

Living the Classical Chinese Traditions

An Interview with Master Zhongxian Wu

Master Zhongxian Wu was born on China's eastern shore in the city of Wenlin in Zhejiang province, where the sun's rays first touch the Chinese mainland. Frail as a child, he began practicing qigong and taiji at an early age. Inspired by the immediate strengthening effects of his practice, Master Wu committed himself to a life-long pursuit of the ancient arts of internal cultivation. He devoted himself to the study of Qigong, martial arts, Chinese medicine, Yijing science, and ancient Chinese music over the next twenty-five years, studying with some of the best teachers in these fields.

Master Wu is the lineage holder of four different schools of Qigong and martial arts. He is the 18th generation lineage holder of the Mt. Wudang Dragon Gate style of Qigong (Wudang Longmen Pai); the 8th generation lineage holder of the Mt. Emei Sage style Qigong (Emei Zhengong); the 7th generation lineage holder of the Dai Family Heart Method style of Xin Yi (Dai Shi Xinyi Quan); and the 12th generation lineage holder of the Wudang He style of Taiji Quan.

In China, Master Wu served as Director of the Shaanxi Province Association for Somatic Science and the Shaanxi Association for the Research of Taoist Nourishing Life Practices. In this capacity, he conducted many investigations into the clinical efficacy of Qigong and authored numerous works on the philosophical and historical foundations of China's ancient life sciences. Since he began teaching in 1988, Master Wu has instructed thousands of Qigong students, Eastern and Western. As Director of the Qigong Program in the Classical Chinese Medicine Department at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon, Master Wu is committed to bringing the authentic teachings of Chinese Qigong, taiji, and martial arts to the Pacific Northwest.

Master Wu, could you tell us how you got started in taiji and Qigong?

At an early age, I developed a strong personal interest in Qigong. This was supported by the culture in my hometown. People there cherished the older traditions, and many of them practiced the art of ancient shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism, and martial arts traditions such as chanting, meditation, herbal folk medicine, acupuncture, etc. I found these things very interesting. When I was five or six years old, I started chanting. At eight years old, I became interested in Qigong. I began learning some general Qigong movements and meditation practices. Then when I was 12 or 13 years old, I started learning Emei Zhengong and shortly after that Dragon Gate Qigong. At that time in China it was easier to practice and study Qigong. It is different for students now; they spend a lot more time studying and doing homework. When I was a child, there was always time at school to do the work for my classes, so I was able to spend a lot of time practicing at the Emei Zhengong School. I studied with Master Yu Wen Cai, a well-known Chinese Medicine doctor, Qigong master, and martial artist.

What characterizes the Emei Zhengong style? How would you describe it?

The Emei Zhengong style combines the Confucian and Daoist traditions. This style includes the practices of mantra, mudra, movement and stillness Qigong, Chinese Medicine, and martial arts. It also contains elements of shamanism; for example, in Emei Zhengong we energize acupuncture needles and water for healing, and use specific mantras or mudras for self-healing. Another practice involves learning to connect with the master's energy and in this way connecting to the energy of the lineage and to the universe through the heart, and through other methods to improve energy and health and to attain enlightenment. These are some of the characteristics of Emei Zhengong style Qigong.

Along with Emei Zhengong, you also studied Dragon Gate Qigong. Can you tell us something about this style?

Dragon Gate Qigong is similar to Emei Zhengong in that it is also an internal alchemy school. The focus, however, is more concentrated on the lower dantien, with the goal of creating an internal elixir to sustain vitality and long healthy life. Dragon Gate is more body-centered than Emei Zhengong and Dragon Gate school also includes internal martial arts. My Dragon Gate teacher, Master Pei, was a famous martial artist as well as a respected doctor of Chinese Medicine. He was a prolific writer who published many articles and wrote at least twenty books on martial arts and Qigong. During my time with him, I helped him with much of the writing and editing. We were working on a book about martial arts theory when he died in 1999. I finished it just two days before I left for the United States.

How many books have you written or worked on with your teachers?

So far, I have written four books. The first book I wrote by myself. It is called *Qigong and Your Life* (1996). The other books I wrote with Master Pei and they are *The Origins of Taiji and Bagua Symbolism and the Concept of Building Health and Nourishing Life* (2000), *Wudang Taiji and the Twenty Methods of Intertwining Hands* (2001), and *The Shaolin Tradition's Seventy-two Movement Exercise and the Mt Wudang Tradition's Sixteen Movement Qigong Form* (2001). Of course, all of these books are in Chinese and haven't been translated into English. I am planning to do some writing in English.

We're glad to hear that. Let's talk about the Wudang He taiji style you practice. Not many Americans have heard of it.

The Wudang He style is a powerful taiji form. It looks soft, but the energy is very powerful. It was developed by a Daoist monk named Zhang San Feng. I read his book *Zhang San Feng Quan Ji* in the 1980s, but didn't practice the form very much because I wanted to do it the right way. Later, I met my teacher, Master Yang Rong Ji, who had studied with Grandmaster Zhen Wu Qin. At the time, Master Zhen had some 1000 students and Master Yang was his best student. The first time I talked with Master Yang, he gave me some very powerful ideas that were very much in line with my earlier reading. Master Yang was a venerated teacher, but he treasured his knowledge in a traditional way and preferred to teach only a few students rather than large groups. Many students pleaded with him to teach them, but he only agreed to teach eight students

in his whole life. He discovered that I was a good student and selected me to study with him. I followed him as a lineage student beginning in 1993.

How does the Wudang He Style Taiji differ from the Yang, Wu, and Chen styles that most Americans are familiar with? Your Wudang He looks very different, but what about its principles?

I'd say the Wu style ideas are probably more similar to Wudang He, but I think the Qigong principles are essentially the same regardless of the style. Taiji is like Qigong and is a way of expressing the Dao through movement. The important thing is to follow the master's instructions because a master gives you the right guidance, and you practice in the right way. The Wudang He form does look different at each level of training. For example, in the beginning the key is to hold the posture exactly as the master instructs in order to align with universal energies and to follow the way of the universe. With this style, it is important to open your body and go to the limit. This allows you to feel the energy moving through your body. The main difference between Wudang He and other forms can be seen in the training style.

Can you describe the Xinyi internal martial arts?

"Xin" means heart and "yi" means mind. In China, we call it Dai Shi Xin Yi Quan. I began studying Xinyi in 1997 and became a lineage holder in 2000. It was my Xinyi teacher, Master Zhaoj Shou Rong, who encouraged me to teach Xinyi style in the United States.

Xinyi is a martial arts style. I think the true meaning of martial arts is not widely understood, nor is how to attack and defend. The term "martial arts" in Chinese is Wu Shu. The Chinese character "Wu" translates into English as "martial" and its original meaning is "to stop fighting." "Shu" means "art" or "method." The most skilled martial artists not only find it unnecessary to kill, but will also stop others from fighting. All of the traditional martial arts methods were developed by observing and imitating the universe and the natural world. The ancient sages discovered that the function of Heaven is to protect and preserve all life and to give birth to the ten thousand things, so the spiritual goal of the martial artist is to follow the Heavenly way, the way of peace. The methods practiced in martial arts are designed to help us understand the Dao.

In Xinyi style, the same form can be expressed in different ways, sometimes soft and sometimes hard. The important first step is to learn standing practice where you unify yourself with the universe and return to the Dao, to the emptiness, or to what we call in Qigong and internal alchemy the "prenatal state." You focus on storing energy in your lower dantien in this style; the theory is the same as the teachings of the internal alchemy schools.

You are the lineage holder for four different schools of Qigong and martial arts. Could you explain how the Chinese lineage system works?

Yes, I carry four different lineages. China's traditional arts and disciplines continue to be passed on within the time-honored discipleship system, wherein the acknowledged master of a given

discipline instructs a close-knit circle of chosen students. Near the end of the master's life, the master selects the next "lineage holder" who will be responsible for the preservation of the entire system of knowledge.

Can you tell us about your work in the Classical Chinese Medicine (CCM) Department at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine (NCNM) and your approach to healing?

I teach Qigong, taiji, and other martial arts like Xinyi and Bagua to students, staff, and people from the community. I also see patients in the college clinic. In working with patients, I draw on my Qigong, taiji, martial arts, and Chinese medicine background, but it is difficult to explain. None of my masters taught me specific methods for healing patients using my external qi. In fact, we did not talk specifically about healing techniques. Rather, my healing methods have emerged from my understanding of the principles of healing, which might best be described using the metaphor of a tree.

Every tree has roots and branches that divide into smaller and smaller branches that extend outward and eventually form the outer tips of the tree. Sometimes, the first indication of a problem can be detected by signs of disease at the tips. Other times, there will be no indication of a problem at the tips, but a disease may be active deeper in the organism at the root. If we attempt to heal by grasping for the tips of the tree, we may be only treating the surface problem. If we want to keep the tree healthy, we must treat the root and the trunk, because when we keep the roots and the trunk healthy, then the whole tree thrives. For this reason, it is important to grasp the deeper principles of Qigong.

As I face new patients, I use my intuition to find an effective way to work with them. I usually get an idea or some feeling about what kind of approach is needed and how to do it. At this point, I reflect on what works well and what does not work well and find a right way to proceed. This knowing has come from many years of practice and experience.

Patients with a wide variety of conditions and concerns come to me at the clinic. Right now, I am working with some patients suffering from cancer, diabetes, and other acute conditions. I also see people who have less serious problems, such as sports related injuries, with good, immediate results. For example, in China I worked with a patient whose thigh had been injured while playing soccer. He was treated with different methods including massage, external qi healing, and Western medicine, but his condition worsened over time. His thigh muscle slowly hardening into bone, the doctors diagnosed muscle calcification and recommended surgery. This option was rejected by the patient because it would have resulted in restricted range of motion in the affected leg. I gave him one external qi healing every week for seven weeks. I also advised him to practice Qigong while I was working with him. In addition to seeing him weekly, I conducted long-distance healings for half an hour every day. After these seven weeks, the patient totally recovered and regained full use of his leg.

Working with patients in the US is different here from the way I worked with patients in China. There I allowed patients to just follow me and practice with me. Here, I usually see them only one day per week. I talk with some of them and give them advice to guide their Qigong practice, but some people do not practice -- and this is unfortunate because recovery can be easier for

those who practice. Doing Qigong practice sends energy through the body. It is like putting special herbs or medicine in the body that facilitate healing. From the Daoist perspective, qi is the best medicine in the world, so I advise patients to keep practicing and to hold the energy.

What are your goals for your teaching in the CCM program?

At NCNM we are starting a National Qigong Training Program for people from everywhere this coming September. There will be two five-day intensives, one in the fall, and one in the spring. This is a comprehensive three-year program that will include many styles of Qigong, Wudang He taiji, sitting meditation, mudras, and mantras. We also plan to bring in some elements of calligraphy, music, Feng Shui, four-pillar-five-elements Chinese astrology, and the use of food and herbs. The intensives will be held in beautiful settings at the Oregon Coast and in the Cascade Mountains.

The Great Dao has no boundary. My hope is that people from all walks of life will come to understand the Great Dao and benefit from the knowledge and qi field I carry. One of my masters wrote a phrase in my notebook as he transferred his lineage to me. It reads: “Ti tian xing dao.” This means, “The Dao is being transferred on behalf of the heavens.” This is a heavy burden for me to carry on my shoulders. I am trying my best to give people the help they need.

The training program sounds exciting, and we wish you well in this endeavor. Is it true that you are also writing a Qigong textbook?

Yes, I’m just starting to write a Qigong textbook. I want to write about the more cherished aspects of Qigong practice. Qigong is the essence of the ancient Chinese culture; it is not just a technique. I want people to understand the ancient knowledge of traditional Chinese culture and the close relationship between Chinese Medicine and Qigong. This ancient knowledge comes from ancient Chinese shamanism. By understanding this, you can more easily understand what has happened in your body and what has happened in the universe at different times. Through practice and understanding the principles, you can change your thinking, change your energy, change your body, and change your life.

Another reason I’m writing this book is that I want to provide accurate knowledge and ways to practice Qigong correctly. Although there are numerous books about Qigong in both English and Chinese, the quality and content of many of them is questionable. Some of these books contain inaccurate information. Sometimes they reverse things; sometimes they catch the tips rather than the roots. For instance, some books suggest that you should try to keep your mind quiet and not think when you practice. This is not only reversed, but also completely wrong. A quiet mind is the *result* of a solid Qigong practice continued over time. If a student does the practice, eventually the mind will become calm.

Another piece of incorrect information commonly found in some Qigong books is the admonition that women should stop practicing Qigong during their menstrual periods. This is completely wrong. Here, the writers did not catch the root or understand the right way to

practice. Misperceptions like this are spread as people copy what they see written and what they are told. What is needed is an understanding of the deeper principles. It is easy to be a follower at a superficial level; deeper knowledge comes only through practicing the right way.

Master Wu, we want to thank you for your time and wish you well in your teaching and writing.

Thank you.

This interview was conducted by Bob Quinn and Pamela Causgrove. Bob has published two previous interviews in *The Empty Vessel* and practices Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and Thai massage in Portland and Sandy, OR. Pamela is a writer, editor, communication consultant, and Qigong practitioner in Portland, OR.

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