

Chatting Tai Chi with Sifu Kai Hung Lau

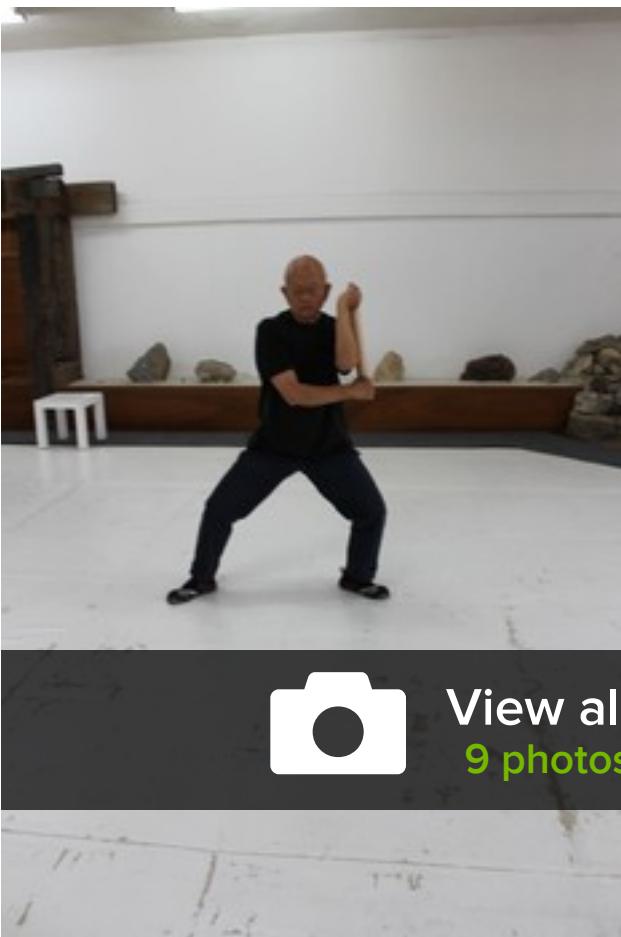
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I saw Sifu Kai Hung Lau of Cupertino, CA, a few years ago before I had started writing on [Tai Chi \(Taiji\)](#). Recently, at the introduction of Sifu Justin Meehan of St. Louis, I had an opportunity to speak with him about the art that we are both passionate about.



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Violet Li



Justin Meehan

Born in Canton, China in 1945, Sifu Lau came to the U.S. in 1968. He has been a research scientist of Physical Chemistry at prestigious Stanford Research Institute (SRI) for decades. His wife worked a night shift and he had to take care of their three daughters after work. Feeling exhausted, he followed some advice and started to learn Tai Chi to increase his energy level. He felt in love with the art immediately. He studied Standing Post, Da Chen Quan (Boxing), Yang Style Tai Chi, Chen Style Tai Chi, and Xin Yi Hun Yuan Chen Style Tai Chi. He considered himself fortunate and had opportunities to study with some of the best Tai Chi masters of our time, which include the Four Warriors of Chen Tai Chi Grandmasters Zhu Tiancai, Chen Zhenglei, Chen Xiaowang, and Wang Xian, Chen Style Grandmaster Chen Qingzhou, and Standing Post Grandmaster Chen Zhengzhong (in Hong Kong and with no relationship to the Chen Tai Chi family), late Grandmaster Feng Zhiqiang (1928-2012), and Grandmaster Zhang Xuexin.

But he wasn't always lucky. He admitted that it took him four years to realize that he was learning fake Chen style Tai Chi and his instructor did not even know Silk Reeling or *Chan Si Jin*, which is the foundation of Chen Style Tai Chi. With that, he focuses on Silk Reeling in his own teaching. He taught a couple of workshops of Silk Reeling during his recent trip to St. Louis. Kai instructed workshop attendees using a Tai Chi Bang (staff) to fully understand how *Chan Si Jin* should be maneuvered. Through constantly turning the Tai Chi Bang, participants could feel how their wrists, elbows, shoulders, waist, and *Kaos* (hip joints) rotate. According to Kai, Tai Chi Bang was originally designed by the 14th Generation Chen Style Grandmaster **Chen Fa-Ke** with knobs on both ends of a staff (see a photo in the slide show). With the center of the knob against the pressure point Labor Palace (*Lao Gong*), it can improve the health of the internal organs while turning. Chen Fa-Ke's Tai Chi Bang exercise

encompasses 14 movements. Kai said that Tai Chi Bang is also a great regimen to practice Joint Lock (*Chin Na*). Other masters later followed the same concept and developed similar training regimens for other purposes, for example Grandmaster Feng Zhiqiang's Tai Chi Ruler was designed for *Qigong* practice (see a video link here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B453Dm_1mg8). True Silk Reeling is not limited to external circling movements expressed by the hands, arms, legs, and body. Kai emphasized the importance of spiraling (or silk reeling) one's Qi while keeping a proper posture during all Tai Chi movements. He stated that "Suspending the Head" (*Xu Ling Ding Jin*) and "Keeping the body upright" (*Li Shen Zhong Zheng*) all require spiraling the Qi. Kai commented that many people bobbing or tilting their heads while doing Tai Chi lack *Xu Ling Ding Jin* and Central Equilibrium (*Zhong Ding*). In Tai Chi, there are sayings that, "if you want to aim the left, go to the right first (*Yu Zuo Xian You*)", "if you want to aim the right, go to the left first (*Yu You Xian Zuo*)", "if you want to aim high, go low first (*Yu Shang Xian Xia*)", and "if you want to aim low, go high first (*Yu Xia Xian Shang*)". Sifu Kai explained these are applications of Silk Reeling. Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui, who was Grandmaster Chen Fa-Ke's son, taught Kai's teacher Zhang Xuexin Tai Chi Bang. Kai shared a story about how Chen Zhao Kui kept a few bangs around his house and even one underneath his pillow so he could practice it often or whenever his heart desired.

Tai Chi is an art and it is difficult to articulate exactly how it should be executed. It is hard enough to express in Chinese let alone in English. Kai said that *Han Xiang* is commonly misunderstood. It has been translated as Hollowing or Tucking the Chest and many practitioners concave their chest that can result the Qi stuck in the chest. The proper posture should involves gently rolling the shoulders back and down but not pulling them backwards so the center point *Shan Zhong* between the nipples will not stick out.

He traveled to China seven times to study directly from Grandmaster Feng Zhiqiang. He often took private lessons. Grandmaster Feng advised him that the secret of good Tai Chi could be boiled down to three Chinese characters: *Song, Song, and Song* or relax, relax, and relax.

Sifu Kai started teaching in 1997. He now teaches seven classes per week and has approximately 50 students. He teaches for free. Some instructors hold a view that when students do not pay they have little commitment to learning and can create a difficult situation for teachers to maintain a curriculum. Kai has a different perspective toward this. He commented that teaching helps to grow his own knowledge of the art and he loves students' questions. He wants to provide the health benefits of practicing the art to whoever wants to learn. Teaching for free affords him to teach the way he sees fit for his students. Ninety five percent of his students learn for health's sake and 20 of them have been studying with him for over 20 years and his oldest student is 92.

Kai is not a disciple of Grandmaster Zhang, but he respects Zhang no less than any disciple. For years, Kai paid his own way to accompany Zhang to various cities in the U.S. as an interpreter. He opens up his arms and offers hospitality to any Tai Chi brothers and sisters who study with Zhang directly or

indirectly. When he learned of Feng's death in May 2012, he went to Beijing to pay a final tribute at the funeral. This time he flew himself to St. Louis to teach free workshops. Kai exemplifies Martial ethics (or *Wude*) and received the honorific of "Hunyang Wude Paragon" from Chinese Internal Arts Association & Mid-West Hun Yuan Center.

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Violet Li

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