

My initial meeting with Jan Silberstorff was at a Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe gathering in Prague in 2001. Of course the first thing that struck you was his unusual hairstyle which didn't quite fit with the general perception we have of serious taiji practitioners. His skill however was soon evidenced by those who partook of his workshops in push hands or, like me, had the opportunity of touching hands with him in a free-play scenario. I later included a feature in issue no. 16 of this magazine which covered the aspects he was teaching there.

Around that period I had reason to travel on a fairly regular basis to his hometown of Hamburg, Germany and I often dropped in to see him in his 'temple park.' During our conversations, which lasted some time, his students would be standing, just standing, never moving. Once our conversation was over Jan would do a few corrections adjustments and work would continue.

Being a regular teacher at Tai Chi Caledonia Jan always brings a quiet, understated depth to his work and engages openly, enthusiastically and authoritatively in debates. He recently released a book in English (Chen - Living Taijiquan in the Classical Style) which had enjoyed considerable success in his native Germany,



## an interview with **JAN SILBERSTORFF** by Ronnie Robinson

### How did you start with Taiji and what inspired you to take it up?

I was eight when I had my first experience with martial arts, having two weeks intensive training in Taekwondo every morning at 6 o'clock with an 8<sup>th</sup> degree black belt Korean teacher. Following that it was clear for me that martial arts will be my reson detra. But it took me 10 more years really to start. Encountering lots of street violence in my youth, finally I decided at the age of 18 to really to take up a martial art and to become better in self-defence.

I could have trained anything, but interestingly I ended up with Taijiquan, a martial art, which I thought was absolutely not the art that would increase my effectiveness in a street fight, but something, perhaps an inner voice made me stay.

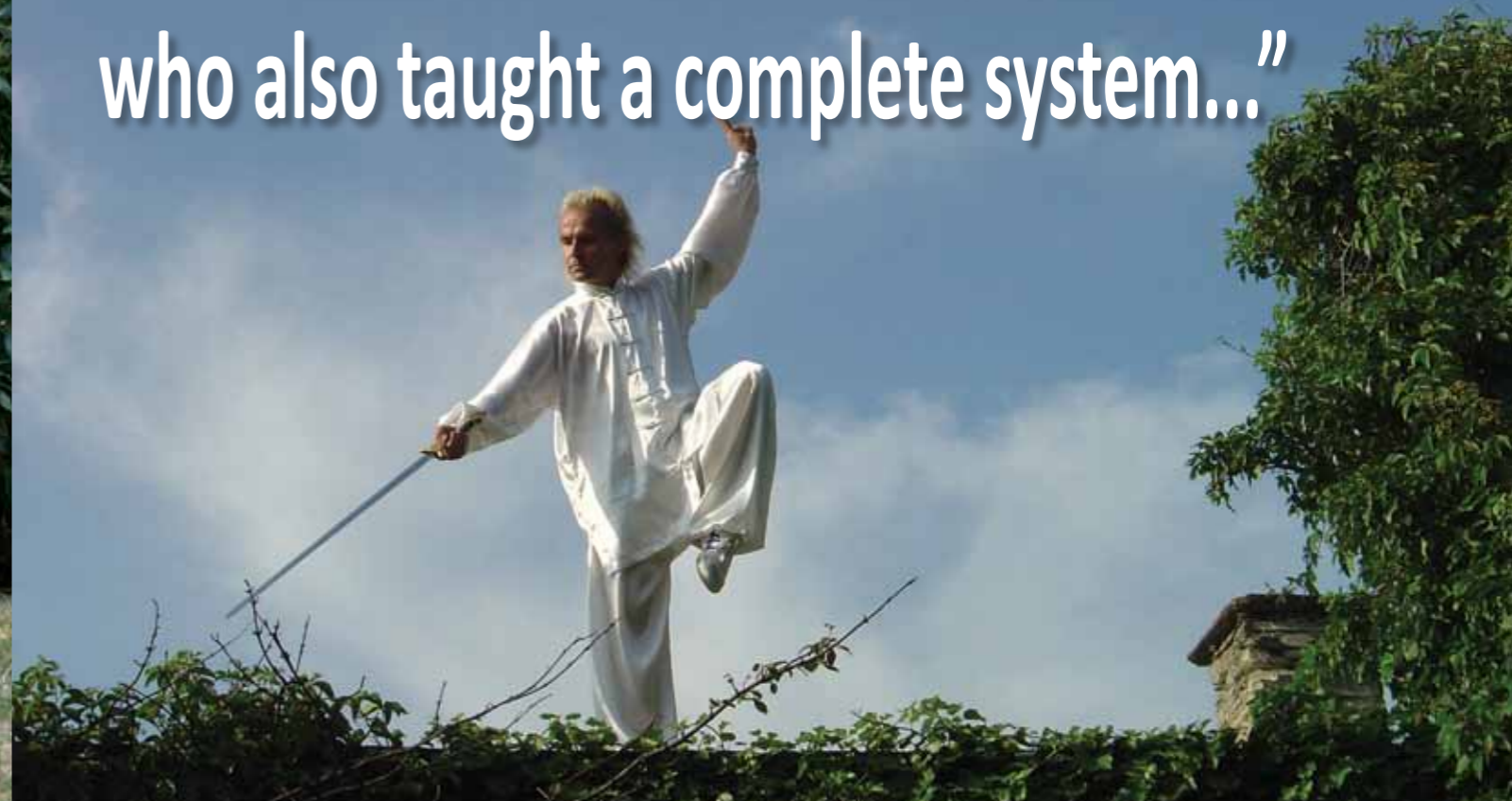
### When were you first introduced to Chen style and what was it that you found in this system that you couldn't find elsewhere?

The first year I started with Yang style. But young as I was, I could never understand, how these slow, soft movements could present any challenge for my street fighting 'adversaries'. Then I saw Chen style in a demonstration with all the fajing movements, jumps and so on and thought, young as I was, perhaps this was the 'real Taijiquan', the real martial art that I had sought from a young age? Of course this was stupid, but I loved the variety, quick and slow, soft and hard, so many weapons, lots of fighting etc. I was fascinated and started Chen style while still maintaining Yang style training too. My final decision to focus exclusively on Chen style was not a question of stylistic preference, as I loved both the same; rather it was borne of the teacher I found.

### How did you make contact with Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and what qualities did you have that allowed you to not only work so closely with him but also form the WCTAG Association.

My first teacher from Chenjiagou, Master Shen Xijing, introduced me to Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang in 1993. At that time, I was already winning many European tournaments, having been the first westerner to win a medal at Chenjiagou's famous tournament and also having written some articles in both German and Chinese magazines, which made me known within the martial arts community. I also spoke Chinese fluently at that time already, which has been a great help not just being understood, but by also being accepted in the Chinese community. When I first met Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang he already knew my and asked me to perform for him. After that, he said, that my form really looks good and that he could see how I won tournaments – but for real application it would be useless. If wanted to learn from him I would need to start again from the beginning. I immediately agreed and he accepted me as his first western disciple and allowed me to stay in his private house in Australia. When working so closely with him, we conceived the

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idea of a worldwide association; I gave him the idea to name it World Chen Xiaowang Taijiquan Association (WCTA). He agreed and I become the leader of the German branch (WCTAG). Prior to this, (for me) form and push hands were two different things without any great connection. But when I started with Chen Xiaowang it became a complete unit and the form training improved the push hands tremendously.

### How many years have you been training, how much time do you train and how do you divide your training schedule between all the aspects of your curriculum?

Before I met Chen Xiaowang, I had already trained 8 years concurrently in both Yang- and Chen style as well as Tanglang, Shaolin, Xingyi-, Baguazhang, several Qigongs, Tuina and Anmo and Philippine Escrima. When I became Chen Xiaowang's disciple, I decided to give up everything else up as I realized that I'd found what I was looking. I knew that everything I had previously trained, although very good, were merely steps on my journey to find what I really needed from Taiji. When I met Grandmaster Chen I felt I had found a teacher with exceptional quality who also taught a complete system and I therefore had no need to look for anything else. Since the age of 18 I have always tried to train all day long, with interruptions only for my teaching and writings. I have now been training in this way for 24 years. I practice sitting and standing meditation as well as Chen

style qigong in the morning and all the forms and explosive exercises in the afternoon and evening. When I meet friends, I train push hands.

### Can you talk a little about the training schedule your students would undergo (or does it vary from student to student)?

Here I differentiate between two kinds of students. Firstly there are those who just like to do something for their health, have a worthy hobby and do something good for themselves and for others. This is very good, so I let them practice as they like. But those, who like to train all the aspects, as professionals, need to practice from morning to evening at least 8 hours a day with literary studies in their free times. In short they have full time practice. To make this possible, I founded the so called "temple park" in Hamburg around ten years ago. Here the students can live and practice together in our center, where we have huge library for books and videos for the evening studies, with the park close by for the daytime training.

### Can you outline what the various aspects of your system do, detailing things like structure, intent, relaxation etc.?

Our system is clearly structured, beginning with body structure training, followed by simple movements which enable this good structure to be maintained. Afterwards students need to develop the internal energy work in these movements. This is all part of our Chen style

qigong, which also includes standing meditation and the two reeling silk sets. Through this training the student develops an understanding the basics of structure and energy work. Once they have attained this on a good level, they need to integrate it in their forms to train the outer strengthening along with the inner alchemy on a much higher level. Thereafter, the explosive forms, push hands, weapons and sitting meditations need to be trained. The whole system is like a puzzle, where every piece sticks to the next one and everything works together to create the full picture. It is very logical system, where you work step by step to train your body and mind in a way that you really understand the Taiji-principle in whole body motion and spiritual experience, which is the root of the art. It really is a system, created over many centuries, not just something here and something there.

### Can you talk about the benefits, or otherwise, to be gained from the many ways in which Chen (as well as other systems) are practiced. For example some practitioners have really deep stances whilst others don't. What, if anything, can we deduce from observing the external aspects of a practitioner's performance of a form, (aside from obvious postural inaccuracies)?

The general benefits are good spiritual and health development by strengthening the body at a high level, effectiveness for self defence. Often you can only see what your own level allows you to. In the beginning you are training



to develop an accuracy of the outer movements, later the inner energy work, with the combination of the “three external and three internal harmonies” - the unity of mind-, muscle- and energy work. You will discover what our founder Chen Wangting states: “I know everybody while nobody knows me. But honestly said, you can only understand and see, what you by yourself have already gained. So – what you can see in yourself – you can see within others. Therefore only these ‘own’ abilities can make you able to correct and teach others. Without your own level of Gongfu – you cannot see or teach others.

**How important is a historical and philosophical education for the Taiji practitioner and how does this aspect of education feature in your teaching?**

Of course it is, it is very important to understand the deeper levels and meanings of the systems. Only if the theory is clear can progress be made. How many people train Taijiquan without reasonable progress just because they are not really clear about how to train correctly? Clear theory and clear practice need to come together.

**How many regular students do you train and how many teachers do you have?**

I train in all about three thousand students and have developed around 200 teachers on 4 different teaching levels.

**As the Chen style grows in popularity do you see differences in the various ways it is taught? For example, are there big differences between how Chen Xiao Wang and Chen Zheng Lei teach?**

Of course there are differences. Chen style has so many different dialects, so many different personalities of teachers, so many different levels. But we are all one family and this family is not only about Chen style, but about all the different Taiji styles in general and in the end about all the different martial arts ultimately about the whole human community in general. So there is no need to think one is better than another. Chen style, Yang style, Wustyle etc, all the other internal and external styles, all human beings in general, we all work towards the same goal which is to understand life better and to have a better life. And everybody has good things to add. My personal experience with Chen Xiaowang is his outstanding level and his perfect clear way of teaching and correcting as well as being a wonderful warmhearted person who really lives “wu de”. For me, he is completely what we imagine if we think about what a “Grandmaster” should be.

**Do you have any views on the Tai Chi for Health and Chen qigong systems that are now being taught?**

Whatever people do is good. But of course those with a deeper interested need to look for teachers, who really understand their subject. I trained 8 years so many different things, just because it took that long to find a teacher who really could teach me the system completely, not only through his knowledge, but also through his capacity. I was doing so many things because I felt there was something missing in my Taiji. But when I found my teacher, everything was there, there was no longer any need for me to do different things - everything was there and there was nothing more to look for, just to practice. Too many teachers only know their system half way. But for only half interested students this is ok. They meet together. However, if you want to gain what is meant by “Gongfu” – than you need something more: A perfect teacher and perfect practice!

**How do you feel about the 20 square km development planned for Chenjiagou?**

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In the beginning I was very skeptical, because I knew the old Chenjiagou and didn't want to lose it. But now I see that it is very correct to do. The switch for the future of Chen style being a worldwide art was made and it makes Chenjiagou able to deal with this. Also the living standard of the villagers will become much better. But I'm proud of knowing the old Chenjiagou of course and I will always explain to students who travel to Chenjiagou: “Yes, it is great here, but you know – in my times – everything was much better and more original.” So I will become more conservative in the future (laughing)!

**What are your views on competition and how do they differ around the world?**

Tournaments are good to test yourself. It is not about the pride of winning or losing. But it helps you to really see where you are and not to ride on “pink clouds”. But it should be only a phase in your Taiji development. If you do it too long, I think, it might hinder your spiritual development as you will be too much into the sporting aspects. Tournaments differ a lot all around the world but what is important is that the rules are very clear and objective. They should not depend on the personal subjectivity of a judge. The judges should just follow the rules, not their own opinion. The fighting rules should allow other styles to take part so that we can check our abilities, not only in our own styles, which can make our techniques too much system conditioned. Remember, in self defence, we will mainly not be fighting Taiji practitioners.

**What, in your opinion is the real essence of Taijiquan, its ultimate purpose?**

Born as a martial art, this will always be the essence, but the goal is higher. It is the spiritual transformation of both mental and physical health and the development of a peaceful enlightened person. The goal is to make the world better and not stay on the beginning level of wishing to fight. It starts with fighting as our animalistic instinct but ends with no fighting but love. Man is because of earth. Earth is because of heaven. Heaven is because of Dao and Dao is because of itself (Daodejing). This journey is the goal: - “to develop from man to immortal.”

**You helped to make a film about Taiji and its origins, how was that experience and what did you really want to show? (Will we ever see it with English subtitles?)**

Actually we did two films which were broadcast several times in Germany and some other countries. The idea was to show Taijiquan in all its aspects, give a good theoretical introduction about all what I said above, but for a normal citizen, so that they may have a good feeling and better understanding about Taijiquan. The film helped a lot to make our work that we were doing outside in the parks more understandable for those people regularly walking by. It showed Taijiquan in its original location in China and helped to build the bridge between east and west which is my main work – to make Taijiquan deeply understandable to the west. With these films I had a chance to document my own way and training in China as well as the development of what I brought from there to the west. I hope it can inspire and motivate people also, to start with Taijiquan as well as practice more seriously. Hopefully we will have it in English soon!  
**How important is knowledge of acupuncture points and meridians to training Taiji?**





Taijiquan sticks exactly to the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory. Every piece of knowledge is relevant here. On the other hand it is not developed by TCM Masters but by martial artists. So, the theory is very similar, but the root is not the same. Knowledge in TCM is helpful but not essential. It is more important to have a deep perception of our inner body. It is not so important to be able to explain all the areas by scientific names. Neither Chen Changxing nor Yang Luchan could do this. In teaching this might be helpful, but not the outside ability of explaining with words, rather the inside experience of truth is what makes for high level ability. By reaching a high level, you will be also able to explain understand and explain the deeper sense, without necessarily using technical terms but more in an authentic way of experience. So – to know the theory of TCM is helpful, but to feel it, is much better. “Experience is all!”

**The Chen Xin (Illustrated Canon of Chen Family Taijiquan) is a substantial piece of work which diagrams each posture with in-depth information on every aspect of the body, do you and/or other Chen practitioners really work at this level when training?**

We have only had this book for a very short time in a non-Chinese language. My friend Oleg Tcherne organized for it to be translated into English, which is great for the western community. Everybody should study the book, as it has so much deep information. For me it is definitely one of the very best books about Taijiquan. Since I began training it has become the main source of classical Taiji texts. From year to year you can understand more and more of the text. As you experience it!

**Push hands is a particularly controversial**

**aspect of Taiji with many notions and ideas as to how it should be practiced, what its purpose is and how it should be trained. What are your views on this aspect?**

If you are interested in the traditional art, Tuishou is good following a foundation in forms and is important for practice. But the form will always be most important, especially when seeking proficiency in push hands. Chen Fake is transmitted as having trained 90% form and only 10% push hands, but he is named as the strongest fighter. It is essential that the form should be trained very correctly and you need to train the form a lot. In the long run, this gives you the highest level. For a short period in the beginning pushing around might seem to develop your skill to be quicker. However training mainly in push hands can engender a more limited ability. Don't forget that Chen Fake is known for training whole day so even the 10 % might be at least half an hour a day. Push hands is one of the most effective training methods in Chen style for fighting. But also it can give you a lot of information's about social behaviour and people's energy in general, as I stated in my last book “pushing hands”.

**What are your views on Taijiquan as a realistic martial art system?**

In the beginning I thought Taijiquan was the only martial art, which had no effectiveness in fighting. Later I thought it is absolutely the best one. Now I think, every system is very good if you have a teacher with deep understanding and you are willing to work hard on it! When I started, I saw my friends practicing external martial arts and I thought: “How can I ever beat their speed and power with my slow motion soft exercises?” After some time I found out,

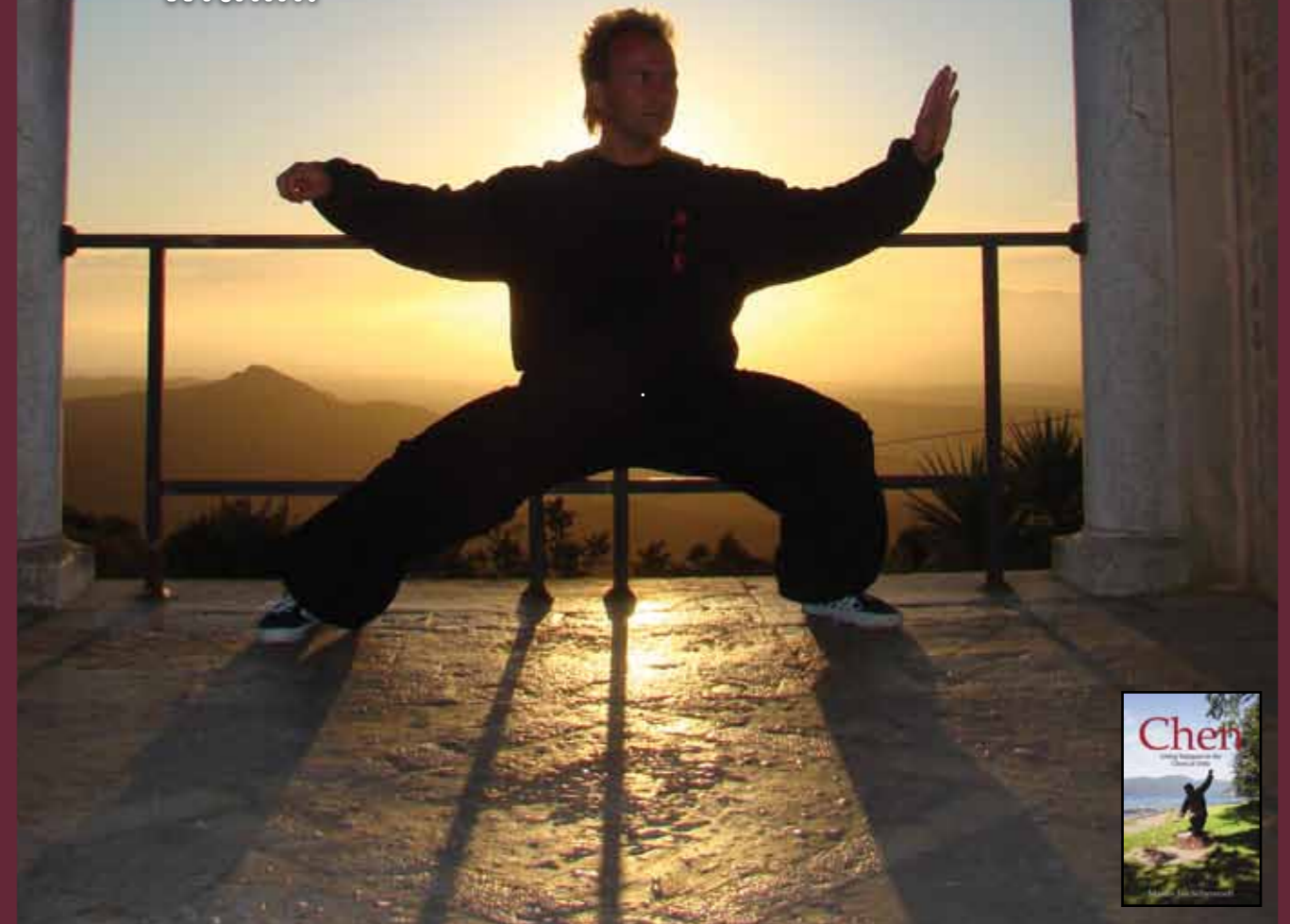
that exactly the soft and slow motions made me really able to feel myself deep inside, to realize all my power and energy within. At that time I thought, how can the external system ever reach such a level by only moving quick and fast? There would be no time for the development of sensitivity which is needed for that understanding. But today, being grown up and having lots of good friends in all martial art systems and seeing their good skills, I think: Have a good teacher and train hard: That will give you all you need – gong fu! Whatever people think - Taijiquan is a real and highly effective martial art system – if you train it correctly!

**Finally, the question which I feel many would like to ask but haven't, - Why the haircut?**

In my teenage times I liked the punk scene. Later I let my hair grow, but I did not change the style in any way because I was used to it. In the beginning people told me that Taiji is of no use and I thought - ok, because you are saying this I will train hard to show you that it is! For my haircut lots of people told me in the beginning - you will not be successful with this look. Again I thought - ok, I will show you it will work. But for real, it is of no meaning. Whether to cut it to fulfil people's stereo-typical of the appearance of a master, I would rather not to cut to show off - I do not feel the need for change because it is of no importance. One day my hair will fall out and the people will think: now I am enlightened!

Jan is based in Germany and travels the world extensively teaching Chen Style Taiji. [www.wctag.de](http://www.wctag.de) & [www.cxwta.com.br](http://www.cxwta.com.br)

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The World Chen Taijiquan Association Germany has created a charitable Foundation to assist those in need in Brasil (where Jan also has a centre) and elsewhere. The site is currently in German but is being developed also in English. Visit: [www.wctag-hilft.de](http://www.wctag-hilft.de)

Jan's new book is published by Singing Dragon at £15.99 and a full review will be in our next edition