driving every day. I tried to live on campus, but that was too expensive so I was still driving back to my hometown to teach Taekwondo classes. In an effort to save money, I decided to live at my parents’ house and commute to campus. All of this drive time and then the time in classes meant that my weight slowly started to creep toward the three hundred mark. It is amazing how you can gain weight and not even realize you are gaining it. In my mind it seemed like one day I weighed two- hundred-twenty-five pounds and the next I was over three hundred. Not only does this wreak havoc on a person’s confidence, but my weight has also given me injuries to deal with; spraining a vertebra in my back and rotating my sacrum. The sprained back resulted from pushing and lifting incorrectly with excess weight. My sacrum injury was the result of trying to perform a lot of jumping and spinning. In one instance my legs stopped moving but the weight of my upper body kept moving.

Watching my then one-year-old son start to get mobile and seeing my father lose fifty pounds made me finally get serious about my weight and make an action plan to lower it. By setting small incremental goals I was able to motivate myself to lose ninety pounds in two years. I can leave all of my students in pools of sweat, begging me to stop, and that is what a martial arts instructor should be able to do in every class. Even my students who are older U.S. Marines have a hard time keeping up with me. That feels good and it is a great confidence booster.

What I have learned about weight loss is that it is not about diets but it is about the same thing we martial artists talk about in relation to becoming extremely proficient in our arts – you must live it. If you only go through the motions of training, you will not go very far in martial arts. On the other hand, if you make the training a part of your life – if you internalize the habits you are learning – you will achieve so much more. That is what I had to do in order to lose weight; I had to make being healthy and exercising a part of my life. It wasn't something I was just doing because I wanted to do the next trendy thing; I wanted to make a permanent change. I tell my students they should have a "Black Belt Attitude" in the school and outside of it. They must always ask themselves, how a black belt would act. I have tried to take a black belt approach to health and fitness as well as remember this important quote from David Campbell, the Founder of Saks Fifth Avenue, "Discipline is remembering what you want."

While in college, a set of soft-spoken yet amazingly powerful Judo instructors brought my martial arts to a whole new level. What these two gentlemen taught was extraordinary! There is a simple Japanese word that is hard to define precisely but so incredibly powerful when used correctly. *Kazushi* means variously, "to break one's balance", "to disrupt the flow" and "to destroy the opponent's ability to defend". This last definition is the one that has so much power. To execute a proper *Kazushi* means to destroy completely and utterly your opponent's ability to stop you from doing what you want to do to them. Even more amazing is the small amount of force need to make a good *kazushi* work. Sometimes you need little more than the force required to open the door of a fine automobile. In most cases on the mat, you can achieve a *kazushi* with the grip of your ring and little fingers.

Another almost equally remarkable concept was that of "Traveling Tension." If you grip too tightly, or clench your fists, there is a chain reaction of muscles in the body. One follows another and so forth until the entire body is a bit more rigid than it was before. In Taekwondo we always talk about staying relaxed and fluid, but it does not have the same impact as it does in Judo. When performing a technique the body must remain completely relaxed and soft; only then will the techniques of Judo become devastatingly effective. This relaxation was the meaning behind the name *Judo*. *Ju* means "soft" or "gentle" in Japanese and *do* means "the way". Judo was the *Gentle Way* not because its techniques were soft and gentle but because it taught its practitioners to be soft and gentle in their execution.

For days I pondered these thoughts. These two concepts could be applied to every area of life. You could apply the principle of *Kuzushi* at work or even at home. Applying the concept of "Gentle Way" in life would mean you let challenges and adversity come but never struggle directly against them.

Be flexible in your approach to people and challenges, move with them and adapt to them. These two lessons were very inspiring but there was an earlier inspiring moment that changed my early black belt eyes.

One of the most inspiring moments was the first time I participated in a Kumdo class. I had been training in Taekwondo and Hapkido for about four years and received my black belt in Taekwondo, so I believed I understood the concept of *Ki* and focus – but Kumdo brought it to a whole new dimension. Classes in Kumdo were very hard but not in the same physical way Taekwondo or Hapkido were for me; they were mentally exhausting. As a warm up, we would do hundreds of simple straight down slicing motions with bamboo swords. Although it was not difficult to swing this stick through the air multiple times, it was exhausting to focus the entire mind on getting the end of that sword to travel in a straight line.

Subsequently, however, I was shocked to find that the rest of my training and teaching had been enhanced! The change was subtle but I could see openings and possibilities to new finishes and better strikes. Unexpectedly, these developments blew me away because it was the opposite of what I believed I needed at the time. I thought I wanted more Taekwondo training because I had just tested for and passed my black belt exam. We were told, once you got to black belt, you would really start using the box of tricks. What I learned was that Taekwondo was my foundation; it would be the art I would always rely on for direction. However, now that I was a black belt, I could begin to develop who I was as a martial artist. I didn't have to be a carbon copy of my instructor and do all of the same things he did as he trained. I could examine the different arts and find out what fit me. It was this knowledge that led me to want to train in Judo. As a high school wrestler, the mat felt like home so it was not a stretch to transition to the Judo mat. Kumdo brought what felt like a revelation, and with grand insights can come either a sense of security in knowing you are on the right track or insecurity knowing that you have a long way to go. For me, it was a little of both – but I did know that I needed some support to continue the journey. I could not do it by myself.

Right now the support of my practice in martial arts is from my wife and family. I teach in both my day job and evening business. It is a lot of fun but is very demanding of my time and energy. My wife is amazing and understands I love to teach and is willing to let me do it nearly as much as I want. I don't think I would be able to continue teaching martial arts without her huge support. Not only does she support me in giving of our time together but she is my best sounding board. I have asked her to listen to the latest and greatest idea I have for my business and she listens very patiently and quietly. In so many cases she has pointed out something that I would never have

considered. Not because it is unthinkable but because I entertain some preconceived notion she deftly points out. That is very valuable to me as a business owner.

The other local support I have in martial arts and teaching is from my master instructor. His background, running a martial arts school for the past 20 years, is very valuable. As an instructor I still struggle from time to time teaching a particular student. Sometimes I just can't seem to get it to click with the student. He is not on the mat with me all the time, so I will ask my master instructor about this student and get his advice. Many times that is enough – but there are times I still cannot get the student to understand. As Galileo said, “We cannot teach anyone anything, we can only help them to find it within themselves”. At this point, I am struggling in the dark as much as my student, trying in vain to find the information within him. Then, my master instructor comes into the school and as if by magic, finds it. The student gets it, like an explosion of insight that lights up his entire body – he just glows from every surface. I have to stop and admire that in my master instructor; he is a natural teacher and, although our teaching styles differ in many ways, I still have a lot to learn from him.

As a martial arts teacher, a great online support network for me has been a group of martial arts instructors who came up with the idea of this work. There are many times I don't even ask questions because someone else has already asked them and I just read the responses of the others in the group. There is so much wisdom and experience in this group because so many of them are outside my martial art, my region, and even my country. It gives a whole new perspective to the martial arts teaching experience and I highly value it.

Currently, my focus in martial arts has been on the business side and specifically on curriculum development. We have been trying to implement a rotating curriculum structure with our system for the last several years and it has been mediocre in its success. It has helped the instructors feel like they are getting more done in a single class period, but it has not helped the students become better students. It has nothing to do with the students or instruction but more with the way we have attempted to implement the system. I have been working on a new implementation, one that would be more systematic, structured, rigid, and much more intense. This new system will progressively create higher demands on each and every student. It will also be easy to teach from an instructor's perspective, with built-in differentiation for more advanced students and even built-in changes for adult and junior level students. If it succeeds, it will give students more confidence because they will be able to see all the work they have done and be proud of their achievements.

Fourteen years of training in Taekwondo, Judo, Hapkido, and Kumdo have taught me a lot about attitude. Your ability to succeed in martial arts has more to do with your attitude than the training itself. You can be the most talented and able-bodied person, but if your attitude stinks you will not go far in any martial arts training. On the other hand, if you have a great attitude but lack physical skills in one way or another you will still be able to succeed greatly. I have had several students who have had cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, or other nearly debilitating conditions yet their attitudes were outstanding. They were focused and determined. These students had the attitude that no matter what cards they were dealt at birth, they would not stop achieving what they wanted in life. These students have amazing confidence and they are infectious to be around.

I have a lot of goals and dreams for my training as a Taekwondo practitioner and as a martial arts business owner – goals I'd like to reach in five to ten years. As a martial artist, I want to get my black belt in Judo in the next five years. Judo has impacted on me in so many ways, but I would not have believed it when I started training. Within ten years I also hope to achieve the rank of Fourth Degree Black Belt in Taekwondo. When I started training, my goal was to get to black belt. There is a concept that black belts have reached the pinnacle of their art. The thought is that there is no level higher and they are the best. But so much more awaits you as a martial artist once you get to black belt. My master instructor tells this story to his students:

As a student you are climbing a mountain and at the top of that mountain is a black belt instructor telling you which path to use and which one to avoid. You strive to get to the top knowing that you will have accomplished your goal and achieved something great. When you get to the top of that mountain, you look down at the path you have climbed thinking of the sweat you have shed. Then, you turn around and see the other mountain looming up before you. This is the Mountain to Mastery and it is a lot bigger than the one you just climbed. You realize that your climb to black belt was only the preparation for what is yet to come.

Over the past fourteen years, I have also come to understand that, once a student gets to master level, the journey still does not end. There is another mountain. But it is not one that you climb for yourself; it is one you climb for the students you will train in the future. Advancement at high ranks of black belt does not test your skills; they have been examined over many years. Masters' Tests are about the development of the martial art and striving to leave the art better than where it was when you started. I hope that, when I die, people will be able to look back and say that I have changed the world – that I have done remarkable things with martial arts and impacted thousands of individuals.

Didi Goodman



Didi Goodman is founder and chief instructor at Cuong Nhu Redwood Dojo in Oakland, California. She holds the rank of Rokudan (6th degree black belt) in Cuong Nhu, a Vietnamese style (meaning 'hard/soft') that draws techniques and principles from several different Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese martial arts. Prior to dedicating herself to Cuong Nhu, she studied both Taekwondo and Aikido for many years. She is also a poet, writer, and avid bird-watcher. She is author of The Kids' Karate Workbook: A Take-Home Training Guide for Young Martial Artists, from Blue Snake Books.

My best friend and I were in the same boat – nowhere to go over a winter holiday break – so we were staying in a nearly-empty college dormitory in December 1975. A friend of hers, who had graduated the year before, flew in from the East Coast to visit. I remember it clearly: I walked into the dorm living room, and there they were, practicing kicks. Front kicks toward the bricks on the north wall, then roundhouse kicks over the back of the couch.

“What are you doing?!” I exclaimed. Then, “Let me try!”

They gave me a few pointers, and I was soon attempting to throw kicks over the furniture. Next we were sitting in horse stance in front of the brick wall, trying to punch full speed right up to the bricks without touching. That was the beginning of my life-long dedication to martial arts.

My friends had taken a Taekwondo class the year before, but the instructor – a student at the college – had since taken time off from school. This holiday visit reminded them how much they had loved it. My friend wasn't sure what to do, other than to keep practicing in the living room. I wanted to do it with her but she insisted she wasn't qualified to teach me the moves. Our problem was solved when, in January, the instructor returned to school and we convinced him to restart the class.

The seventies were a boom time for martial arts. Young college students, who had grown up on Bruce Lee movies and David Carradine's *Kung Fu*, filled huge college gyms. The women's self-defense movement was underway, developed and led by women trained in karate and other martial arts.

I knew nothing of this. I attended a small college that didn't emphasize athletics; our workouts were student-run and tiny. I had never seen a Bruce Lee movie until well after I became involved in martial arts (shocking, I know!). While I understood that women were often targets of violence, I didn't feel a strong personal need to study self-defense; I just wasn't interested in it at that time.

What I saw in that living room – and what I came to practice daily over the next six months – just had an intense, gut-level appeal. Deep in my body, I had to try it and then I had to do it. To use a more recent cultural reference, it was like Billy Elliott. Billy just had to dance; I just had to kick and punch.

I loved everything about it; the challenge of getting arms and legs to do difficult things, the physical pain and strain. I loved being so sore I could barely move, feeling muscles I hadn't known I had. I loved the aesthetics of it. The movements and stances seemed to me both beautiful and powerful. I enjoyed the sparring matches, which were rough enough to be challenging but well-controlled and safe – more so than the fights I'd had with my older brother growing up. We sparred without gear, non-contact or light contact; it was a little like a bruising game of tag, with everyone vying to get good enough to kick a partner lightly in the head.

I also loved the ritual and formality. The instructor lent me an old uniform and belt. I would tie the belt on and bow into the gym, where we practiced nearly in silence with little or no questioning or discussion. This format suited me perfectly. We followed instructions and trained hard; there was no need for anything else. I had a natural feel for what I later came to know as the “Zen” of training: the workout as meditation in motion, where focus is intense and the questioning mind must be switched off. I simply accepted this as the way martial arts was done, and that's how I did it. I believe in that method to this day.

I mentioned that my college did not emphasize athletics. What it did emphasize was questioning, analysis and argumentation – things I also value highly. We were expected to pursue a life of the mind. By contrast, this hard, traditional, Eastern-style physical training brought some satisfying, much-needed balance – the life of body and spirit, or a taste of it. That's no doubt part of what made it so addictive.

The training I did in college – first with that small Taekwondo group, then at an off-campus karate club – represents only about two years in what is, at this point, a thirty-five year journey. Yet I continue to think and talk about it, because it laid my foundation in so many important ways. I have an idealism about training that dates from the very beginning and against which I've measured every school and experience I've encountered since.

One part of that foundation is my love of traditional training – by which I mean, training that follows rituals and etiquette and in which students, at least during the formal workout, don't ask questions or talk. On my very first day in class I learned something about the value of this approach. About half way through, after warm-ups and basics, the instructor said, "White belts do 15 knuckle push-ups!" Given no other option, and knowing it was bad etiquette to question or express doubt, I just did the fifteen knuckle push-ups. Never mind that I was out of shape, hadn't done push-ups in a long time, had never done a knuckle push-up before, and had bony little fists that hurt *a lot* when I got down on the hardwood floor. I just did it. And then I knew I could do it – which surprised me and felt really good. It may seem a small thing, but thirty-five years later it remains a symbol of what an effective tool etiquette can be for getting people to exceed their self-imposed limits.

I noticed then – and have seen time and again over the years as an instructor – that students who don't feel bound by formality, who feel free to comment, question and analyze before making a move, very often simply fail to accomplish what is asked. Whether we're talking about feats of physical prowess or mastery of skills, the questioning Western mind can be a real impediment. Questioning, analyzing – these contribute to understanding, but are of most value when they come *after* training. That is, after the students have done enough repetitions to have a genuine feel for what it is they are questioning.

Another foundation-stone laid early on was my attitude toward sexism in martial arts – a notion that didn't even cross my mind at first, but later (through no choice of mine) became an important issue. In that first Taekwondo club there was no hint of it. Everyone just trained; no one got special treatment or consideration and that was as it should be. The subject just didn't come up and I was naïve enough to be surprised when I first encountered it. It happened six months in, when I was home for the summer. I was so gung-ho about practicing, I decided I would find a dojang back in Tennessee to train for a couple of months. There was nothing in my town, so I borrowed the car and drove to Knoxville to check out a couple of schools. I found the first one and was greeted by a Korean man in his thirties at the front counter. I said I'd been training in college, and told him the name of my teacher's Taekwondo style, as he had told it to me: Chang Moo Kwan. The man laughed; I have to say he laughed *at* me, because that's how it came across, and he offered no explanation. I looked up at the schedule, which was posted on a board like a fast-food menu and said, "So, 7 o'clock Tuesday is the adult class?"

He replied, "You come at 6 o'clock. Women and children's class."

"Children? ..." I asked.

“Yes, women and children’s class; that will be good for you. Come to that. Adult class is men.”

I was much too shy to say what I was thinking (and we wouldn’t want to print it here, anyway) so I said I’d think about it after checking out another school. Then he said, “Don’t go to that instructor down the street. He says he’s a 4th degree black belt, but he isn’t!” This baffled me; I really didn’t know or care about degrees of black belt, only about working out. My teacher back at college was barely a first-degree black belt, and he was great! I was demoralized by the whole exchange and just went home.

Then I decided to check out an Isshinryu karate club that was meeting in a rec center in my town. It wasn’t Taekwondo, but it would be a much shorter drive. The head instructor was courteous; he invited me to watch class. The class was small and mixed: men, women, and a few young teens. There was a woman wearing a black belt. That seemed promising. The basics were different from what I was used to, but looked interesting. Then came conditioning and the black belt leading class said, “Twenty push-ups! *Women—do twelve push-ups on your knees.*” This was not the only time during the workout that an instruction was given, followed by an easier version for women. The woman black belt did the easy versions. I couldn’t believe it. It’s not that I couldn’t accept that a particular woman might not be able to do as many reps as a man or, for that matter, that a particular man might not be able to do as many as another man. The problem was *she wasn’t even being asked to try*. Apparently it had been decided in advance that women were less capable and they wouldn’t be asked to measure up. Worse, that preconception was broadcast and reinforced to every member of the class every time an unequal instruction was given.

I found this very disheartening. I’m not sure how I would have described it back then, but what I can say about it now is that those instructors were cheating their students. It is our job as instructors to ask *all* our students to do *more* than they believe they can do – even more than they’re *capable* of doing and maybe even more than is *possible*. How else will we get them to transcend themselves? How else will we be sure they are really reaching for their best? And it is *not* our job to reinforce prejudices about who is capable of what. If there’s one lesson I’ve learned time and again over my years of teaching, it’s that students will amaze you with what they can achieve as long as you leave the door open.

I practiced kicks alone in my parents’ basement that summer. When school started again, I returned eagerly to the gym, but our class fizzled out as the instructor got swept up in the demands of college. My friend suggested checking out a nearby karate school. We’d seen their black belts doing demonstrations at a tournament held in our campus gym. We’d also seen their students take most

of the top trophies in their divisions at the tournament. Although I personally wasn't interested in competition, I was very much interested in the flashy, two-person kicking sets they had performed. We soon signed up at Karate for Women, a school founded in 1965 by Pauline Short, a pioneer among women martial artists and a champion fighter well-known in tournament circles at that time.

Pauline was a tough, demanding teacher. The training was hard; the sparring was hard. My forearms and shins were perpetually black and blue, in spite of the fact that we suited up in sparring pads for every class. It was great! I loved it.

Some words must be said about why Pauline ran a school for women only. Simple: it was because of the type of sexism I encountered that summer – the kind she had endured through her own training. Training is hard enough without having to fight against instructors and classmates who don't respect you, aren't demanding of you or don't believe you are capable. It's a rare student, like Pauline herself, who will achieve great things "in spite of". For most people, if their teacher puts them on a lesser track aiming for lower achievement, *less* is exactly what they'll achieve. They might not even realize what's going on. Most people, if they do notice they're being disrespected or shunted aside, will simply quit, find another school or find another hobby. How many people – when they've set aside precious time to pursue any activity – want to spend that time dealing with other people's biases and low expectations? Most people don't.

In Karate for Women, Pauline created a place where large numbers of women had a chance to experience something they'd have had a hard time finding in mixed schools, given the prevailing attitudes of the day. Not all of them became champion tournament fighters or flashy performers, but they all had a chance to strive to be their best – their *true* best, not a lesser best. Although I trained there for only about two years, I was honored to get to take class from Pauline Short and be a part of what she had created.

When I graduated from college, I moved to another city for graduate school. I convinced myself I was too busy to work out, but I missed it deeply. Finally one day – after far too long a break – I walked into the university Taekwondo club and began the rest of my training. I started out that summer going two nights a week to the "club" workout. When fall semester rolled around, I found I could fill up my schedule with two sections of Physical Education (for P.E. credits I didn't need) plus two nights of club and open workout on Fridays. I went from being a sedentary grad student to working out every weekday – on some days for four hours straight. I really did love working out, and I must say it was the one grad school activity that I always attended with enthusiasm.

The University of California at Berkeley is a very big school; I was now in one of those huge martial arts classes that could fill a gym. Dr. Ken Min, head of the U.C. martial arts program, taught the P.E. classes himself back then. He was one of those instructors who seemed to see and know all and have a wise word for any situation. No matter how big and crowded the class, he didn't miss a thing. One moment he would be sitting in his office, seeming not to watch, and then next second his voice was right behind you correcting some detail of technique.

In my experience, Dr. Min showed equal respect and was equally demanding of all. The same could not be said for my classmates or for the young black belts who ran the evening Club. I found myself spending quite a bit of energy struggling against their sexism. Any time students were asked to "find a partner" men turned their backs on women as fast as they could. If they got "stuck" with a woman partner, often they'd look around desperately for a partnerless woman or another man who'd been "stuck" – and then say, "Go pair up with *her*!" If these men had their wish – keeping women paired only with women for drills and sparring – the few women in the club would train over and over with the same few partners, while the men got the benefit of working with all kinds of people, all ranks, sizes and skill levels – training that is absolutely necessary to build good skills. After a while I got fed up. If someone tried to pawn me off as a partner, I'd simply refuse: "No, you're going to train with *me*!" And I'd follow it with kicking the guy a little too hard during the drill. I'm not proud of that approach, but it really did seem called for and, in some cases, gained me a little grudging respect.

I should say that there were also men in the dojang who trained respectfully with women, did not run the other way at partner time and appreciated working out with anyone who shared their passion for martial arts. Those people made it worthwhile. But sexism was an added burden during class for the handful of women who stuck it out, and it was one reason we were only a handful. As you can imagine, my dojo has a zero tolerance for that kind of behavior or for any similar kind of disrespect. There's no "running the other way" when it's time to get partners. This is challenging sometimes for certain people, especially children, but they manage quite well once my expectations are made clear.

In the early nineteen eighties, the World Taekwondo Federation was working hard to get Taekwondo recognized as an Olympic sport. Club training became more and more about tournament competition. I had arrived at this dojang with a love for traditional martial arts. I didn't mind Olympic-style sparring as a part of training – in fact, I enjoyed the challenge – but I didn't care much for tournaments and would have preferred more balance. One day Dr. Min announced that henceforth there would be two "tracks" to black belt: "competition" and "martial arts," as he put it. I

was surprised to hear him put it that way, but it seemed honest. If you chose to do it by “martial arts”, he said, it would take much longer.

I resigned myself to a long, slow road, but also began looking around. I left graduate school to pursue the precarious life of a freelance writer. I couldn’t attend P.E. class any more, which left me some days with no training. I kept noticing a guy on a bicycle posting flyers advertising karate classes for \$10 a month, but I didn’t follow up. Then a friend, someone who had quit the U.C. Berkeley club, told me she was going to check out a women’s taekwondo school. She’d seen an ad, called the number, and invited me to come with her. We ended up joining, and I wound up staying for six years. For four of those years, I attended the U.C. club and this other dojang on alternate days.

I had high hopes for this new dojang, because I thought I could duplicate the experience of Karate for Women. That’s the biggest pitfall of changing schools in the martial arts. Students with previous training almost always come in with well-formed expectations that won’t be met. They have an extra-hard time “emptying their cup”. It took me a long time to realize this school shared none of the background or ideology of Karate for Women, but I did at least get in some good hours of kicking and punching.

All told, I spent about eleven years training in Taekwondo. Both clubs were quite insular – one because of the emphasis on the Olympics, the other because it was a very small social group – so by the end of that time I was very ready to break out and expand.

The Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists (PAWMA) gave me the means to do it. One of my classmates learned about them and their annual multi-style training camp. I attended with a friend, and it was like stumbling into a candy store after being forbidden for years to eat sugar. There were animal forms, weapons forms and styles I’d never heard of. There were highly skilled, articulate instructors who cast new light on familiar ideas and it really opened my eyes. Some of them were peers of my old teacher Pauline, or were students from a similar lineage. Most of all, the camp was a weekend of non-stop, hard-training fun.

A highlight of the camp was the Sunday demonstration. The Aikido instructors absolutely captivated me. Jamie Zimron Sensei, an instructor from San Francisco, put on a beautiful, powerful show of technique. It was as if I could see the energy flowing through her arms and into her opponents, bringing them magically under control. The experience, for me, was very much like my first experience back in the college dorm watching my friends practicing kicks. I had to do it! But I wasn’t in college any more; it wasn’t so easy to take up something new. It was a year later, at the next PAWMA camp, that I first took class from her. And it was some time after that when I began

commuting to San Francisco to train seriously – something I kept up for several years, until I opened my dojo.

At that second PAWMA camp I also met the late Master Mary Davis, a senior instructor in the Vietnamese eclectic art of Cuong Nhu. She taught a snake form that was utterly unlike anything I'd seen in Taekwondo, full of low sweeps, kicking from the ground and open hand strikes. It was a blast, and Master Mary was an unusually gifted and generous teacher. Again I was captivated. My friend and I returned from camp trying hard to remember the form and show it to our classmates at the dojang where I still trained. We also brought back some basic bo (long staff) techniques, which we practiced alone during off hours. A dam had burst and we wanted to keep the stream flowing. Then I learned that an old Taekwondo friend was training with Master John Burns, a Cuong Nhu instructor in Berkeley and one of Master Mary Davis's peers.

In retrospect, it seems inevitable that I would wind up training there. Cuong Nhu is a blend of hard and soft martial arts. To me, it looked like the perfect combination of the kicks I loved from Taekwondo and the Aikido techniques with which I had recently fallen in love. It also had the promise of weapons training and animal forms. It added depth and practicality with a strong emphasis on applications (or *bunkai*) – something we'd barely done at all in my Taekwondo years. PAWMA camp had shown me the candy store and now I could move in and live there.

I first joined Master Burns' dojo as a guest, wearing my Taekwondo black belt. Not long after, the founder and head of Cuong Nhu, the late Dr. Ngo Dong, came to town for seminars and black belt testing. I was deeply impressed with him – his intelligence, his caring and open attitude, his endless skill and passion for martial arts. He had such a generous and inclusive concept of the martial arts. There was no arrogant tone of "our way is right, your way is wrong" in his approach; instead, he could respect and appreciate whatever was in front of him and find how seemingly different approaches were related through underlying principles. Cuong Nhu is a blend of styles, but I never heard him say it was made up of "the best" from each style; it was more like the Zen story of the butcher shop: "Everything is best."

I met O'Sensei Dong (as we call him) on Friday night and watched the black belt testing. On Saturday morning, I came to the seminar wearing a white belt. I've been a Cuong Nhu student ever since.

1988 was my year of starting over. I actually got to live the expression: *If I could do it all over again, knowing what I know now...* I was a white belt in Aikido, learning a completely new way of training from scratch. Yet it wasn't from scratch. I had over a decade of martial arts experience that meant, if nothing else, I knew how to be a student. I knew that my goal was something deeper than

technique; it was that balance, flow and power I'd seen in Jamie Sensei's demo. During practice I was able to focus on the deeper things (relaxation, center, connection, flow, proper body usage) instead of the superficial things (grabbing my partner and throwing him down). Not that it was easy; Aikido is a subtle and difficult art. Over time, this training had a profound effect on everything I did. My hard style practice became more fluid and powerful. I relaxed my shoulders, kept better posture and balance. That's exactly the kind of crossover one aims for, training in an eclectic art like Cuong Nhu. Besides, I just loved the practice. In Jamie Zimron Sensei's dojo I recaptured the gut-level joy in training that I'd had when I first started out.

Meanwhile, I was also a white belt in Cuong Nhu, where there was enough overlap with my black-belt skills to bring some lessons in humility and patience. I lined up with the beginners and often did drills with them in class. My partners corrected me as a beginner. Master Burns was a very exacting instructor. What I thought I knew well, he often found wanting. Changing styles is a real challenge and you have to be committed. I didn't always agree with the corrections that came my way. Sometimes I just didn't like being corrected, but etiquette helped me keep my opinions to myself (mostly). I *was* committed, so I stayed around long enough to see the value in what was being said. Cuong Nhu forged me into a much stronger, more precise martial artist. Or, I should say, it was the combination of Cuong Nhu, a demanding teacher in Master John Burns and my commitment to traditional etiquette, which made me listen to my instructor even when I didn't want to.

The fun part of starting over was taking in all the new material – what Cuong Nhu offered that my Taekwondo training had not. I gained a much greater appreciation for practical self-defense. I was good at kicking but impoverished in hand techniques; Cuong Nhu opened a whole new world. Weapons training brought another new dimension. Everything was broadened and deepened. All this was much easier for me to take in because of my previous ten-plus years. I've often had to remind myself as an instructor that a "true beginner" can't gobble up the Cuong Nhu curriculum the way I did. It is comprehensive and complex; it takes years to master.

I had long known I wanted to start my own school. I considered the idea when I left Taekwondo, but I wanted to be affiliated with something bigger than myself. Now the plan was to do it once I earned my Cuong Nhu black belt. As the date approached, I began looking around for spaces. In a wonderful case of *right place, right time*, not too long after my test, I noticed a new community center was being built just five minutes from my home. I took my resume to the director, Gwen Austin, and convinced her to bring me in to teach martial arts.

Redwood Dojo opened when the new Redwood Heights Community Center opened, in January 1992. It started with a small kids' class and a smaller adult class, two days a week. Thanks in large part to Gwen Austin's efforts and support, the program grew quickly and became well established. I had a lot to learn, but also had a lot of help. I maintained my connection with my "home" dojo, teaching and training there on alternate days until, eventually, Redwood Dojo expanded to those days. I'd had my apprenticeship teaching kids under Master Burns and he was always a source of ideas, as were several other colleagues. The kids themselves were my greatest source of ideas. My adult program was helped by many talented Cuong Nhu colleagues, as well as friends and colleagues from PAWMA.

I've written elsewhere about how I wound up teaching children, including a chapter called *Learning from Children: Five Easy Lessons for Teachers*, in the book *Martial Arts Teachers on Teaching*, edited by Carol Wiley. I can sum it up like this: I didn't want to do it. Like a lot of people back then (and perhaps even now), I didn't think it was as "important" as teaching adults. I didn't think you could do "serious martial arts" with kids. And besides, I had no experience and hardly knew what to do. In the end, I learned I was wrong on all counts. I've learned more "serious" lessons working with children than I've learned anywhere else in my life. I now think, as converts often do, that *everyone* should be required to work with kids and learn those lessons.

It's hard to believe the twenty-year anniversary of Redwood Dojo is coming up. I've spent all these pages describing the journey to starting my school; will I now need as many more pages to cover those twenty years? Not really. In a deep sense, traditional teaching – like Zen practice – is the same, day in and day out. You show up, you see who are in front of you and you find a way to push them to excel. Of course you have a curriculum and of course you have lesson plans – though they often get tossed out the window once class is under way. But teaching is not what you thought it was when you were coming up through the ranks.

It's not about correcting your partner's mistakes. It's not about "telling what to do", or sharing how much you know. Good teaching is entirely about the people being taught: learning who they are, learning what they need and getting them to find their own way. Our subject matter is hard, sometimes painful, and sometimes dangerous. It may mean pushing past fears, getting people to do things they don't want to do. Good teaching isn't about *catering* to people, but it is about caring who they are and how they do. Know your material and come to class caring more about your students than yourself; then you're on the right track. I've also noticed that the very best teachers are the ones who do the least talking. Their students spend the most time working out. I still struggle very hard to meet that standard.

I've also struggled with injuries, including a serious neck injury from a fall and hereditary bad knees. I've now reached the point of having to ration myself out – in other words, I can't teach kickboxing four nights a week the way I used to, and my students have to demonstrate some techniques. It's disappointing not to have the abilities I once had, but that's part of life. It doesn't deter me from teaching. For myself, I try to focus on those areas of soft style where my power is not decreased by physical limitations.

I can still keep things fresh after twenty years by reading, writing, communicating with colleagues and taking or watching class. The world is full of ideas. And there's always plenty of work to do, as a member of a two-dojo family. Remember that flyer I saw years ago about Karate for \$10 a month? The one I didn't follow up? It turned out that was a flyer for the Cuong Nhu school and the guy on a bicycle, stapling flyers to the kiosk, was John Burns. It's funny how I wound up at his school in the end. Years after that, we decided we had a lot in common; we got married in 1998.

We have a wonderful community of students and black belts and fantastic network of colleagues across the world. It's a pretty good martial arts life and we mean to keep it going for many years to come.

Robert Nomura



Robert Nomura practices Wing Chun Kung Fu. He trained for five years and is a level seven (black sash) in his kwoon. Before Wing Chun he studied Aikido intensively, Taiji Chuan for two months in China, a bit of Judo, and even Karate in Japan. He currently publishes the WingChunLife.com website that aims to entertain and help busy martial artists reach their full potential.

My interest in martial arts began by watching Kung Fu action movies and idolizing Bruce Lee, Shaolin monks, and even Ninjas. The coolness factor of martial arts is something that stays with me even as an adult. As my sifu says, "martial artists are nerds."

I believe that defines me pretty well. I could collect comic books or fix old cars or even play golf, but I choose to practice Wing Chun, watch Kung Fu flicks, and talk about and buy weapons. It's a great lifelong hobby.

However, in my experience, it gets more challenging as I get older. It doesn't get physically harder because I actually feel stronger and faster now after two years of consecutive training. I've trained Wing Chun for a little more than five years, but I had a five-year hiatus in the middle. I'm actually better now, seven years older, than when I first began studying Wing Chun.

What's more challenging is finding balance with my time commitments. I've noticed this has been a growing lifelong problem. The older I get, the more responsibilities I have that take away my time to train and, more to the point, take away my concentration to train.

When I studied martial arts as a child I had almost no distractions. Then I entered university and my studies themselves became a small distraction. By the time I discovered Wing Chun I was married and working full-time; both very big distractions. And after I returned to Wing Chun after my hiatus, I added children to my list of commitments. I guess this is why Shaolin monks live in solitude and aren't allowed to have wives.

Talking with other adult martial artists, I noticed they have similar experiences. We're all basically nerds and would all love to play 'Ninja' or 'Bruce Lee' all week long, but we have obligations outside of training that need to be kept.

As a solution I decided to attack the problem head on. I started a Wing Chun related website to communicate with hard working practitioners around the world, and share experiences and tips to find ways to get more effective training done with less time. I've gotten great connections and had many interesting conversations. The problem, however, is running a good quality website adds one more responsibility to my plate. A Catch-22, if you will.

Since my goal is to play out my Bruce Lee fantasies as long as possible, I've developed a number of little tweaks and hacks to get the most effective training in the shortest possible amount of time. I really believe in leverage; getting the most done with the least amount of effort. I wouldn't call it laziness because you still have to do the work. It's the art of efficiency, getting rid of the bottlenecks that slow down my training.

One thing that has made the most difference is training at home. In my case, I have to drive anywhere from fifteen to forty-five minutes to get to class. It depends on traffic. But taking a break from my computer to do a Wing Chun form is something I can do in my office or living room. The added bonus is I get a good workout and it clears my mind, which makes me fresher at work.

I like to experiment and find new, easy techniques that have a huge payoff. Recently, a friend lost nearly a hundred pounds in less than a year, simply by walking and watching his diet. He walks a lot and now trains for five kilometers and longer distances.

But when he showed me his initial training routine that led to his exciting results, I was shocked! It was a twelve-week plan, in which he basically walked less than thirty minutes a day the first six weeks. Most days he only walked for fifteen minutes, plus he was able to eat more calories because of his increased exercise. I've added smart and effective walking to my Wing Chun training with good results. Besides, there's nothing hard about walking and it doesn't take long either.

Another group of tools I use come from NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming). This is a study in human excellence. The premise is that if someone can accomplish something – climb Mt. Everest, sing, become a stellar salesman, or get a black belt – you can learn their “recipe,” replicate it, and get similar results much faster than through will power or hard work. NLP has a vast knowledge base and many tools to reach the goals you want.

I've used what I know about NLP to discover the “recipes” from senior students, my sifu, and other top-notch martial artists. I'm not an expert in these tools, but it has allowed me to cut down my raw learning time and invest it into refining my skill.

A set of tools all martial artists should use come from Dr. Maxwell Maltz and his best-selling book, *Psycho-Cybernetics*. Dr. Maltz is largely responsible for popularizing the concept that a healthy self-image leads to a healthy and well-grounded person. Some of the methods used to reach a healthy and strong self-image are transferable to martial arts like Wing Chun. He deals a lot with using your imagination and relaxing yourself mentally and physically to allow your true self to come out.

My former sifu used to tell us that we want our Wing Chun to flow and told us to express ourselves naturally. By studying Dr. Maltz's works I've been able to accomplish this at a much faster pace, even while keeping busy with my family and career.

One learning technique that I've had fun using to make me a better martial artist with less hard work is "wearing of masks." The overall concept is to imagine you are putting on the mask/face/head of someone you want to become, better understand, or mimic.

In my case, before each class I imagine I put on the face of my sifu, previous sifu, our lineage's Sigong, Bruce Lee, and Ip Man. I pretend I am them. It sounds weird but I begin to behave more like them during my training and drills. This, of course, speeds up my learning too.

This concept is not so foreign to martial arts. Many cultures use similar techniques to gain wisdom from an ancestor or even an enemy. I guess you could say the original Kung Fu grandmasters put on masks when they mimicked the movements of the Kung Fu animals like the tiger, snake, crane, mantis, or monkey.

I really believe any one of the above tools can help accelerate anyone's martial arts. It may take some time to understand how to use the methods themselves – but the added bonus, especially for someone who works full-time, is you can even use them to better your career or any other area of your life.

At the moment my long term Wing Chun goals are pretty modest. I want to perfect and refine the skills I currently have, while slowly adding new ones. Perhaps I will take on the added responsibility of becoming a sifu and teaching a new generation of Wing Chun martial artists. But that is a commitment I'm putting off making at the moment.

Neil R. Hall



Neil R. Hall is the Chief Instructor at London Chinatown TaeKwonDo, which he co-founded in 2005 with his son, Gareth. He became a full time martial artist in 2008, and the school now has classes around England and internationally.

“The fencing school won’t take them until they are eight.”

Helen (my wife) was reporting back on her attempt to find some positive physical activity for the boys. Drew was six and Gareth was seven. Drew, in particular, was enthralled by a cartoon on the TV at the time, called *Dogtanian*, featuring a beagle with some awesome musketeer skills. He was really, really keen to learn fencing.

It was in this moment, long before I took up martial arts myself, that I started to learn not only lessons which would inform my own martial arts teaching many years later, but also the entire philosophy and approach of London Chinatown TaeKwonDo – which was still at that point some thirteen years away from its own beginning.

“What else can they do?”

“How about Karate?”

“Sounds good. Is there a class nearby?”

“I think so, but you might have to drive them. You could probably do it too.”

“Okay.....”

So in that moment came my first and second lessons in running a martial arts school. First, mums are important. Second, mums don’t want to wait until you think it’s best.

So it was that the boys ended up at freestyle karate with an instructor in South Manchester called Dave. I remember red suits and just a handful of kids. The first class came, and our boys were warmly welcomed and invited to stand in rows. Drew looked nervous. The instructor looked at him, and Drew stammered: “I don’t want to fight anyone.”

“That’s okay,” said Dave, “You don’t have to.”

And herewith another lesson. Almost twenty years later, Drew has become something of a legend for his sparring. But only because on that first day the instructor had the good sense not to say “well, that’s what we’re here for! We’ll all be fighting in a minute! Time to face up to it or get out!”

The memory and the lesson bring a smile even now. Anyway, it seemed to go well.

We got back home and told Mum all about it.

“Did you join in?” she asked me.

“No, I couldn’t really. The adults’ class is at half past seven after they finish. If I did it, the boys would have to wait around till past their bed time - and I wouldn’t be doing it with them anyway.”

I have often looked back on that day and wondered what might have been. At least I know what it did for me. It made me a champion of family classes, where parents and children can train together. Sure there are times when it’s better to have a kids only class and times when it’s better to have an adults only class. But if you don’t provide opportunities for families to train together, you lose so much and so many.

So in those days twenty years ago the lessons which I now apply were already coming in rapid succession. Still, while the boys began their lifetime in martial arts, which has taken them into senior grades, teaching, and becoming an inspiration to a new generation, I was in the swimming pool. Just time to nip down from the karate class to the pool, quick change, twenty or thirty lengths, quick dry, nip back, collect boys

The next years were filled with practising alongside them. Working with them through every grading. Motivating them. Giving them lifts. For Helen, it involved three-hundred-mile round trips to class when we moved from inner city Manchester back to the Isle of Skye, which at that time had no martial arts at all.

Skip on a few years. I’m working in London. Fitter than I had been, because I’d been working out for years with a programme Helen had designed for me, after she’d first cured my bad back with her yoga. The boys had moved from one style of karate to another, but drifting instructors, a lack of focus on the development of students, an absence of clear structure and opportunity for progression, and more besides, had led them from karate to a Taekwondo class in Pershore,

Worcestershire. It was taught by a guy called Nick Croad and his fiancé, Annemarie Stanley. Taekwondo, said Nick, wasn't unlike karate. He'd made the change from one to the other himself.

Working long hours in London, with a six hour round trip commuting, I wasn't down for the lifts any more and Helen was doing it. A few months at that class and she was tired of sitting in a freezing cold hall while the boys ran around. "Join in," said Nick. So she did. Aha.... You're with me already. Next lesson: the Mums at the side will actually join in if you give them time and encouragement (and I'm sure Annemarie's example and presence were crucial).

Six months later. My day job in London was changing and I was unhappy. At least, as part of the changes, I was able to take the opportunity to work at home for half the week. Suddenly I had evenings without a long commute. But that just meant I could be miserable at home instead.

"You need to get involved in something else," said Helen, "Something outside work. You've always wanted to do martial arts. Why don't you join in the Taekwondo with us?"

"Oh, no, I'm far too old for that now. I'm nearly forty," I pointed out.

"That's not too old. I already asked the instructor, and he says there's no problem. Come along to the next class and see how you get on."

I went along. There was another guy in the class, Andy, who was about my age. The instructors partnered me with him for some of the time, which made me feel less self-conscious, and there were some other adults in class too so it felt okay. What can I say? I loved it. From the first minute I was inspired; a changed man. I remember being fascinated to learn from Annemarie about the way to punch and kick and the way to stand. I think I was okay – even better than I expected – on the fitness stuff. I remember bowing a lot, thinking it's better to bow too much than too little. Another lesson from those days then, which has inspired my philosophy now: you're never too old.

How I experienced that first class, the lead up to it, during it, and following it was all fantastically important – not only for me as a potential martial artist, but also as the Chief Instructor of a major school today.

I guess that when I arrived I was fairly sure of myself and I had the experience of years with the boys and the support of my family around me, but I was nevertheless lucky in the atmosphere of that first class, the attitude of the instructors and the welcome from my classmates. That experience was telling and the memory of it remains with me and guides my work today.

Now I try to connect with each and every new student. “Remember,” I tell them, “that in every martial arts class, everywhere in the world, every single person has done what you are doing now. Nobody in the world who does martial arts starts at the top. Everyone – *everyone* – comes through the door for their first class, and feels just like you. And everyone remembers that time. So everyone will look after you, and no-one will laugh at you for not knowing stuff, because they didn’t know anything on the first day they came either.”

Well this was quite some time ago. Then I was pleased just to keep going till I achieved the next grade and had no desire to look any further. It was only years later that it began to dawn on me I could be doing this for a very long time yet, and only years after that when I began to say: “what I would really love to do, if I could, would be just to teach martial arts full time....”

Now that I have years as a full time teacher behind me, it’s fitting to be asked to look back at the journey I have taken. And, looking back, the wonderful memories have been countless: it would take more than a whole book even to begin to recount just the very best of them. Every time a student achieves something they had not dreamed of doing; every time someone says “you changed my life”; every time someone surprises not just others but herself; and every time there’s something that reminds me of what it’s all about, I feel a breath of the spirit of martial arts.

And for me, the spirit of martial arts is what it’s all about. My own journey is a spiritual one. Though I’m happy to accept the breadth of martial arts – from fun and games to competition, to street self-defence, to discipline and tradition – I’m looking myself for something which fills the soul and comes in and out with the very air we breathe.

I remember rising in the winter cold, drinking some green tea, venturing outside into the garden of Kensington Gardens Square and swinging a sword in the lingering darkness, not yet dawn, while the snow fell and my breath steamed. I remember dripping with sweat at the end of a pattern, sweat running down my face, through my eyes, off my nose. I feel the sting of it now. My whole body aches. I’m unmoving. There’s something in the stillness. I remember pulling on my sparring gloves, standing, looking across the room and feeling, “this is the moment....” In these moments, I felt the true spirit of martial arts.

Now, my life is full of simple stories of changed lives. Of how our oldest student won a golf tournament after his Ensodo changed his golf swing. Of how our youngest students have found the confidence to do something that they never before would have had the courage to face. Every day. Day after day. It’s a wonderful blessing. Of course, there are stories of wonderful fights, magnificent jumps, punching through stacks of tiles... but then that’s what you’d expect, isn’t it?

Interestingly, few of my career changing moments have been in the dojang and fewer still have been in the dojang during class. Most have been outside in the day to day.

Let me explain by way of a life changing example. After the struggles with my work in London, which inadvertently led to my taking up martial arts, the work picked up and I started to find myself in London a lot more, especially when I became the first Head of External Relations for the newly elected Mayor of London in 2000. In that job I got to know people from London's Chinatown rather well, as I was instrumental in the Mayor's Office supporting the Chinese New Year celebrations. When I left that job, it so happened that I continued to work closely with people in Chinatown and in particular with Christine Yau, Chair of the Chinese Community Centre on Gerrard Street.

One day Christine was asking me about my martial arts. At the time I was spending half of the week in London with my son, Gareth, who was by then a student in the city. I bemoaned the fact that Gareth couldn't find a martial arts class that suited him and that we couldn't ourselves find anywhere in central London to train together – at least not that anyone like us could afford. Christine pointed out that on one of the weeknights the Chinese Community Centre was not used and offered it to us as a training space.

It's not a big place. In fact, it's tiny. But we were thrilled with this kind offer and pretty soon we were clearing away the tables from the elderly people's luncheon club (which ran then, and still now, till the end of the afternoon), sweeping the rock hard floor and getting down to it.

After a while we thought we should open it up to others and put a notice outside about a black belts training class, open to black belts from any arts. A couple of people drifted in and out.

Then a fine Kung Fu student called Amy Edwards, who was completing a doctorate, joined us and we trained together for some time, along with French actress and model, Isabelle Tranquille. Amy and Isabelle taught us a lot about women martial artists working at the highest level and since then, with Helen's example already behind us, we've been pretty much set on recognising and valuing women martial artists. These early training partners can claim their own important part of the credit for the fact that almost half our students at LCTKD today are female and there are many women and girls in martial arts now because of LCTKD. Women and girls who almost certainly would not be involved without our encouragement and without that first example that Amy, Isabelle and Helen set.

I must have complained to Christine about having sore feet and not being able to throw people around, because the Community Centre came up with the offer of some mats. I often laugh about the fact that I could not work out how to fit the jigsaw mats together when they arrived.

Fortunately, a guy called Joe Hung from the Centre helped put them out each week. One day he asked if we would train him. “You’re not a black belt,” I pointed out. “Not yet,” said Joe. So that was it: the gift of the mats had worked and we were now teaching beginners.

Joe was followed by Assistant Director at the Chinese Community Centre, Sara Wong, and she was followed by Youth Project Manager, Susanna Fung, who brought her sister, Vivien. Then one day Christine said: “there are all these young people in the youth project. Why don’t you teach them? You could have a class full of Chinese people!”

Well, we could hardly say no to our benefactors and I had wondered when the gift of the mats would be remembered with a request. Anyway, after that pretty well anyone over fourteen was welcome. With Vivien and Susanna, some young guys from the Youth Project, including a young man called Gin Hung Ho and the highly experienced Arnold Lau joining us while in London from the U.S., we were on our way.

It seems only a blink of an eye later when the Community Centre asked us to teach even the youngest children, who were already almost literally banging on the door to get in. I can’t remember who it was that asked for it, but I guess it was inevitable when with the help of Mr John W. Swift of the Independent Taekwondo Schools, we moved from a training club to a formal class with the opportunity to develop through the syllabus and do the gradings like other classes.

So that’s how a Korean art, taught by a Scotsman and his son, took hold in the centre of England’s biggest Chinatown. All from a conversation over a cup of tea in *Y Ming*, Christine Yau’s excellent restaurant on Greek Street.

And that seems a good point at which to end. A sort of “happily ever after.” But of course, as I have now discovered, the journey does not end – it only continues.

By the middle of 2008 my time working in London was coming to an end, and with Gareth finished university I found myself talking to my students about the prospect of my leaving London. “I don’t really want to stop teaching,” I explained, “but I have to earn a living. For the past few years, I’ve done this class for free, but I guess if you were to pay at least something, I could try to keep it going and see if I could find a job that would work around it. What do you think? Is there anyone that would pay?”

Everyone's hand went up. That was it. The journey from that first class with the boys back in Manchester an age ago had made it through my own first class to our first training session in Chinatown, to our first formal class, to my own first step into martial arts as a career.

I applied for some other jobs, including going to a local school asking to be a "dinner lady." I wasn't successful in any of those applications (thank the Lord), and it's a delightful irony that Gareth now teaches a class in the school where I failed to get a job as a dinner a lady. I wonder if any of the staff notice when I come to visit the class or do demonstrations and anti-bullying workshops for the school.

It didn't take long to become obvious that I would never find a job where I could spend every Tuesday teaching martial arts in Chinatown. So I decided I might as well set up some classes in other places on the other days of the week, and that's how LCTKD took its first steps from a small class to a major school and I took my first steps from part time volunteer teacher to full time Chief Instructor.

Ah ... it feels like time to pause, as if for breath, and reflect back on the journey.

As I look back on what I've written, I notice that in the journey there have been not only many golden moments, but also many important people. For me, and for countless numbers of our students, the lesson that I learnt on that very first day has held true: family support is crucial and mums and dads make all the difference. I often say to worried parents of children who seem to show little aptitude for martial arts: "for a martial artist, in the long run talent is much, much less of a predictor of success than the support of their family."

Unlike my own family, of course, not all students are surrounded by a family of martial artists. Which reminds me that it's worth noting many of the important people in the development of LCTKD have not been martial artists at all. Without Christine Yau's landmark suggestion, for example, we would not exist. And there are so many others, including many who have not been mentioned, who have made us what we are and without whom we would not be where we are.

And yet in practising martial arts, despite all the people around us who have made it possible, we are indeed still on a very personal journey. We do not all travel the same road (even as those close to us), and we do not all travel at the same time.

My own journey began later than most and that has been central to the course it has taken. I began when I had the income to pay the fees, buy the kit, and all the rest. I increased my training when my

family were grown and we could train together, without there being a tension between the upbringing of the children and my art.

I came to teach in Chinatown because I had had the privilege to work and make friends there. I made martial arts my profession as well as my life at a time when I had already gained the experience and maturity to make it work – not to mention a whole heap of technical knowledge in things like contracts, computers, marketing, public speaking, research, and teaching, which came from years of doing lots of different things in a long and much varied career.

While I believe being older does make running a martial arts school less frightening, being an older martial artist in itself is not always easy. In an art like Taekwondo, which is very physically demanding, an older body struggles. It's not as clear cut as you might imagine. Not a case of waking up at fifty and not being able to do it any more. You can still kick, still spar, still jump, still punch through stuff and still do the exercises.

What you notice first, almost by surprise, is that you seem to have had more injuries in the last year than you expected. More illness. Then somewhere you realise that you can still do the stuff, but it hurts more the next day than you remember it did. Or you begin to wonder, reluctantly, if that ache in your lower back might just be something to do with the jumping crescent kicks you executed so beautifully for twenty minutes the other night without any apparent difficulty.

You're good once you're warmed up, but that means arriving half an hour early and accepting that you'll still only be truly warm once you're half way into the class.

In this respect, age is like loss. I have denied it, been angry about it, accepted it and found a way to live with it. To begin with I trained harder than others. If youngsters could do it, so could I. There is no reason why someone in their forties should not be as fit as someone in their thirties, or even their twenties. It's just a matter of trying harder. And indeed I found this to be true. I could say to my students: "don't tell me you're too old to do it! I'm twice as old as you and I'm doing it!"

The result of such pushing is that you can do it on the day, but it's like purchasing your powers on credit. One day the toll on your body needs to be repaid and your credit is called in, in the form of missed gradings and other constant frustrations through injury or illness. The moment when you realise this is a sad one.

For every challenge there is an opportunity, and for me the inability to keep up the "pounding" style of martial arts that was my forte not so long ago has helped me consider what truly makes a martial

artist. My interest in the softer and more circular arts (including Tai Chi, Aikido, and others) was re-awakened with a new perspective.

Thinking of myself first, I then thought about others. And thinking about others I thought about an art that would work for older students – older students, but no less real martial artists.

That was how Ensodo came about; a real art with more thought and fewer press ups. Drawing on circular arts, working on knowledge rather than strength, Ensodo was designed with much input from others around the world. If there was power in it, it was the power of the internet. Particularly helpful were Master Lawrence Tan and Toni Josephson of Tan Dao Kung Fu in New York, who linked the philosophy to the Japanese Enso and gave birth not only to name but also to logo.

Now my dedicated cohort of Ensodo students are a joy to work with – and not least because in their work they prove me right: you don't have to be teenage and muscle-bound to be a real martial artist.

While I've had to fight to come to grips with martial arts as an older student, I have been kept moving forward in my martial arts journey by the teaching of martial arts, in which I have found inspiration beyond measure. When I'm not working on my fitness and my martial arts, researching, writing, or the development of LCTKD, I'm actually teaching. I teach fifteen to twenty public and private classes a week, and often more in seminars and workshops. The classes, like the students, come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. They are in rich areas and poor, highly urban and very rural, full of Chinese students and full of westerners, dominated by male students and dominated by female students, full of old students and full of little ones.

I often explain to students that it might look like I just turn up and think "what shall we do today?" but in fact our programme of lesson plans is developed through a process of feedback, reflection, discussion, research, and just plain "why not?"

Our lessons are not the same week after week, but are constantly developing. And there's a very important aspect of this, which sometimes people don't realise. You learn as much from teaching as you impart. And that means teaching is not a destination; it is part of the journey. You don't get to become a teacher and that's the journey complete. The more I teach, the more I learn and the more I am able to inform my teaching. I realise now that the teaching of martial arts has been the greatest inspiration to my own art and the greatest guide on my journey.

To explain, it might be helpful to rewind a little and give a straightforward example.

Let's go back quite a few years. I'm in a class where I began and I guess I must have been around for a couple of years or so, because the instructor asked me to teach another guy a pattern we call Won Hyo. It's going okay, and I'm teaching a move unfamiliar to him, which is a low circular block. He seemed to grasp it, then he asked: "what do I do with the other hand?"

"The other hand?"

"The one that's not blocking. This one."

Mmm . . . I would have liked to say "I'm afraid I haven't a clue. I'm sure I do it, but right now I just can't think what it is." Nowadays, I would have the confidence to say that, but back then I just mumbled some old rubbish and left him none the wiser than before he asked.

When I got home, I did the move over and over, concentrating on that hand. What was I doing with it? Why? It began to dawn on me that to teach required understanding an awful lot more and "winging it" would be pretty much impossible.

So I've researched, I've practised, I've studied, I've considered, I've asked, I've tried out and I've repeated. Now I know a fantastic amount more about martial arts – my arts and others – than I could possibly have known without having been a teacher.

And now I've realised that the journey never ends. You never reach a point where you can answer every question, teach everything just right. In fact every day throws up something new; a new question, a difficulty, something that went wrong. I never come home without reflecting on how my work could be better, how my art could be strengthened and considering what I've learnt. And the more varied the students, the more varied the arts we teach and the more cause there is for reflection, consideration, and improvement.

So, with that in mind, where goes the journey now?

I am committed to maintaining LCTKD as an organisation dedicated to everyone, not just the fortunate few. We have embraced rich and poor, women and men, young and old, fit and disabled. In all of our work, people who would not normally be involved in martial arts have had opportunities that they would not have had elsewhere.

I wrote a while ago that almost half of our students are female. How many martial arts schools could say this? Precious few. Was it easy to achieve this? No, it wasn't. It was very hard, but we persevered because it was something we believed in.

Sometimes you have to pursue what you believe in though it might seem impossible to attain. That is the sort of spirit that has made LCTKD different and I want to make sure that we carry it forward into the future; carrying the message and opportunity of martial arts to those who would otherwise never have come into contact with it. In particular, now, I'm keen that in our next phase of development we spread our martial art Ensodo more and more to older students, bringing in still more people who without our determination would never have experienced martial arts at all.

The more I learn, the more I look further afield and the more I study with others around the world and from a wide range of martial arts backgrounds. It is my aim to bring together learning not just from our own arts but from many, so that our advanced martial artists do not need to stop learning just because they have achieved a black belt - which should, after all, be considered a beginning, just a first step.

I have been engaging in discussions with martial artists around the world about the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Integrated Martial Arts (www.iaima.org), through which martial artists of different disciplines will be able to learn from each other, share experience and even undertake advanced training leading to advanced dan grades, post graduate qualifications or both. The Institute should be fully formed soon, just as the first wave of our LCTKD students come through their black belt gradings. As in life and in music, in martial arts timing is everything.

To do all this, of course, is impossible alone.

A big school, let alone an international institute, cannot be sustained without an enormous amount of work both in and out of classes. And for me to find time for my own interests and ambitions, I need to find even more time in a week that is already packed and overflowing.

It is my great good fortune in this to be surrounded now by a big team of instructors and assistant instructors. Some run their own classes, others rotate classes with me (giving me an invaluable amount of time to do other things) and still others help with each class, allowing us to share our knowledge more effectively with more students.

I want to pay tribute to those instructors and assistant instructors and our other supporters, without whom we would be nothing like we are, and without whom LCTKD would not be able to grow as it has done and continues to do. My thanks go to them for their constant support and encouragement. And my encouragement goes to you, the reader, as you pursue your own martial arts journey.

David Michael Cunningham



David Michael Cunningham, author and Iraq war veteran, is the owner of Studio 212 Fitness, in Northwest Ohio. David has trained in martial arts for over fourteen years, and has been an instructor for five years. In addition to being a martial arts instructor, he is also a Certified Fitness Trainer through the International Sports Sciences Association. He is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Education degree, majoring in exercise science and double minoring in entrepreneurship and psychology, at Bowling Green State University.

I am an only child born to a single mother. Growing up in the late 1970s to early 1980s was hard on me, as my mother seemed to always be away at work doing her best to provide for us. I was a latchkey kid, which meant that when I would come home from school I was all alone at home. No one was allowed over and I was not allowed out of the house while she was not home. The winter months were especially difficult for me, because when my mother would get home it was already dark outside and I was not allowed outside after dusk.

Because of this, I took every opportunity to play outside whenever I was able to. I would spend many, many hours playing with my friends and would not come home until the very last minute. However, playing outside mainly meant that I watched my friends play football or baseball. I rarely participated as I really didn't like those sports. While I was content watching them have fun, I wished that there was something that I could participate in that I enjoyed. I was the kind of kid that could appreciate what the "group" did, but even then I was always longing for something different.

Since my mother was the only source of income for our family, we didn't have much money. This was kind of hard for me to deal with as I would see my friends always going off and doing things like go to movies, arcades, etc. Also, since my mom wasn't home much, even if we did have the money for me to enjoy the same things as my friends, I couldn't go because my mom wasn't home.

One day my mom came home excited because she had found a beginners "karate" class at the local YMCA that started after she got off work and the price was very affordable for us. She shared the news with me and I was elated. Not only could I participate in something like my friends, but I was able to take "karate."

I don't know if my mom even knew at the time if I had any interest in “karate” or not, but it was something that she finally could afford and at a time that she could take me. This was wonderful for me, because I very much liked martial arts. Not only could you learn how to defend yourself, martial arts were becoming more popular and there was this air of mystery that still surrounded them. I was really attracted to the uniqueness of martial arts as compared with what all of my friends did at the time; football, baseball, soccer, gymnastics, etc.

The first day of my “karate” class I was excited and could not wait for my mom to get home from work so I could start chopping, kicking, punching, and screaming like the martial arts masters I'd seen in books and magazines. When I arrived at class it was surreal. The small room in which we practiced seemed giant to me and was filled with all sorts of strange weapons and punching bags. Everyone was dressed in white pajamas and performing an amazing demonstration of their form of “karate.” I felt as though I was in Nirvana. I wasn't even fazed to learn that I was not going to learn “karate,” and that what I was going to learn was Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan. I had no idea what that was, but I didn't care because whatever it was I was going to learn it.

The first few lessons were filled with learning etiquette, how to step properly, and two stances. From the start, I loved working on stances. I would practice my stances to make sure mine were the absolute best. I had reached the top of my boyhood dreams. I was able to participate in something that was unique, I was learning how to defend myself, and I thought that Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan was the coolest thing ever.

That was until I arrived for class and discovered that as part of warm-ups we had to jump rope. I froze. I was terrified. Why on earth would they do that to me? I used to love this, but now they want me to jump rope?! There was no way I was going to jump rope and I told my mom that. She looked at me puzzled and said, “Yes you are! Now get in there and get going!” I had other plans, which apparently involved me running around the lobby of the YMCA yelling “I'm not doing that and I'm going home right now!” That lasted for a couple of laps around the lobby until my mom decided to go the other direction and catch me, as she knew I was so worked up I wouldn't even realize she wasn't chasing me anymore, and was waiting for me to run directly into her arms.

My mom was less than comforting as she held me tightly in her arms and sternly told me, “I left work without working over and rushed through traffic so I can get you here on time. You are not going home,” she said to me as she released me from her arms and escorted me to the class room, “you are going into that class and you will do whatever is planned for today.”

My mom had no idea that my fear of jumping rope came from an incident earlier in my life when I was jumping rope with friends and tripped, slamming my tail bone down onto the concrete. While I didn't break my tail bone, somehow my shorts had slipped down and I had sliced up the skin near that area from glass that was on the ground. I had also bruised the area very badly. My friends, not knowing any better, had seen the blood streaming down from my wound and cautioned me not to tell my mom about this. They were concerned that I would not be allowed to play with them, even though they didn't do anything and I had tripped on my own accord. Because of that incident, I'd held an irrational fear of jumping rope ever since.

Fortunately for me, when I finally entered the class room, they had finished jumping rope and were moving onto more familiar exercises. I was then torn between my love for Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan and my fear of jump ropes. From that day forward I was reserved when I entered the YMCA, as I did not want to have to repeat that day again. Thankfully I never saw a jump rope in class again.

Even with my reservation, I still loved the class and thought I would continue until well after I earned my black belt. I had no idea that I was only able to go to classes for a certain period of time because my mom only had enough money for the "one month trial", which was significantly cheaper than the regularly priced classes. I don't remember how I found out, but I was crushed. Even though I was upset, I had figured out that my last class would have landed on a testing day. Even though I was prepared and thought that I would solidly pass the test, I didn't go to class that day.

I knew how happy my mom was that she was able to afford and provide me with something that I enjoyed. Because she had never been able to do this for me in the past, this was a proud moment for her. Since I knew that, I figured that when the time came for classes to end she may be upset that she could no longer afford to have me go to classes. Assuming that was what she would think, I convinced my mom that I really wasn't ready to test and that I wasn't sure if I even liked the classes anymore. She must have believed my performance, as she didn't take me that last day.

By stopping classes, I discovered that I could learn martial arts on my own. I continued to practice what I had learned on my own. Practicing opened up my thinking as to what else might be around. That set me on a path of searching and discovering what other martial arts might exist. I still wished every day that my mom would come home with news that she had found martial arts classes she could afford and that I could start up again if I wanted to. But that day never came.

However, something almost as good happened. One day my mom came home from work and told me a story of a fight that broke out at her work. She said that a somewhat bigger man started a fight with a smaller but stockier man. The short version of the story is that the man who started the fight had no idea the smaller man used to be a wrestler throughout his school years. The fight was over as quickly as it had started, as the smaller guy wrapped the initiator up in a series of wrestling moves and pinned him until others broke it up. I was in awe. It was at that point I knew I had to learn wrestling.

Fortunately, my junior high school was within walking distance from my home. That meant that when I started junior high, I would be able to join the wrestling team because I would not have to worry about getting a ride home after practice. As soon as I started junior high school, I joined the wrestling team.

I never was a good wrestler and, at the same time, I loved every minute of it. The reason I wasn't that good was because I didn't understand the strategy behind the techniques. It seemed only the kids on the varsity team were coached in strategy.

Even though I loved wrestling, I decided I would not take up wrestling in high school. I was too frustrated with knowing the individual techniques really well, and at the same time not understanding when and why to use them.

I would still mess around with my friends who were still in wrestling. We would practice different techniques and strategies. Once they started to show me their strategies, wrestling made a whole world of sense. I then understood what I could and should have been doing in my matches. I was both elated and frustrated.

Time went on, and I eventually got into different things in my life. Playing in local bands and doing regional tours was my main focus. While I didn't actively practice wrestling, or what I knew of Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan, it was still in my heart and waiting for the right opportunity to come out.

That opportunity came in 1998 when I met Christopher Miller Sensei. I had learned that he was an instructor at a local martial arts school, and he invited me to come out to try a free lesson. I took him up on the offer and that's when I finally learned karate – real karate. The school where Miller Sensei taught was owned by Joseph Hursellers Sensei, a fifth degree black belt in Shuri-ryu Karatedo. It was here at this school that I learned Shuri-ryu and Huang Style Tai Chi.

I had no idea that meeting Miller Sensei would change my life. Not only did he share his knowledge of Shuri-ryu and help me become a better martial artist, he changed my life in more profound ways. Just by observing the way he taught and treated every person, in and out of the dojo, with dignity and respect, I learned if I wanted to be a better person I needed to do the same. Miller Sensei also showed me the most heartfelt kindness in times of great stress – even when it was between us.

By 2007 Miller Sensei had not only taught me for nine years, but by then we had become business partners and opened our own Shuri-ryu-based school. Because of that, it was difficult for me to confide in him that I no longer thought that Shuri-ryu was for me. I shared with him how I felt my study of Shuri-ryu was becoming stale, and how I had begun informally studying and practicing Wing Chun, Japanese Jujutsu, Chin Na, and was exploring Kyusho-jutsu. I had now studied Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan and wrestling, Shuri-ryu Karatedo, and Huang Style Tai Chi, and at the same time I found that the more I studied, the more I wanted to learn from other arts, bringing my knowledge together into developing my own style. I guess I was coming to realize I was never going to be happy settling in to a single style, until I could develop for myself something that could bring together all the aspects of my study into something that worked for me.

Taking all of this in his stride, Miller Sensei looked at me and said, “if you feel that is your direction, then that is the direction you must travel.” I told him I was not sure how this would affect our business, and also talked to him about my uncertainty as to the best way for me to go about personalizing my martial arts style. He reassured me the business would be fine, and that I should meditate on what exactly it was I was seeking, and he offered to help mentor me in developing my own martial art style. I was floored. Not only was he “OK” with my views about changing my martial arts direction, but he actually wanted to help me do it!

And help me is exactly what he did. Not only did I learn great teaching skills from him, he also showed me how to trust my heart. I'm not sure he would have guessed that by following my heart I would decide to join the military. After many weeks of meditation on my new direction, both in business and martial arts, I had a calling to join the Ohio Army National Guard.

The calling was primarily due to views that I was expressing about military service, and yet was not following myself. I firmly believed that before anyone passes judgment on certain things, they should participate in those things – in some way – before they pass judgment. Well, I was passing judgment about military actions and such, and yet I never joined the military because I had thought I was too old. I had later found out that the Army had raised the age limit for joining to forty-two

years of age. Since I was thirty-one at the time, I had decided my actions should match what I was saying, so I decided to join the military.

After joining the National Guard and successfully completing Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training, I joined my home unit in 2009. The tough thing about this was that my unit was called up to deploy to Iraq. That meant I was now going to be gone from our business for at least one year. That alone was rough, as I took care of the business side of our school. Considering that there was a chance I may not make it back from deployment, I decided to give Miller Sensei my half of the business freely. I figured if anything did happen to me, it would be a lot easier for him to own one hundred percent of the business free and clear.

The greatest challenge was that Miller Sensei didn't see any of this coming. He had no idea I was going to give him my fifty percent of the business. While I thought what I was doing was an honorable thing, for him it seemed like I was giving up on him and the business. Since he didn't have any part in the business side of our school, I was “dumping” on him something he would have to learn quickly if he wanted the school to survive. While we were cordial to each other, there was clearly some tension between us – and being blindly naive, I had no idea that what I thought was a good idea was the cause of this tension.

While my unit was going through the mobilization phase of our deployment, I quickly realized I would be one year without any martial arts training. It didn't even occur to me that this was something I should have considered. I now was becoming frustrated as I practiced alone and did my best to laugh off the comments of the guys in my unit – after all, all, not many of them had seen anyone doing Tai Chi forms before, let alone in an Army uniform.

I was able to satiate my appetite for marital arts practice and study briefly by chatting with some guys in my unit who did boxing and mixed martial arts. We shared technique ideas and concepts, but not much came of it. The greatest thing I got out of it was being able to talk with some people who could somewhat relate to my passion for martial arts. I had no idea that the time I would actually spend in Iraq would be vastly different.

When I first got to Iraq I didn't have much time to think about martial arts. We were busy going through equipment hand-offs from the unit we were replacing, getting trained up on our overall mission while in Iraq and getting used to our new environment. Everything was pretty much a blur for the first month and a half while we were in country.

After I got settled in and got used to the “routine” of our missions, I started to long for martial arts training again. Fortunately, in the later part of 2009, I met a couple of soldiers who were martial artists and did some informal training with some other guys. I chatted with them about all things martial arts and, when they discovered I was looking to train, they invited me to train with them in their informal and impromptu practice sessions.

There were nine of us total, including myself. All of us were from the Army, with the exception of two from the Air Force and one from the Navy. With U.S. military combatives as our common martial art, we shared with each other techniques and philosophies from our various styles. We began to collect a group of techniques that really worked well, considering our varied martial arts backgrounds. This was the most significant and powerful time of my martial arts experience.

This opportunity was significantly powerful for me because, while I had informally studied other martial arts as I progressed through my formal studies, I had wished I could “break out” and mold all of these styles and techniques together as a cohesive whole. My experience in Iraq gave that to me. We all brought our experiences from our different martial arts backgrounds and taught each other the core essences of our respective styles and experience. This was exactly what I was longing for. This provided me an opportunity to train with like-minded individuals and finally train in the way I preferred to train. Even though most of us were instructors or high-ranking individuals in our respective martial arts, we treated each other as equals and shared the training and learning roles. We didn’t allow cultural and assumed traditions to hinder our progress in studying the martial aspects of our training. We looked at what we were training on at its most basic level, analyzed what our intention was, and grew from there.

That experience answered so many questions for me. It also validated many assumptions I had formed during my years of martial arts studying and training. Training in this way fulfilled a long standing need to have a wider understanding of martial arts in application – wider than from any single tradition, even if that meant I had to follow a path of my own, separate from other martial arts schools.

Another experience affected my martial arts in a way I would not have expected. It was a rather small event, but it made the biggest difference for me. It occurred during a conversation I was having with a military contractor, who happened to also be a Dog Brothers stick fighter. We were talking about different techniques and the styles that use them. I had mentioned one of my favorite “stances” is the neko ashi dashi (cat stance). He couldn't figure out what I was talking about, so I demonstrated the “stance” for him. He laughed and said, “Oh, you mean footwork!” I was puzzled

by his statement and asked him to explain. He said what I was referring to as a “stance” is a moment in footwork that is not static. That’s why the term “stance” didn’t make sense to him, because footwork is dynamic and in fighting there are no “stances”. That brief conversation opened up a whole world of understanding for me and resolved many issues I had with my practice. From the beginning, in my very first class as a child in Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan, I was fascinated by stances. But over the years I had come to focus too much on stances as opposed to fluidly linking movements together. Eric suggested that I forget “stances” and move the way that was the most natural. As soon as I started to train in this way my skill improved greatly. I had moved beyond a plateau I didn’t even know I was on.

Knowing my time in Iraq was drawing to a close, I began to become concerned I would no longer be able to practice and train on the techniques I’d had the privilege and honor to work on. I had decided that, when I got back home to the United States, I was going to continue teaching martial arts and hoped I would be able to build upon what I had learned in Iraq. It was then I decided to ask the guys if I would be allowed to take home what we trained on and formalize it so I could teach it to my students.

I was shocked by their response, as my question was met with laughter. This was not what I expected. While I did expect rejection, because what we worked on really belonged to the whole group, I certainly did not expect to be laughed at. I was embarrassed for even asking, because I thought that they were laughing at the audacity of my request to take the group’s techniques, which we informally called Hebikido, and teach them on my own. Come to find out, they were laughing at my request because of the way they regarded our training. I was told that what we worked on was as much mine as it was the “group’s”. They found it funny I would even ask permission for such a thing, as it was assumed we all would take what we learned and build upon it. So even though it was not needed, they granted me their blessings to take what we trained on and formalize it into a martial arts system the best way I saw fit. I was elated.

Now I am home from my deployment. I have reconnected with Miller Sensei, and I’m happy to report we are now on good terms without any tension between us. He is still my friend and mentor – both in martial arts and in life. While I still face the potential of being deployed again, I am nevertheless moving forward with training and teaching martial arts, and formalizing the systemization of Hebikido.

There have been many challenges that have come up, and continue to do so, in my martial arts experience. The thing that keeps me going forward is the knowledge that, no matter what happens,

as long as I follow my passions fully everything else works out as it needs to. The thing I would say to all martial artists, beginners through masters, is to follow your passions. Understand that everything will work out the way that it needs to.

There will be challenges – and for some people there will be many – but at the same time, as long as you follow your passions and do the best that you can, you will be exactly where you need to be. If I had not taken the steps in my life that I have, my journey would have been drastically different.

Find your passion and start on your journey.

Richard Northwood



Richard Northwood studied Shotokan Karate in his youth. He now exclusively practices Chen Style Tai Chi. He has taught Tai Chi in Adult Education for 8 years. He has produced 2 British Open Kung Fu Champions and helped hundreds of others find balance and harmony. Richard lives in Cheshire, UK with his wife, Claire, and their two children, Jenna and Mia.

I discovered Tai Chi while working for a theatre company. We were a group who gave free workshops to any schools that block-booked their classes for our performances. While I was playing the part of 'Banquo' in Macbeth, I became aware of one of my actor colleagues who was the most focused performer I had ever met. He was a calm and very generous person. He never missed a line and nothing seemed to rattle him, despite the fact that the director and the rest of the cast were absolutely disastrous!

Throughout the rehearsal process, and before each performance, he would use Tai Chi movements as a warm-up. It became obvious that Tai Chi was an important part of his preparation.

Due to a complete lack of talent as an actor, I eventually ran out of money and had to find myself a serious job. I shuffled from one short-term position to another until I found a stable income. My lifestyle was hectic and unhealthy. I burned the candle at both ends, working all the overtime available and partying when I should have been sleeping. I drank and smoked far too much. Basically, I was a mess.

Then I woke up one cold Sunday morning and lay in bed listening (with some concern) to the slight wheezing sound of the air going in and out of my lungs. It became clear to me that I needed to make some changes or I would end up at the wrong end of a hospital bed. So I threw the rest of my cigarettes in the bin and called time on my heavy drinking.

Now what was I going to do with all of this free time? I remembered my actor friend and how calm he was amongst the chaos of the theatre company. With nicotine withdrawal gnawing at my nerves, his calm disposition seemed to be a highly attractive proposition. I went to my computer at work and typed "Tai Chi Manchester". The first name that came up was Master Liming Yue, who was teaching classes in Chinatown at the time.

My first class was held on a Tuesday evening. It was in a long office room, two floors above a lap-dancing club – though it has since moved to a far more reputable location. I turned up early for my first lesson. An advanced class was still running – at least I *hoped* it was the advanced class. Embarrassed, I quickly slipped past to the small changing area at the other end of the room and sneaked looks at them as their lesson came to an end. It looked very different from the Tai Chi that I had seen before. I was expecting to see lots of senior citizens doing stately movements. This was totally different. Yes, there were a few older students, but most of them were my age. They were standing with deep postures that looked *tough*. The movements were smooth and soft, just as I had expected, but there was real martial intention in them. I started to feel a little intimidated. What had I got myself into? Then the class finished and the smiles that broke out, as well as the obvious ease these people had, were instantly recognisable to me. I *was* at the right place.

Master Liming Yue turned out to be an inspirational teacher. I poured all my nervous nicotine withdrawal energy into the classes and felt it change into useful skill and a calmer disposition. My colleagues at work noticed before I did. I was coping with pressure better, getting more done and being financially rewarded for it. Before long I was travelling to China to attend Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei's First International Advanced Training course.

If you decide to practice a martial art, or you already do, I strongly recommend that you travel to its place of origin. There are countless vital lessons you learn about the culture that gave birth to your art. It is that total immersion in culture which will move you on as a martial artist faster than anything else.

Chenjiagou is widely acknowledged as the birthplace of Tai Chi and was part of a heavy schedule of travel that meant we took in Tiananmen Square, The Great Wall, Jian Jia Jie National Forest Park and the Songshan Shaolin Temple. When we arrived at Chenjiagou, we found a small town where there was very little in the way of creature comforts. Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei took us all to a small walled graveyard in the outskirts of the village next to a field. There he burned paper money and lit firecrackers. Then we all queued to light incense to his ancestors. I was moved. This simple ceremony showed me the real heritage of martial arts – the passing of skill from one generation to another and the love and respect for those who brought the art through the generations. It was at that point that I decided I wanted to teach Chen Style Tai Chi. When we returned to our hotel I redoubled my efforts to learn. By the end of the training week I could hardly stand.

There are times when you want to travel and learn and, when all is done, you just want to get home so you can tell everyone how you went on. I returned to rainy Manchester and reluctantly settled

back to my normal working life. When I attended my usual Tai Chi class, people were naturally interested in how things went. After a few anecdotes, the class started and things felt no different from when I had left three weeks earlier. During our break, it was usual to sit around and chat. People came up one after another to say how much my Tai Chi had improved since I went to China.

Things were going very well until one summer afternoon when I witnessed a murder. A man was brutally shot by a couple of assailants outside my flat. I saw everything and the police asked me to testify. It took a year for the trial to get to court. During that time, I was afraid to go and visit my parents for fear that I was being followed. Even after the men were sent to prison, I was constantly looking over my shoulder for a reprisal. It weighed heavily on my heart. Then one day, we were training and Master Liming Yue was demonstrating some self-defence techniques to the rest of the class. I was his top student, so was always at hand as his stooge for any pairs work. I think he saw something in my demeanour, because he stopped and changed his approach. He quickly went through every kind of punch and kick, demonstrating how high risk they were and how ineffective each attack would be. Then he placed his hand on my shoulder and said – more to me than the rest of the class, “No need to be afraid”.

I could feel a lot of emotions rising up that had been suppressed for a long time. But one thing was becoming clear – I had been living with fear and anger for too long. It had permeated into every aspect of my life and was holding me down. Looking back, it was the first time I truly acknowledged what I now know to be one of the complete truths – not just of martial arts, but also of life.

No matter how great things are, or how bad things get, you are your own greatest enemy. For all the trials and tribulations that life throws at you are merely lessons in a lifelong learning pattern. The only true failure is not to learn from your mistakes. Albert Einstein said that the greatest madness is someone who does the same thing over and over and expects different results each time. It is this knowledge that has made me look honestly at my skill and has made me a better teacher and a better human being as a result.

It is good to acknowledge your sources. For me there have been many. But all of this would not have been possible without the central teachings from Master Liming Yue. When I first googled *Tai Chi in Manchester*, it was purely luck that I picked him out. I have seen many other local teachers since, and I doubt I would have lasted more than a couple of weeks if I had chosen them. Not only has Liming taught me with great patience and skill, he has generously introduced me to other Masters who have been instrumental in my development. I try to see Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei every time he comes to the UK. His attention to detail is amazing and has taught me many things about the Tai

Chi curriculum and the structure of the forms. Grandmaster Gou Kongjie was Master Liming Yue's first teacher. His Tai Chi is very practical. All the applications that I learned from Grandmaster Gou were very useful. Master Liu Yong taught me about fajin (releasing energy) and some of the tougher silk-reeling exercises.

In recent times, the biggest barrier to my enjoyment of Tai Chi has been a recurrent knee injury. This is a result of many years of practicing my favourite form – Cannon Fist (or “Paochui”). Cannon fist is the more energetic and powerful branch of Chen Style Tai Chi. It is really hard kung fu, and I love the many jumps, stamps, leaps and twists. My years of overzealous practice have resulted in frequent pain when I overload my right knee. I have asked many doctors, who have just told me to take it easy. I checked my alignment and had other Tai Chi teachers check my posture to make sure I am not using my body badly. But nothing worked, and the pain got worse and worse.

Then I had an idea – I lost some weight, and it seems to have worked. My knee occasionally has bad days, but don't we all? Another valuable lesson is to think laterally to solve the most difficult problems.

When you start to take martial arts seriously, the first thing you think about is competitions. For some reason my preparation has never been good. I am the unluckiest competitor in the world! For my first attempt at the British Open Kung Fu Championships I decided to train in China and got some serious training in, but my connecting flight to Beijing was delayed and I had to spend an extra two days in Beijing. I finally arrived dehydrated, sleep deprived, exhausted and jet-lagged at 1 a.m. of the morning of the competition. Sleep was impossible, as I had to leave at 6:30 a.m. to get to the tournament. If you see any pictures, my eyes were half closed as I could hardly keep them open. I managed to scrape a 3rd place.

The catalogue of bad luck has continued with injuries and my car breaking down on the way etc., right up to my withdrawal from competition. But when my students have entered competitions, they have never lost. I have trained two British champions and I can honestly say that their success means more to me than my own.

Looking to the future, I would like to see my classes grow and my students become outstanding Tai Chi teachers. I would love to be able to travel to China more often to catch up with old friends and see how the country has changed. In my secret thoughts I dream of having enough money to open a Centre of Excellence for martial arts, meditation, consciousness and education.

For those starting out on their own journey, I would say,

“Be kind to yourself and trust the process.”

For when we first go to a martial arts class, we look at all the other students and say to ourselves “how can I possibly do that?” I know, because I was once one of those people. Recognise that there is always a set methodology to follow and that these processes have been refined over many generations. Trust that these generations of people were all beginners once and had their own problems to overcome.

Also, being kind to yourself is important because when you make mistakes (and you *will* make mistakes) you need to be able to correct them positively without punishing yourself. If you become angry with yourself, your practice will become a meditation in frustration and you will soon give up.

Finally, I always say to my students, *“For real skill, it’s not how hard you practice, but how often you practice.”* This is because repetition leads to habits and good habits are the foundation of skill.

Chris Bennett



Chris Bennett has been practising and teaching traditional Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan in Melbourne, Australia, since 1987.

He also uses Tai Chi meditation, exercises and philosophy in workshops and programs for clients of all ages through BJ Seminars International, the facilitation and training business he runs with Sue James.

My first impression, when watching snippets of martial arts on television and film as a teenager in the 1960's, was that it looked so easy.

Just a karate chop to the neck and the bad guy would drop like a ton of bricks. A few villains would always surround the hero and attack one at a time, but he'd drop all of them with his killer karate chop without raising a sweat or messing up his hair.

Why would I bother to train for years when I could learn everything watching a television show like the *Green Hornet*, which co-starred a young Bruce Lee? Bruce was really the reason I watched the show. The lead character just looked good but Bruce was 'the man'. He threw punches and kicks that were impossible to see if you blinked. So I stared at the screen wide-eyed, not daring to blink even once.

Watching Bruce did wake me up to the fact that you probably needed more than a karate chop to knock out the bad guys. But that was okay. I was willing to spend a few extra minutes to learn some kicks and add them to my single repertoire of one karate chop. Well, at least I figured I could learn how to do low kicks - not the high flying ones that would have snapped my skinny legs in two.

The commando scene in the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, starring William Holden, gave me some more killer moves to practice. Again it looked easy and I thought yes, I could do that. Just practice the moves, throw in a killer smile after I'd disposed of the enemy with the knife, and voilà – instant hero!

My next lesson in the art of self-defence was watching *A Shot In the Dark*, a Pink Panther movie, starring Peter Sellers as the bumbling Inspector Clouseau. His servant, Cato, would attack Clouseau without warning to keep him alert.

For next few days I'd walk around expecting to be attacked by Cato at any moment. So I developed an awareness of my surroundings. I was ready! Even in Frank Dempsey's butcher shop, as I was ordering steak for my Mum, I'd hear the door behind me swing open as a customer entered the shop and mentally prepare myself for a surprise attack by Cato. You could never be too careful in Fitzroy.

In the early 1970's, a television series, *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, completely captured my attention and I avidly watched every episode from 1972 to 1975. Not even a crowbar could wedge me out of my chair. I imagined myself as the David Carradine character, Caine, a Chinese American boy who was orphaned and taken in by Shaolin monks to live at a monastery and train in Kung Fu.

Caine fled China after killing the nephew of the Emperor who had just murdered his mentor, Master Po. He roamed the American West, crossing deserts by foot and encountering many adventures. For a man of peace who tried to avoid conflict he sure was in the thick of things.

Every episode had a fight scene where Caine would defend himself against more than one bad guy. In slow motion he would dispatch each baddie with a kick or a strike and then wander off to the next town, the next adventure, the next fight. I loved the fight sequences and I also loved the philosophy and flashbacks to his younger days with the Shaolin monks, when he learned life lessons as well as how to fight.

The philosophical discussions between Caine and the monks and also with the people he encountered in the American West were my first introduction to Eastern philosophy. I thought deeply about the various insights and slowly came to realise that there was more to martial arts than just a karate chop to the neck or a few good kicks.

In 1973, one year after *Kung Fu* began, Bruce Lee exploded onto the film screen in *Enter the Dragon*. I had never seen anything like this film before.

This was a film devoted to martial arts and it was extraordinary! It was the first time I had seen several martial arts fight scenes in the one film. Talented martial artists I'd never heard of before battled each other, including Jackie Chan who played a minor part as a hood in an uncredited role.

And of course there was Bruce Lee, the star of the movie. His fight scenes, nunchuks and expressions were fascinating to watch. He fought and won every encounter. My favourite fight scene was the one in which he battled Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the 7 ft 2 in (2.18m) American, a Los Angeles Lakers star basket baller. It wasn't the best fight scene, but it resonated with me because I was a young basketball coach at the time, and here was one of the top National Basketball Association players fighting Bruce Lee in a movie.

Enter the Dragon inspired me to think about taking up martial arts so I read a couple of books by Bruce Tegner on self-defence. But I was a dabbler, not a genuine student. I'd practice each move only a few times and then move on to the next technique.

It was during this time I was heavily involved in coaching basketball and really had no time to go to a martial arts class, so the Bruce Tegner books ended up on my bookshelf and remained there undisturbed for a long time.

Over the next several years, while I continued to watch martial arts on television and in the movies, I never got around to joining a class.

But all that changed in 1985 when I bumped into Wu Style Tai Chi. Well, Tai Chi bumped into me. I got to know my sister's employer at the time, John Thirlwell, who was a Tai Chi teacher at the North Melbourne Tai Chi club. John was a student of Master Rocky Kwong, who was a student of Master Cheng Tin Hung.

At that time I knew very little about Tai Chi. I thought it was just a slow form of dance, suitable only for the elderly. John and I had many discussions over the next two years and he would often suggest I try Tai Chi.

One day he demonstrated a Tai Chi technique on me. With a minimum of effort he pushed my chest with his hands and caused me to stumble several paces backwards. I think he used the 'As If Closing' posture.

I thought, 'hmm there may something to this Tai Chi'. So I asked him where I could go to learn. He suggested I try instructor John Yuen's Blackburn Tai Chi club, which was much closer to my home than John Thirlwell's club. Both clubs were affiliated with the Australian Federation of Wu Style Tai Chi Association.

So in 1987, at the age of 35, I started my first Tai Chi class in Blackburn. It was a Monday night and at 6.30pm our instructor John Yuen introduced himself and gave a short talk on Tai Chi to twenty beginners. I was a bit nervous because I had no idea what to expect.

He then said with a smile, *'Big ones down the back, and little ones in the front.'*

And I thought, *'Terrific! I'm tall; I can hide down the back!'* So I shuffled down to the back of the hall, right near the stage, and this became my spot for the next seven years.

After my first one-hour class of Tai Chi I was hooked. I loved it. It was so different from what I had experienced in the past – it was a breath of fresh air. Even though I very much enjoyed coaching basketball, Tai Chi was like a gift. It was something I'd stumbled into and I wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

I wanted to go all the way – to improve as much as I could. I wanted to be as good as the seniors and the instructor and the only way I could ever hope to improve my skills was to train. It was as simple as that. I didn't want to become a social Tai Chi player and attend class once a week. I also had to work hard because I had average talent. I started training once a week and practiced on other days – otherwise I knew I'd be left behind.

In the first six months we were taught the traditional Wu Style Tai Chi form, which has 108 postures (some repeated) and other transitional movements. Learning the form in six months was fast paced. Well, we learned the movements and connections in six months – the deeper learning of these moves takes years.

If you didn't train everyday it would show during class. You'd forget and get left behind because each week you'd learn two or three new moves. Usually those who didn't practice would drop out because they couldn't keep up. That was never going to happen to me. I was determined to stay the distance even with my wonky left knee which played up at times.

After six months we finished the form and I was thrilled. I did it! I had kept going and achieved my goal – I could now do the entire traditional Wu Style Tai Chi form. I was one of the few who stayed and accomplished it.

Twenty-four years later I am still practicing and teaching Wu Style Tai Chi.

What's kept me going over the years? Well, there are several reasons why my passion for Tai Chi has continued until this day.

That first night in the beginner's class ignited my passion for Tai Chi. After one hour I knew this was what I wanted to do. This was for me. After 15 years of coaching basketball and focusing on other people's needs, I had finally found something where I could focus on my own personal development; mentally, physically, psychologically and spiritually.

As much as I loved coaching basketball, it was time to move on to the next stage of my life. And Tai Chi was a natural step for me.

From the first class onwards I found Tai Chi challenging and fascinating. Over seven years at the Blackburn Tai Chi club I learned the traditional Tai Chi hand form, Push Hands, Chi Kung & Nei Kung, Weapons (sabre, sword, staff and spear) and Self Defence.

Another significant moment that kept me motivated happened when I was invited by our instructor, John Yuen, to join a small private class he conducted in his garage on a Friday night between 7.00-8.30pm. After two years of training I was finally getting the opportunity to learn the self-defence component of Tai Chi.

Friday night training was by invitation only and usually it was made up of senior students. But if you showed potential and had the right attitude then there was a chance you could be invited. And at the age of 37, without any previous martial arts experience, I became part of this select group.

The garage was small and could only fit one car, so it was a tight space with room for only about eight students. And because it was a small area you had to train hard and it was fair dinkum (real). There was nowhere to hide and bludge and that suited me. I was there to train and not muck about. This was too good an opportunity to advance my skills and there was no way I'd waste it.

We worked hard and I loved training. It was a friendly and a happy group. After the session most of us would go to the local Thai restaurant to relax and have a meal together.

At times it was very competitive. I remember one night we were practicing the Monkey Climbs drill which involved stretching upwards on our toes and bending down until our thighs were parallel to the ground and then back up again. We were only supposed to do about 20 or 30 but we kept going to see who could last the distance.

200 Monkeys ... 300 Monkeys ... At this point only three of us remained, as the others had all dropped out. Up to 350 Monkeys, and now only Joseph and I were left. At the 400 mark Joseph finally dropped out and I did another 50 to 'win' the contest.

I was feeling pretty pleased with myself until later in the night, when it was time to get up and leave the restaurant. I couldn't move! My legs felt like logs. Silly me, but what can you do when the male ego kicks in? Well, sometimes you do really dumb things.

What I also appreciated about training in general was that I was with other students, younger and more talented, who gave me the incentive to keep up.

Push Hands, a key component of Tai Chi, was another motivating force that fascinated me and gave me an avenue for my competitive nature. Push hands is a sensitivity drill, a means to self-defence but not self-defence itself. The object is to stay relaxed and throw your opponent off balance with a minimum of effort or force.

In Push Hands, both in training and in competition, strikes or foot sweeps are not allowed for safety reasons. There are two types of push hands – fixed feet and freestyle. In freestyle you can move your feet but in both styles you have to maintain contact with your opponent's arms at all times

In my first year at the club I watched the seniors practice for an upcoming competition and I wished I was training with them. I'd glance over every now and again to see what they were doing. During one night my instructor called me over to join the group – but not because I was talented. They

needed a big guy and a sort of 'attack dog' to test their skills. There was circle in the hall and the object was to push your opponent out of the circle using Tai Chi.

Well, I pushed hands – or rather I chased and pushed one senior after another, one at a time, for the remainder of the session. I was exhausted at the end of the drill but I absolutely loved it. I wanted to enter but was disappointed in that ambition because I wasn't ready for competition and had to wait until the following year.

Finally in 1988 I got my chance to compete in the Australian Federation of Wu Style Tai Chi Push Hands competition. I lost my first match but over the next three years I won both the fixed feet and freestyle competitions. I think my record was thirty wins and one loss. The competitions were for beginners and intermediates only – seniors and instructors were not allowed to compete.

Looking back now I think the reason I did well was because I was determined to win and was very competitive. I never at any stage considered I had a good level of skill in Push Hands even though I won many matches. When I pushed hands with various Federation instructors during training, I knew I had a long way to go to consider myself capable. So if you're thinking of coming over to challenge me to a Push Hands death match – forget it – I won't be home.

However it was a wonderful opportunity to test my push hands skills against other similar skilled players, and the pressure of staying relaxed in a competition environment was an invaluable experience.

The motivation to improve to the best of my ability kept my passion alive. Six years after I had joined the club I was invited, with three others, to train for Nei Kung level. We trained for about six months and passed the test to become official senior students. It was a great feeling to achieve senior level at Blackburn. All those years of hard training had paid off. Not bad for an old man of forty-two with average ability!

During my years at the Blackburn Club my training partners, Chris Anderson and Bill Dritsas, also strengthened my motivation to further improve my skills. We met during the first class and became known as The Three Amigos.

We started to train together for three hours every Sunday morning to practice and review what we had learned in class. Occasionally we would train at Swinburne University, where I was doing a Bachelor of Arts degree as a mature age student.

I never felt that training at club sessions was enough if you were serious about training. I had to do more so my schedule in those days was:

Monday:	Club training
Tuesday:	Personal training
Wednesday:	Personal training
Thursday:	Personal Training
Friday:	Private Training group
Saturday:	Weapons training with the weapons group
Sunday:	The Three Amigos training

At the end of 1993 and with my instructor's approval, I set up the Olinda Tai Chi club which ran from 1994-2001. The club focused on the well-being side of Tai Chi as my students were generally middle aged and not interested in the self-defence aspects.

I taught the Tai Chi form, Chi Kung, basics, push hands and the sword and sabre forms. Teaching was a great way of learning because I had to analyse and think about every part of Tai Chi, which helped me improve my own practice.

Teaching was natural for me as I had been a basketball coach for several years. I also knew I had to maintain my research and skills so I could deliver a professional service. So I trained every day and kept training with Chris and Bill whenever I could. It was during this time we set up the Melbourne Push Hands Club, which was open to all styles of Tai Chi and/or other martial artists. Freestyle push hands was the main style used.

The club gave me another avenue of training and allowed me to test my skills in a safe environment against all types of martial artists. The rules at the Push Hands Club were simple – no strikes or foot sweeps for safety reasons. This was not full contact, 'fight to the death' type of training otherwise how would you explain turning up dead at work the next day?

The rules were always explained to newcomers and a demonstration was provided to show what was acceptable and what was unacceptable during training.

Occasionally the experienced members of the club, including myself, would step up the intensity to test our skills. But newcomers always trained in a gentle manner until their skills improved before considering vigorous workouts.

Tai Chi was and still is part of my full time business. I'm a facilitator, trainer and speaker in personal and professional development and well-being and use various aspects of Tai Chi in my work.

I've run specialised conference energisers, short courses, workshops, and presentations for various organisations, corporations, Councils and schools. From 2005, with my business partner, I've been fortunate not only to run workshops here in Melbourne but also interstate and (so far) one overseas trip. That overseas trip was a real high point. We ran a workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal, for the World Appreciative Inquiry conference in 2009.

Into all the work that we do I bring the physical and philosophical aspects of Tai Chi to support deeper learning and transformation for our clients.

It's a very satisfying feeling when your passion is your job, but it hasn't all been easy. Running a business requires the same discipline and perseverance as my training in Tai Chi. It's the passion not the money that keeps me going.

There were several challenges that threatened to derail this passion and almost forced me to give up Tai Chi.

One consistent problem over the years has been my left knee. I injured it in primary school, resulting in a weakness that has made it difficult to maintain stances for any length of time. After a minute or two in a stance I'd feel the pain in the knee. It wasn't severe but it was there and I had to work my way through it. Surprisingly, it did not affect any other part of my training.

During the years I was learning and in classes, it was more will power than correct technique that kept me going to keep up with everyone. I could feel the pain but ignored it. It wasn't probably the smartest thing to do but I didn't want to drop out of the more physical training required to progress in Tai Chi and my pride wouldn't allow me to admit to a physical weakness. I was determined to keep up with the other students and I did.

In recent years the knee has played up again whenever I've tried to do the various stances in Tai Chi. At one point after the stance work, the pain would be severe and I would have to rest it for several days, which interfered with my training schedule. When this occurred I felt like only 'half a Tai Chi man' because stance work is essential in Tai Chi as it is in all other martial arts. And I couldn't maintain the stances for any more than a short time.

It came to a point where I had a choice to make. I could continue my training in stance work and further damage my knee, which would eventually force me to give up Tai Chi – or I could stop practicing the stances. For several weeks I reflected deeply on my dilemma and found the answer in the Yin Yang philosophy. It was simple really. I needed to practice what I'd preached so many times in Tai Chi. And that is, to take a Yin Yang view – a balanced view – of my situation.

I had locked myself into the extreme yang position of trying to force myself into doing the training that other experienced martial artists considered essential. Ok, so it may be ‘essential’ – but I realised this was my knee and to continue the path I was taking would have meant giving up what I had loved and practiced for the past twenty years.

Giving up was never really going to be option for me, regardless of what others thought or said. So I decided to stop doing the stances. This decision was a major turning point for me in my Tai Chi journey, as it made me realise what the Chinese proverb ‘*invest in loss*’ really meant. My loss was giving up an essential part of Tai Chi training and my investment was that I could continue my journey in Tai Chi.

The result of this decision has made a major difference in my approach to training. I created a schedule that suits my circumstances. I train more than I ever did, with the difference that I now train smarter not harder.

Here’s my current schedule, which I developed so I can continue training and avoid damaging my knee further. The times and sequences sometimes vary according to my work schedule. I try not to do more than 30 minute sessions at the one time so my knees can cope.

Monday	6.30am – 7.00am	Chair Chi Kung exercises
	10.00am – 10.30am	Chi Kung and Tai Chi drills
	3.00pm – 3.30pm	Tai Chi hand form
	5.00pm – 5.15pm	Spear Drills
Tuesday	6.30am – 7.00am	Chair Chi Kung exercises
	10.00am – 10.30am	Chi Kung and Tai Chi drills
	3.00pm – 3.30pm	New skills
Wednesday	6.30am – 7.00am	Chair Chi Kung exercises
	10.00am – 10.30am	Chi Kung and Tai Chi drills
	3.00pm – 3.30pm	37 postures – applications
	5.00pm – 5.15pm	Spear Drills

Thursday	6.30am – 7.00am	Chair Chi Kung
	10.00am – 10.30am	Chi Kung and Tai Chi drills
	3.00pm – 3.30pm	Weapons forms
Friday	6.30am – 7.00am	Chair Chi Kung
	10.00am – 10.30am	Chi Kung and Tai Chi drills
	3.00pm – 3.30pm	Self Defence applications
	5.00pm – 5.15pm	Spear Drills
Saturday	11.00am – 12.00pm	Revision
Sunday	Rest Day	

I also do what I call a ‘spot drill’ each weekday that lasts a few seconds. Before I walk down the driveway in the morning to pick up my newspaper, I pop into the garage and use the punching bag that’s slung over the wooden beam to test my grounding skills.

If I’m short on time during the week I try to make sure I cover my core sessions – forms and self defence applications.

As the schedule demonstrates, I do many drills over the week. As I do each one, I usually count each repetition silently. The other day I was in town walking along the foot path and realised I was counting silently to myself. I’m glad nobody could hear me or they’d have thrown a net over me and taken me away!

After several weeks of using the new schedule I’ve actually felt my knee get stronger, which has been a bonus for me.

I sometimes reflect on how various martial arts masters, both in the past and now, cope with injury issues that stop them doing ‘essential’ exercises. Perhaps true mastery is finding your way around ‘impossible’ circumstances.

The more I train, the more I feel the need to go deeper into the philosophy, not only to understand it but to put it into practice. What’s the point of quoting and understanding profound sayings if they’re not used in a practical way? It really is a case of ‘physician, heal thyself.’

Another challenge I’ve faced in recent years is training without partners or other Tai Chi teachers, due to my business commitments.

Apart from the time issue, it's very difficult to find Tai Chi training partners who are available and have the same focus with training as I have. I've tried in the past but it hasn't lasted for various reasons. And it's difficult to attend classes consistently when work can call me away at any time.

I'm determined to find the time and like-minded partners with whom I can train so I can continue my development in Tai Chi. Until then I'll keep training by myself.

As long as I'm physically and mentally capable, I'll continue to train in Tai Chi. And should some unfortunate event down the track prevent me from doing Tai Chi, I will simply find another way to nourish the Chi such as sitting Chi Kung.

My motivation is as strong as ever, as the benefits from Tai Chi in health and self-defence are worth nurturing and developing. It's usually a challenge and I love a challenge that will push me further along my journey in Tai Chi.

Every time I feel I've reached a peak in a certain area of Tai Chi I look up and there it is - another peak, another mountain, another challenge. That's another reason why I love Tai Chi – it's a never ending journey. Every destination is just another stop along the way.

I remember attending a Chi Kung workshop years ago, when the teacher demonstrated what looked like the opening posture of Tai Chi – raising his arms and then lowering them.

He said *'it took me 25 years to understand this move.'* I couldn't understand what he was saying then – but I do now. There is depth in the most basic movement of Tai Chi that can take years to understand.

It's only when I practice the various movements for a long time that I begin to grasp the meaning of a particular movement. When I have these insights it's a thrill and a sign that my journey is progressing to a deeper level.

I love the variety in Tai Chi – the hand form, self-defence, weapons, Chi Kung/Nei Kung, Push Hands and the Yin Yang philosophy. All these elements are designed to nourish the Chi and develop internal strength which is a foundation for a healthy psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual state.

I intend to keep going until I fall off my perch!

About the Authors

Pam Soldoff

Pam Soldoff is the owner and lead instructor at Basalt Family Martial Arts in Basalt Colorado. She teaches a primarily traditional Taekwondo. Ms. Soldoff is also an amateur Muay Thai kickboxer and includes Muay Thai classes at the studio. She has been practicing martial arts since 2002. She has a First Dan Black Belt in Taekwondo but has cross trained in Silat, JKD, Kali, Sevat, Wrestling, Gi-Less Jiu-Jitsu, Capoeira, American boxing, and Muay Thai. Her son Calvin (also 1st Dan) and husband Chance also instruct at the studio.

Basalt Family Martial Arts

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Phone: (970) 309-0778

Daily classes for Juniors ages 6-13; Adults 14-and up; and Li'l Dragons 4-6

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Wayne Boozer

Sa Bom Nim (Master) Wayne Boozer has been running the Tang Soo Do school, Texas Coast Karate, since its inception as a simple karate club in the Houston, Texas area, in July, 2009. Since then, the club has grown into a legitimate school where classes are now taught in two areas of the Houston Metropolitan area. Master Boozer has been practicing Tang Soo Do since being introduced to it in 1995 and continues to train under the guidelines of Grandmaster CS Kim and the International Tang Soo Do Federation, of which he is now a member of the Technical Advisory Committee.

Since contributing to Journeys, Master Wayne Boozer actually followed his dream and in December, 2012, left his full-time job to teach at his schools, Texas Coast Karate, in Houston and League City, TX.

In addition to running his school, Wayne is extremely physically active, and likes to compete in challenge obstacle races (like the Warrior Dash and Metro Dash), and also maintains a school YouTube channel and two blogs, one of which is specifically for his Tang Soo Do practice called "Be the Master" (<http://www.sbnboozer.wordpress.com/>). An avid fan of writing, he finds it to sometimes be the best way to convey his thoughts to students.

Wayne lives in League City, Texas with his wife Beth, children Landon and Mia, two dogs and two cats. He's a particular fan of motorcycling, and hops on his Honda VTX as often as time and weather allows.

Josh Waltzing

Josh Waltzing is the Head Instructor of two Taekwondo schools in Central Minnesota. Training in the martial arts for over fourteen years, he has earned a Third Degree black belt in Taekwondo as well as advanced under-black belt rank in Judo, Hapkido, and Kumdo. Besides teaching martial arts, he earned a teaching license through the State of Minnesota in High School level Social Studies. At twenty-nine years old he is married and has one three-year-old son with whom he loves to share his joy of learning.

Josh's students at his schools train primarily in traditional Korean Taekwondo but with a desire to create the best martial arts experience possible, students also receive instruction in Hapkido and Judo techniques to augment their Taekwondo training. In addition to the traditional martial arts material, black belt students have the opportunity to train in several weapons such as bo staff, nunchaku, and short sticks. Through their parent association students also have the opportunity to earn rank in Hapkido and Kumdo.

Currently, Josh teaches over sixty students in Sauk Centre and Alexandria who have ranged in age from four to sixty-five. His students include ranks from brand new beginners to Fourth Degree Junior Black Belts who have been training for nine years. Many students come to his schools finding they do not fit into "regular" sports but after a few years of training find themselves succeeding on other sports teams. Several of his martial arts students have gone to become high level competitors in Cross Country Skiing, Swimming and Diving, Regional Gymnastics Champions, and State Champions in Elementary wrestling.

Didi Goodman

Didi Goodman is founder and chief instructor at Cuong Nhu Redwood Dojo in Oakland, California. She holds the rank of Rokudan (6th degree black belt) in Cuong Nhu, a Vietnamese style (meaning 'hard/soft') that draws techniques and principles from several different Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese martial arts. Prior to dedicating herself to Cuong Nhu, she studied both Taekwondo and Aikido for many years. She is also a poet, writer, and avid bird-watcher. She is author of a Karate workbook for children, published by Blue Snake Books.

For more information about Didi Goodman's book, *The Kids' Karate Workbook: A Take-Home Training Guide for Young Martial Artists*—including where and how to buy it—visit www.kidskaratebook.com.

This site also serves as a blog and idea-sharing forum for instructors who teach martial arts to children. For information on Redwood Dojo in Oakland, California, visit www.redwood-dojo.com.

A third website, www.drgoodmanpoetry.com, is devoted to Didi's non-martial-arts life as a literary poet, publishing under the name D. R. Goodman.

Robert Nomura

Robert Nomura practices Wing Chun Kung Fu. He trained for four years and is a level seven (black sash) in his kwoon. Before Wing Chun he studied Aikido intensively, Taiji Chuan for two months in China, a bit of Judo, and even Karate in Japan. He currently publishes the WingChunLife.com website that aims to entertain and help busy martial artists reach their full potential.

When Robert isn't refining his Wing Chun skills he manages his Wing Chun website, or writes direct response marketing copy for business clients, or eats spicy food, watches a movie, goes on a trip, hikes, swims at the beach, and sometimes reads economics, history, and personal development.

If you have any questions, contact him through his WingChunLife.com website.

Neil Hall

Neil R. Hall is the Chief Instructor at London Chinatown TaeKwonDo, which he co-founded in 2005 with his son, Gareth. He became a full time martial artist in 2008, and the school now has classes around England and internationally.

You can find Neil R. Hall at www.lctkd.com where there's plenty to find out about the popular martial arts school founded in London's Chinatown, and now with classes in London and The Cotswolds, England, and in Algeria, too! Neil founded the martial art Ensodo in 2010. Ensodo, the real martial art for older students, now has its own website, which you can find at www.ensodo.com.

As this book is being published, the Institute for Advanced Integrated Martial Arts, of which Neil is Director, is about to go live. The Institute will be concerned with exchange and study visits, post

graduate research and other academic qualifications in martial arts, publications, seminars, and dan grades in integrated martial arts for advanced martial artists. Find out more at www.iaima.org.

For more information on any of these arts and organisations, e-mail info@lctkd.com.

David Michael Cunningham

David Michael Cunningham, author and Iraq war veteran, is the owner of Studio 212 Fitness, in Northwest Ohio. David has trained in martial arts for over fourteen years, and has been an instructor for five years. In addition to being a martial arts instructor, he is also a Certified Fitness Trainer through the International Sports Sciences Association. He is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Education degree, majoring in exercise science and double minoring in entrepreneurship and psychology, at Bowling Green State University.

Richard Northwood

Richard Northwood studied Shotokan Karate in his youth. He now exclusively practices Chen Style Tai Chi. He has taught Tai Chi in Adult Education for 8 years. He has produced 2 British Open Kung Fu Champions and helped hundreds of others find balance and harmony. Richard lives in Cheshire, UK with his wife, Claire, and their two children, Jenna and Mia.

After leaving Tytherington High School, Richard gained distinction grades for Recreation and Leisure provision at Macclesfield College and worked in many of the sports/leisure clubs around the Macclesfield Borough. He has also worked in the entertainments, pharmaceuticals and construction industries before settling in the financial services sector.

Richard holds a Tai Chi Instructors certificate, assessed by Master Zhang Dongwu in Zhau Zuo, People's Republic of China. He is endorsed by Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei as an advanced Xinjia (New Frame) practitioner. He also holds a Central Council for Physical Recreation's Community Sports Leader Award, and a current British Red Cross certificate in First Aid.

As well as Tai Chi, Richard enjoys Meditation, HFT Air Rifle Shooting, Technology (computers etc.), consciousness evolution, psychology, astronomy, philosophy, politics and anything else that interests him. He teaches Tai Chi for Cheshire East Adult Education in Sandbach Boys School and Macclesfield College.

Chris Bennett

Chris Bennett has been practising and teaching traditional Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan in Melbourne, Australia, since 1987. He also uses Tai Chi meditation, exercises and philosophy in workshops and programs for clients of all ages through BJ Seminars International, the facilitation and training business he runs with Sue James.

Chris is the author of *Tai Chi: A Step-by-Step Guide to Complete Relaxation* and provides Tai Chi classes, workshops and private lessons in the eastern suburbs and the Dandenong Ranges of Melbourne. For further information go to his website [Chris Chi](#)

When he and Sue James met several years ago, they found so many similarities between the philosophy and principles of Tai Chi and Appreciative Inquiry (Sue's background) that they formed a business partnership as BJ Seminars International and combined their expertise to develop their unique AQ-KQ Framework (Appreciative Intelligence and Kinaesthetic Intelligence).

Chris loves writing and blogs regularly on the [Chris Chi](#), [Chris Chats](#) and [BJ Seminars International](#) websites. He's also currently writing a memoir, has completed a first draft of a screenplay, has self-published several ebooks and has a number of articles published in various print magazines and ezines. He writes on wellbeing, business and humour.

In his 'spare time' he enjoys photography, watching basketball, reading, movies and juggling.