

## **The Road**

### **(On Touring Tai Chi)**

Sam Masich

#### **Morning has broken**

Before this particular tour I had been meaning to buy a new pair of blue jeans as my last pair were rather awkwardly ventilated in an unfortunate Chen style squatting-split incident. I haven't found the time to do this before leaving Vancouver and so am hoping that I might get to a GAP store (regrettably the only place I can seem to find jeans to fit my Tai Chi thighs) when I get to Ontario.

It's early. And as almost anyone who knows me knows, I'm not an early riser. Actually I'm an outright nighthawk and it's usually at about midnight that my creative juices really start to flow. I've been that way since boyhood, notwithstanding several failed efforts to change this tendency. Some people have a problem with it. Tai Chi teachers are supposed to awaken in the predawn to welcome with alertness, the sun as it silhouettes their poetic gestures. Instead, at 5 am, I'm falling asleep after hours of writing or thrashing on a guitar. For the past week however, here in Madrid, I've been waking up at odd hours as a result of jet lag.

This is the last week of a six week teaching tour which has seen ten workshops, fifteen private lessons and a couple informal concerts in eight different cities in central Canada, the USA and Spain. During this time I've adjusted to seven different beds, (one too springy, one just a little bit short and another with *very* polyester blankets. Seven is also the number of shower configurations I've mastered without getting scalded once. I've shared my space with several cats including, *Cinder, Lulu and Jinx.*

It's a strange way of life in many ways but I really love the work and the people. For nearly 20 years I've been a sort of high-tech *Kwai Chang Cain*, roaming the earth with my sword, guitar (and lately), laptop. Along with various and sundry mantic wisdoms from the East, I teach Chinese Internal Martial Arts, mainly Tai Chi, as well as Qigong 'Seminars'. At times I give theatre, guitar or songwriting workshops, and perform concerts either as a solo singer-songwriter or with my trio *FFM*. I've taught and performed in well over one hundred cities in *Canada, U.S.A., Mexico, China, Germany, Austria, Switzerland* and *Spain*. I guess this is somehow in the tradition of wandering martial artists, minstrels and performers from bygone days. I am generally 'on the road' well over half the year, mainly teaching Tai Chi.

#### **You'd be so nice to come home to**

I generally prefer to stay in peoples' homes rather than in hotels. It saves money for the organizer and more importantly, lets me get to know the people I work with better. Since I usually visit my students repeatedly, over the years I have gotten to know many of my host's homes and neighbourhoods well enough to feel relaxed and surprisingly settled for my usually short visits. The first thing I do when I'm shown my bedroom is make it feel like mine. Here is where my books go, here is where my clothes go (I'm always grateful if there is an empty drawer or some free hangers in a closet!), here a space for my alarm clock. I clear a space for my computer and find a corner to

lean my guitar which is always unpacked immediately assuming I have brought it with me. Some folks make sure there is a guitar in my room because they know I like to play a little before and after sleep. If there is a clean towel, a bottle of water, a box of tissues, some fruit or crackers waiting in my room, I'm thrilled. It's amazing how much easier these little things make life on the road.

Of course staying with workshop participants means that I'm with people 24 hours a day and in a sense am always 'on stage'. Aside from at the seminar itself, I'm also with people at meals ("I think you'll be surprised at how good our local Chinese restaurant is!") and in vehicles shuttling between the airport, seminar hall and at my host's home. During a 15 minute break in a workshop I'm generally quickly surrounded by people who want to ask a few questions, offer feedback, relay a short story or ask where I'd like to go for lunch. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, in fact I wouldn't have it any other way. Some teachers feel they need to stay in a hotel as being 'on' constantly in this fashion can be quite draining after a while. Me, I prefer the personal contact and feel enriched by experiencing something of the lives and perspectives of my students. Still, I crave space from time to time as I find much of my inspiration in solitude. In my twenties I used to be happy on a couch in someone's living room, now I need a room with a door for people to knock on gently.

### **A few of my favourite things**

Packing for a tour like this is a fairly complex thing, especially if I bring T-shirts, sweatshirts, videos, CD's, hats and swordbags to sell to students at events. Other important considerations are, length of trip, mode of travel and luggage combinations. There is the 'two-day-bag *versus* week-long-bag *versus* long -tour-bag decision; the 'plain laptop bag *versus* the laptop/camera bag (*versus* not taking the computer or camera at all) decision; the 'hard-shelled, bulletproof guitar case (heavy) *versus* much lighter soft-shelled guitar case (vulnerable)' decision; and of course the 'do I pack an *at-the-seminar-merchandise-carrying-to-and-fro bag* or do I just find a box at my host's house' decision to be made. I'm still searching for the perfect four day over head bag . I had just found an ideal large travel bag with two compartments to suit my purposes but as of late the airlines changed their rules on luggage sizes and weights due to gas prices.

The process is something like this. *"If I use a separate bag for my personal clothes and bring my guitar, the airline will charge me another hundred dollars for extra baggage. Should I try to borrow a guitar on the road? Should I cram my personal clothes in with the T-shirts and videos? Or perhaps not take my computer/camera bag as carry on baggage so I can bring my months worth of clothes on the plane instead."* Not that 2 or 3 pairs of pants, 6 T-shirts, a pair of training shoes and a toiletries bag take up a huge amount of space, but combined with a couple books (Chomsky tomes can be quite large), packets of workshop handouts and various gifts for hosts/organizers/friends, space becomes a premium. I usually bring 8 or more pairs of socks because you never know how laundry time will work out and wearing icky, taught-in socks for 3 days is the worst. Ultimately I can't resist the lure of having my beautiful guitar handy for moments of leisure and besides, I've got a house concert in London, Ontario with another singer-songwriter there, so I'll need to really practice. Thus, at 4 am before my 9 am flight I'm frenetically repacking

everything, tossing out T's and vids that are less likely to sell, paring down my wardrobe by a couple shirts and eliminating one or more of the books I was hoping to read. And forget about packing swords along these days.

Of course the ensuing mess will be waiting for me when I get back to my home in Vancouver and I'll likely sort it all out while unpacking. Ideally I'll try to do this ASAP upon arrival back home. I'll sift through all the miscellaneous knickknacks acquired from the tour; *receipts, airline tickets, mailing list names, video orders, gifts and articles of interest from students, posters from workshops, souvenirs, new books etc.* In the past I would come back from a workshop or tour and pile all this stuff in a heap by the door and after a few days hit the road again, not having sorted anything. After a year of repeating this behaviour, piling road artefacts one top of another, I would have to do something akin to an archaeological dig, and could rediscover my year through the anthill shaped paper maze as I searched for receipts, lost video orders or that article on 'Sung' that someone gave me. Now I know to organize to this in advance and I pack several manila envelopes. It's a big set of small considerations every single time and I always forget something.

### **Unforgettable, that's what you are...**

After airline tickets and contact lenses, the worst things a Tai Chi teacher can forget to pack (in approximate descending order) are: *teaching shoes, sweatpants, toothbrush, alarm clock, student handouts, the video or T-shirt I promised someone I'd bring, razor, enough under wear and these days, computer power supply or connection cables.* At one time or another I've forgotten all of these items and, although many of them are readily available almost anywhere, one doesn't know one has forgotten his toothbrush until bedtime. Since its not particularly polite to wake up one's hosts at midnight, and its obviously not at all cool to start using the seminar organiser's wife's toothbrush, I have to swish with toothpaste hoping that my breathe will be okay for the next morning's up close and personal Push Hands class. The schedule of a workshop is usually quite tight so, even if I might manage to remember that I need to buy lens solution or a USB cable, time might not permit finding a store during business hours, particularly on the weekend. So each day I hope no one notices the Chen split seams in my blue jeans and each day I try to remember to go shopping.

When packing up to leave a place its remarkably easy to overlook some little item on the way to the next gig, a shirt left in the bed sheets, shoes on the porch or my damn toiletries bag again. In the past I was notorious for forgetting alarm clocks. I've left an easy dozen over the last twenty years. This year I only left one behind, I think in Cranbrook, but I'm not sure. Eventually one gets better at taking care of all of the minutia and gradually becomes professional traveller.

### **Time is on my side**

All of this means that a seminar is not just a two day event. Without even considering the scheduling, travel booking and promotion several months or even years in advance, a typical weekend workshop involves a Thursday day of errands (*which T-shirts to take, getting videos together, I need some new teaching pants and those blue jeans...*) plus an evening of packing. Friday can be a solid 12-14 hour day with travel (including getting to the airport with the usual

time allotted for security hubris) *and* an evening workshop. Often I've arrived in a new city in a new time zone just in time for class to start. If I'm lucky I can get in a little shuteye before the event starts. I've become a good day napper as I need to be 'on' and not draggy after travel, and a siesta can really take the edge off. Usually teaching the class is just what I need to revitalize my travel-loggy self and get me into the swing of the tour. After teaching Saturday and Sunday I have another full day of travel followed by a half day or so of unpacking, resorting, filing and generally re-connecting with my life in Vancouver.

This means that the two and a half day workshop is a five day event for me and that during a busy cycle my own midweek 'weekends' generally start on Tuesday evening (TGIT!), include Wednesday and bit of Thursday. In that time I manage and maintain my relationships with friends, family and teachers, my love life, writing and rehearsing with FFM, correspondence and administration, as well as arranging future workshops, concerts, and video and recording production projects. Oh yeah, and training.

Then there are the unavoidable of travel. For example on this trip both going to and returning from Madrid my luggage was not properly transferred at Heathrow Airport in London which meant two extra days in a ripening T-shirt while meeting new people ("Hi I'm Sam. I'm from Canada."). On my return flight I spent a solid hour of sprinting between terminal 1 and 3 at Heathrow to get my bag on the plane back to Canada. I can't count how many times my luggage has arrived late and some airlines are worse than others for unhelpful officiousness. In his 'Republic', Plato argues that the weakest and most important basic link in a successfully democratic state is the policeman of integrity. This was of course before the airline receptionist was invented. An accident slows traffic to the airport in Vancouver. A snowstorm delays flights in Chicago. Will I make the Friday night qigong class? Once, getting into a cab to go to the airport, I twisted my ankle on a little pothole in the street. It was the beginning of my last workshop tour of the year before the lean winter period and I had to cancel everything. It was a tough winter financially. Fortunately these things rarely happen. In 20 years of travelling, teaching and touring I can only remember having to cancel one weekend event, one tour and have been seriously late for a Friday night class on only a couple of occasions.

### **Money, its a gas**

During the course of a month long seminar tour there are still bills to pay at home (very easy to forget while on tour) and it becomes necessary to get money to the bank. This kind of work can be feast or famine so by the time I'm ready to hit the road to teach I may have run very low on cash and be needing to get money home quickly. It's surprising how poor the service of many banks and credit unions are when it comes to depositing cheques from across the country. On this particular trip I learned that the Royal Bank of Canada in the East is not set up to transfers with its counterpart in the West. Didn't we send a man to the moon like, forty years ago? (Actually that was a hoax...) As far as trying to deposit a cheque into a Vancouver Credit Union account from Corpus Christi, Texas... fuget-about-it. Usually I mail cheques directly to my bank in a guaranteed post envelope (at \$8 a pop for a traceable 3 day delivery!), or I put cash on my VISA card (indispensable for this way of life) and hope nothing gets lost in the mail. It's not that the phone company should care about such things, but few institutions in these automated days seem to have

much flexibility for we 'Lifestyles of the Peng, Lü, Ji, An' types. I've gotten to know the post offices, banks and credit unions of dozens of small towns and have developed favourite restaurants, coffee shops, book stores and walking places for those midweek times when my host is at work and I have some nice free time to run errands and just hang out. I have little practice nooks in parks everywhere.

Its virtually impossible to book anything over the late-November to early-February period due to the extra expense and preparation people make for Christmas. Folks just don't want to book workshops. So this is usually a good time for me to dig into creative projects such as instructional videos, articles music CD's. But these projects cost money and it's typically a very lean time for me financially. I'm sure some people think that I make fair coin teaching when they calculate the seminar cost per participant and the number of people registered, but considering that I work nearly seven days a week during my 'on' season, and that the winter is generally a financial wasteland, things don't necessarily average out that impressively if calculated by real hours of work, preparation, travel, production etc. No one is paying me to sit at an editing bay putting together a teaching aid. It all trickles in later. The same with T-shirts. *Boom!* \$3500 up front and then dribble, dribble... When one considers the actually mark up of the shirts, deducting promo-type give-aways and T's that just don't sell either due to design or sizing (I've got a bunch of XXXL's sitting around by the way) it's hardly worth it financially. Not to mention the cost of the editing bay itself, or my computer and video, music and recording equipment. A project like 'Tai Chi People', the documentary film I'm trying to find time to edit, is entirely subsidized by my teaching, performing and merchandise revenues. So far I have about \$25,000 into the film with no guarantee for any distribution other than hawking it off the T-shirt table at workshops.

I've had more than a few critics over the years who have said that anyone who teaches Tai Chi for an income or to, heaven forbid, make a living doesn't have their heart in the right place. In reality I feel quite certain that I could make a much greater income doing another occupation. I know how to communicate with people, sell things and ideas, and would be a valuable commodity in almost any industry I chose. And, even when there are a few extra dollars on the table because a workshop is particularly well attended, if I compare my financial situation with someone in a more mainstream occupation who possesses comparable expertise, say a doctor, lawyer, realtor or corporate executive, it's really not all that impressive. Instead I'd rather give a thousand per cent to my art, my students and my fans. I make my income through what I am able and willing to share and believe that I make a contribution to, and a difference in, peoples' lives this way. I don't franchise or claim non-profit status in order to buy up real estate or ask my students to teach for free and have them 'kick up' to me. Next time you try to apply for a business or home loan see what your bank manager says when you list 'self employed Tai Chi teacher' as your occupation.

I think I have 'paid my dues' and have invested a tremendous amount on many levels, including financially, into becoming a truly professional instructor who can quickly help students solve the problems in their practice, which may have plagued them for years or would have for years to come. People know that I'm committed to supporting their development in the long term, not just for a single event. I give my students tools they can work with in their regular Tai Chi situations

that can allow them to master the art more quickly, easily and painlessly. Often my critics have put in a miniscule fraction of this effort into their own technical and pedagogical development but believe themselves to be somehow morally superior. It is often the results of their sloppy teaching, the damaged knees, the bad backs, the fuzzy comprehension suffered by truly dedicated students that I am left to clean up.

### **(Sam) I am! I cried**

The fact is, not a lot of instructors are willing or able to do what I do. From a technical and curriculum standpoint alone, there are few teachers who are willing to devote the time to learn broadly or deeply enough to develop the kind of versatility and adaptability needed to meet a wide variety of situations, levels and needs. To offer consistently new and useful work while maintaining the integrity of the traditional art requires constant exploration and research. A new workshop theme can take me years to develop. Currently I can teach about fifty seminars on various themes *aside from* forms and curriculum seminars. Not many people would make the personal sacrifices necessary for this kind of research and development or for the touring lifestyle required to support making the work available in so many communities. There is no pension plan, union, no dental coverage, no compensation for on the job injuries or disability coverage while recuperating from an injury. When I ruptured two discs at the end of 1998 there was a very real possibility I might not do martial arts or play guitar again. I was without income for six months, most of that time in agony. I can't have a dog or a cat of my own (not that the cat thing is an issue) and relationships are real challenges.

### **My way**

My Tai Chi life is in some ways like that of a touring musician, though few of players have a twenty year run without having a 'day job' eventually. Also, most musicians don't interact so personally and for such long periods of time with their fans. These relationships require energy, communication and commitment and if I wish to see real progress as a consequence of my teaching, I must invest these things in real persons.

It can be daunting at times, the idea of heading to that airport knowing I won't sleep in my own bed for six weeks. Routine is nonexistent in my life as no two days are alike. Occasionally, I yearn for some stability. I really need more time to write, edit, practice, play music and do nothing. And I'm not 25 anymore ("So, if you're Sam Masich then *who is the guy on the videos?*"). But it's my life, my path and I invented it. I have few if any people to look to find out how to do it right. It comes from my heart and my passion for art. It's a Way.

I could probably settle back into teaching classes, seminars and private lessons in Vancouver. But then I wouldn't get to see Mavis in Milton, Gloria in London or Jim in Eugene. I wouldn't know Tom and Cecily's kidlet Francesca since before she was born or get to talk philosophy with Marnie's son Andrew. I wouldn't know how my students cook, what their worlds and dreams are or really why they love their Tai Chi so much. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be invited into their worlds and to play with them on home ice. I see my videos on their bookshelves and their swords all standing in a corner. And I know that wherever I go to teach I am home.

**Epilogue: Blue jean blues**

As it turns out, I never did get my new pants. But here in Madrid, on the last week of this tour, I awaken in my host's spare bedroom to find on a chair beside my bed my poor Chen afflicted blue jeans all washed, pressed and neatly sewn. And what do you know, the jet lag is gone.

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