

Meet Henry Cheng of Tai Chi Wellness Center and Art Gallery



SDVoyager

Henry Cheng

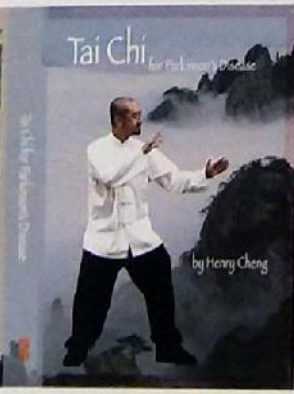
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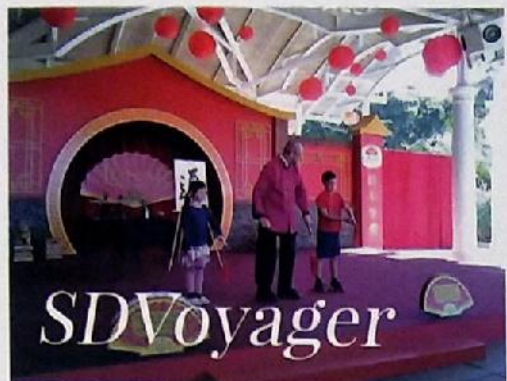
Today
we'd
like
to
introduce
you
to
Henry Cheng

So, before we jump into specific questions about the business, why don't you give us some details about you and your story.

I like my students to call me (老師) "Lou Si," instead of, (師傅) "Si Fu." Lou Si is more humble and implies teacher or coach whereas Si Fu is can be used for anybody, like taxi driver, plumber, or cook. I was born Hong Kong. When I was six years old, I studied Chinese calligraphy and painting with Master Pak Yu Kong and continued my studies with him in Tai Chi Chuan, when I was twelve. I followed the master to hiking and life drawing when I was very young. I still remember getting ink all over my hands and face at the very beginning.

I started by learning the different aspects of Chinese brush painting like how to make paper, how to make seal, how to use ink, how to use different brushes, how to suspend the wrist, how to support the wrist, how to frame the artwork, how to make wall couplets and how to decorate. I had to learn every subject about brush calligraphy and painting.





In 1968, I was very fortunate to start Tai Chi Chuan with Master Kong and I have studied it ever since. Traditionally, Tai Chi is handed down from master to student. The master only teaches the basics to regular students. He may perhaps find only one or two students in his whole lifetime who deserve to learn all that the master can teach and receive the honor of being the next generation's master. It is an honor that can only be passed directly from one master to another. In 1982, Master Kong, passed the title of, "Wu Style Tai Chi Fifth Generation Master," to me. In accepting that honor, I have committed my life to teaching Tai Chi to improve people's health and well-being. I teach real Tai Chi and adhere to the principles of the Tao. In this, I require my students to be humble, polite, affable and approachable – the same principles I require of myself.

I came to the United States in 1980. I was a blue-collar worker at the electric company, Sanyo. The company had given me a job that required me to lift 1000 refrigerators a day onto a conveyor belt in preparation for shipment. Needless to say, it was very exhausting. After working at Sanyo during the day, I would work as a waiter at a Chinese restaurant at night. In my spare time, I taught Tai Chi out of my garage and backyard. At the time, I worked like a machine, a human machine. As it became known in the community that I taught Tai Chi, some of the local community centers asked me to teach at their centers. I started to become very successful and soon was working for various fitness centers. Through word of mouth, people were learning about me and my classes, as one person would refer me to another, one job would be followed by the next.

After years of freelancing, I was finally able to open my own business. I chose the name, "Tai Chi Wellness Center," as I wanted to let people know this is the place for wellness. Not just a place to learn how to fight or violence. The Center now offers classes including beginning to advanced Tai Chi, self-defense, weapons (sword, saber and spear) and calligraphy. The Center is also an art gallery with Chinese calligraphy and artwork filling the walls.

During the 2008 economic crisis, many of my students left because they had lost their jobs. My business was slow too, which gave me more time to do calligraphy and painting. Oddly enough, this led to more business on Chinese Arts side of my work. People liked my art. I was invited to exhibit my artwork at UCSD, San Diego Zoo, Sea World and various other places. If you remain positive, everything will work out in the end. That is the approach I take to my America Dream.

The local and international media started interviewing me. My story and articles were published in newspapers, magazines and aired on TV. As a result of the attention, I was given the opportunity to work with the city, the YMCA of San Diego County and the National Arthritis Foundation to develop special curriculum and produce a video, "Tai Chi for Arthritis," which airs on PBS and other TV stations. Doctors nationwide and the Parkinson's disease Association of San Diego have also invited me to make a video, "Tai Chi for Parkinson's Disease." Further, San Diego State University gave me the opportunity to work with them on a research project to determine how Tai Chi affects bone density. I was also asked to teach Tai Chi to doctors and nurses at the Scripps Memorial Hospital Rehabilitation Center and to write a training manual, "Training Strategies for Rehabilitation Health Professionals."

With all this attention, my name continued to spread more and more. I am not just working as a Lou Si at the Tai Chi Wellness Center, but also invited by many organizations, universities, colleges, hospitals and clinics to teach, give lectures and workshops for Tai Chi, self-defense, wellness, Chinese brushwork and Taoism. These organizations include the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Research Center, San Diego County Parks and Recreation Center, Chinese Historical Museum, YMCA of San Diego County, The Arthritis Foundation, Parkinson's Disease Association of San Diego, Marriott Hotels, Center for Health and wellbeing, Johnson & Johnson, Nokia, Intuit, Girl Scouts of San Diego – Imperial Council, Sea World San Diego, San Diego Zoo, SK Sanctuary, White Sands La Jolla, Whole Food Market, Senior Olympics, UPAC and many more.



Overall, has it been relatively smooth? If not, what were some of the struggles along the way?

Tai Chi, calligraphy and painting represents some of the many traditions of China as well as my own philosophy. I spend a lot of time sharing it with people. In the 1980s, sharing this was very difficult mostly because the lack of exposure the everyday American had to Eastern Culture.

People knew about aerobic exercises, but not many were familiar with Tai Chi. Most people did not understand how a form of moving meditation that is relaxing, could be an exercise. I would knock on ten doors and nine would be slammed in my face. Still, I did not give up. If one person opened the door, it was a good day for me. All I needed was that one person to lead me to ten and from that ten to the next hundred referrals.

I know my work well and I worked hard to make it successful. I carried a briefcase like a salesman and went different Tai Chi schools to check on what their knowledge was. From this, I could compare and ensure that I made my teaching the correct way, the real way.

Tai Chi Wellness Center and Art Gallery – what should we know? What do you guys do best? What sets you apart from the competition?

I teach Tai Chi as described in the Tao and the Tai Chi Classics. These are ancient writings that are the authorities on the authentic Tai Chi principles and methods. There are three kinds of Tai Chi: Tai Chi Competition, Tai Chi Exercise and the real Tai Chi. Of these, I only teach real Tai Chi. With real Tai Chi, one pays great attention to detail and teaches people how to do the internal work for their benefit. My Center differs in many ways from other schools as most schools do not have a real master teaching the classes.

At the Center, there is only one master teaching and I teach all of the students personally. I teach without discrimination. Each student is taught the same. Also, many schools give tests and belts every few months and has become focused on a for-profit business model. The Tai Chi Wellness Center does not do this – we focus on wellness. There are no belts or tests. The equivalent to a belt at the Center is the knowledge the student has within. Students know how much they know and how much others know by how well they perform. Students advance by authentically grasping the teaching.

I am most proud that I do not just work at the Center, but I am also involved with many different organizations to give lectures, classes, demonstrations and workshops. I have been invited to produce Tai Chi videos, and have a television program which airs weekly nationally and internationally. Besides martial arts, I also teach calligraphy and Chinese brush painting. The Center's studio space also serves as an art gallery to these works. This makes the Center different from most in that it does not have an atmosphere of competition or aggression. It is a peaceful environment where people can arrive stressed and leave feeling, relaxed, light and happy. The artwork is a tool for healing, itself.

Chinese calligraphy and painting is closely related to Tai Chi. In Tai Chi, we do not block the chi so that it can flow freely through our bodies. Which enhances our physical health and mental well-being. In calligraphy and painting, we again are taught not to block our chi, thereby allowing the energy to flow throughout bodies, out to the brush and onto the paper giving the calligraphy and painting a beautiful, flowing look and feeling alive. The regular practice of calligraphy allows a sense of inner calm, putting aside distress.



What sets the Center apart most is that the majority of schools teach the external arts and differ from the Tao teachings. For example, Tai Chi does not use force, we use flow. The philosophy is clear, but many schools when teaching, use excessive force instead of the flow. I teach internal arts and the principles of Taoism. I teach my students in the way that matches the Tao philosophy. I teach everyone equally and ensure that the students grasp not just the form, but also the teaching and principles behind the form.

There are also many benefits from the real Tai Chi it reduces:

1. Risk of falling in older adults
2. Stress, anxiety and depression
3. Blood pressure
4. Joint pain

The real Tai Chi also improves:

1. Energy and stamina
2. Mood and overall well-being
3. Aerobic capacity
4. Flexibility, balance and agility
5. Muscle strength and definition
6. Sleep quality
7. Immune system function
8. Congestive heart failure symptoms
9. Self-defense

What is "success" or "successful" for you?

What I like about Tai Chi philosophy, calligraphy and painting, are how much healthier and calmer you can get. I did not call my Center, a Kung Fu School, dragon school or tiger school, but "Tai Chi Wellness Center," because I want to emphasize that it is a place of peaceful gathering. Written in Chinese, it means "Tai Chi study and resorts meeting point."

As a real master, if you understand the Tao philosophy correctly, it says that if you know the truth, you should say you know it. That is how you know that you are a good master. If you do not know the truth, you should say you do not know. That means you really understand. Do not claim you know, if you do not know. You would not be a good master but like a blind man riding a blind horse.

If you lie to your students, you do not give them the true meaning of the Tao, nor are you honest. If these students follow your misguided teaching and spread it to other students in the future, those people will not receive the real benefit of what is supposed to be taught. I do not support my students competing in competitions or flaunting their achievements. I strongly believe that being humble with life is the best way. I do not want people to praise how good my Kung Fu is.

I just want the people to know what is real Tai Chi, what is real Tao. If you can follow this simple, humble rule. It can be key to your success. That is why when people walk in the Center, we do not emit the feeling of a combatant Kung Fu school. We emit a feeling of peaceful tranquility, serenity, harmony, happiness and love. I hope you all enjoy my story.