49 Years of Tai Chi Chuan

Gerrie Sporken

It all started in the hot summer of 1976, when Paul van Loenen visited my boyfriend Thom and I. Paul arrived with a mission to invite us to an Arica program called the 9 Hypergnostic Systems™. That visit would change my life. The next morning, Paul did the first third of the tai chi form for us. I was mesmerized, and I wanted to learn tai chi.

Thom and I decided to go the Arica training in Dorset, UK, and we got the money together to pay for the six-week program. There were about 50 young-to-middle-age people from all kinds of lifestyles. I was kind of green, and when the training was opened in the name of God, I had flashbacks of my Catholic upbringing. I had sworn to never engage with another religion. The trainers were weird in my eyes. Happily for me, Arica turned out not to be a religion but a systematic program to assess your life in all its details, combined with physical exercises, breathing and meditations.

In the last two weeks of the program, Greg Woodson and Stan Swartz came to join us and taught us the first third of the tai chi form. While I thought I would easily learn the moves, it turned out to be harder than I imagined. After one class, I had to lie down because I was shaking from exhaustion. Greg and Stan did not say much at all in class, except that Greg kept whispering in my ear to come to New York to participate in the apprentice teacher program and learn to teach tai chi.

It took another year for me to get to New York. Thom and I split up and sold our house out in the country, and I moved back to Amsterdam. At that time, I was in my master's year of studying law. After working in a law firm, I decided I could not see myself for the rest of my life working around men acting like wolves. I was still studying tai chi, and I became friends with Dito Staley, an American who was teaching with Sherry Kent and Connie Nerrie in Amsterdam. When Dito went back to the US, I went with him. To get a visa, I had to meet with the American ambassador and show a letter from my university stating that I was a registered student. When entering the US, I was questioned again about what I would do there and why. In the end, my visa came through for six months.

Dito's father picked us up at the New York airport, and drove us to their home in Rhode Island. It was such a friendly environment with friendly people. His father took us on a sailing trip on the ocean. I got very

seasick until his father put me behind the wheel of the boat, and I felt better.

Then Dito arranged that I would join the beginning form teaching apprenticeship in Manhattan. He taught me how to hail a cab at the train station and gave me the address where the cab had to drop me off. When I came out of the cab, someone put a hand on my neck. It was Greg—he was watching for me. That made me feel safe.

The apprenticeship was already halfway through the first third. In my imagination the tai chi office was a big space, but it turned out to be tiny. In that apprentice group were Janey and Edna, my guardian angels. Edna coached me to speak English using knock-knock jokes and hung out with me, going to Chinatown, films, and shows. Janey got me a job as a waitress at the New York Health and Racket Club, close to Times Square. After having been a guest in in a few places, finally I was part of a group who rented one of the first Washington Street apartments.

The teaching apprenticeship covered the whole form, so for months we gathered in the tiny office, and I also did all the tai chi classes I could get to.

I met Patrick Watson at the Arica New Years party (1976-77) and also got to know Pat Gorman. With Patrick I did a lot of walking—he would check out my response to objects like lampposts or garbage or people. We also talked about life in all its details and tai chi. He asked me how old I was, and I said I was 22 years old. He commented that 22 was old to become a teacher! In class we would do push hands, and in the beginning I did not like the pushing at all. Patrick asked me to push him anyway and not to be so soft. Well, that took time to get used to. And what came back from my push was always like a boomerang. In time I loved and still love pushing hands.

In January of 1977, the first tai chi winter training met for three weeks in Manhattan in a loft on the fifth floor above Bigelow's. We all had to walk up and down, which after a few days of tai chi and pushing hands was an ordeal. That winter, I learned double hands push hands and took Push Hands 4. Patrick spoke to us in the Push Hands 4 seminar about the history of tai chi, and he told many fascinating stories. We each did the form in front of a video camera. I wonder where those tapes are now?

After I finished the beginning form apprenticeship, my visa ran out, so I went back to Amsterdam with an extra bag full of tai chi shoes. Due to a snowstorm, I landed in Brussels rather than Amsterdam. My brother and

mother came and picked me up to take me home to the south of the Netherlands for the carnival celebrations.

Back in Amsterdam, I taught tai chi with Sherry Kent and Linda Coviello. We taught several nights and weekends, five classes for each section of the form, Beginning 1, 2 and 3.

Around that time, Paul van Loenen and Sherry Kent founded the Stichting School of T'ai Chi Chuan. Patrick was the first president of the Stichting. He had me translate the bylaws for him, checking before he would sign.

The summer of 1977 was the first summer training in the US, three weeks long. At that time, I did a two-week Arica program, 9 Domains of Consciousness™ rather than tai chi. I did manage to go to the following winter training. I learned a lot there but was not allowed to participate in the Winter Form Work. I cried and felt it was unfair since it was only because I had not done the Summer Form Work in the previous summer training. Patrick took me to a sushi restaurant with lots of wasabi. That took care of me crying. Later I understood why, but at that time it was a blow.

I traveled to New York every winter and most of the summers. In 1978 we started having a summer training in the Netherlands. For several years we were in Bergen at a venue called Vluchtheuvel. That is where Pat Gorman and Patrick taught Sherry, Greg and me the first half of the sword form. In the same summer at the US training in Bennington, we learned the second half. Patty would teach while Patrick would watch along with Margaret Matsumoto sitting on the side, since she already had learned the sword form from Tam Gibbs. Patty was tough on us, wanting our steps to be lower, longer and with our joints opening. At that time there was tension between Patty and Patrick about him being involved with Peggy Watson. Though Patty did not want to come to the training, we begged her to come and teach us. Luckily for us, she did.

Years went by, and Koen and I had baby Sacha on November 11, 1985. Patrick really wanted me and my family to come to the winter training in New York, so Sacha, Koen and I did it. Patrick picked us up from JFK airport, and he had an apartment ready for us. Imagine teaching sword form for the first time with Sherry and Greg and breast feeding between classes! It was exciting at times, and also scary when riding in a cab with Sacha. Of course we didn't get much sleep. Els Eijssens was also staying in that apartment, and she rocked and talked Sacha to sleep. That was so nice of her and good for Sacha. Edna was there too. John and Vicki visited us and gave us a baby blanket. On New Years Eve, Patrick stopped by.

We have a picture of that time and a client, Thea, made us a painting from that photo.





PW office where I would sit to breastfeed.
Greg and Matsu came to visit.
The globe is a little joke because Patrick wanted us to teach tai chi chuan all over the world.

More years went by, with Patrick coming over to Europe every year, visiting London and staying with me in Amsterdam. I would travel to the US every year too.



Summer Training Dorset UK 1989

Sherry and I learned Push Hands 6 when I was pregnant again in 1988. At that time, Patrick would not push me. I remember that all the qi went to the baby inside of me. I learned Push Hands 7 at the winter training in New York. I asked him why it could not be applied both ways, since he was only showing the advancement and not the response.

Around this time Patty taught a class called Push Hands 5B & Above, teaching how yin and yang manifest in myriad forms in pushing hands and the tai chi form. We would read from Professor Cheng's books about how to embody yin and yang. This time was the beginning of Patty and I exchanging our ideas. She was very pleased when I began teaching the

Push Hands 5B & Above material. We wrote a manual for this level with plenty of notes and drawings.

In one of the many summer trainings, Patrick and I did some inner tai chi work. We would do five first thirds together, and he would ask me what I noticed. That was somewhere at the beginning of the Eighth level work.

In 1991 at the summer training in the US, Patrick had a meeting with eight of us. He asked each of us individually to be Lineage Holders, to assure that the school would continue as a path to enlightenment.

In the beginning, we were called the "Circle of Eight." I asked Patrick who the ninth was. He said that as long as he lived, he would be the ninth, and after him the school itself would be the ninth.



The Circle of Eight, right to left: Pat Gorman, Axel Schwolow, Margaret Olmsted, Margaret Matsumoto, Sherry van Loenen-Kent, Peggy Watson, Greg Woodson and Gerrie Sporken

When Patrick was dying, it was very hard for me to sleep. He was in the hospital in New York with Peggy, Patty, Greg and Matsu. At night I would sit across from the Universal Logos meditation yantra and visit with Patrick that way. Before he passed, I saw him one last time for a weekend. He had phone contact with several apprentices, asking for their forgiveness in case he was the cause of their suffering. He did try to pass as cleanly as possible. For me he did. When we finally said goodbye, he sat up and hugged me, giving me a gift of love and qi right into my heart, telling me to keep the school going. I cried. Axel was there and guided me out of the room. We did the Arica Black Earth ceremony for him at midnight in our local school in Amsterdam and at several other locations.

The Circle of Eight had many meetings, about the school as a whole and about the business failure at the Perch Lake property. Those meetings were at times very tense and brutal. Eventually Axel left the group, and then Peggy left and did not want to meet with us. MO was overwhelmed in her own life, and Sherry's husband Paul developed serious health

issues, so she had to be away. That left Patty, Greg, Matsu and me to work together. In New York I would stay with Patty, who was at times very weak due to her illness. That is when Greg, Matsu and I starting talking about moving the school from depending on a single teacher to a social transmission model. That change took several years, and I guess some apprentices left because of that, though most continued. I feel immense gratitude to Greg, Matsu and Patty for persevering on in a more relaxed way. Together, we grew and evolved into the school we have so far. And now there is another change coming, to be discussed in the winter trainings in 2025.

Sometime in the nineties, MO and Sherry returned to meet with us and carry the responsibility of the school. We changed our name to the Legacy Holders Council. We still meet regularly, with the help of Els Eijssens as our facilitator and holder of the archive of all we have produced over the years.

After Perch Lake, the 8th level members and the legacy holders would meet close to Patty's home on Long Island. Tina and Karen helped to set it up. Apprentices of push hands levels 5, 6 and 7 were invited too. In the beginning we met both in spring and autumn, and later only in the autumn. After Patty died, we did not meet in Long Island any more. Nowadays, we meet for some extra days before summer and winter trainings.

Around 2002, Patty and I got to talking about Professor Cheng's 8 Ways of Tai Chi program, and the Bagua (eight Daoist symbols). As acupuncture practitioners, we were both very familiar with yin yang and the five phases of qi. We exchanged ideas about a new program via fax machines (this was before computers), and at times there was so much paper coming out of the machine that it looked like a roll of wallpaper. It took about two years of working on the new program to feel that we were ready to present it to the senior teachers in the school. We called it "Roots & Branches 5 Element Qi Gong."

We taught all of the five sections in two days. The material was well received, and Patty and I felt it was a good base to add to over time. Patty worked with Karen Kohlhaas to produce an excellent video of the Roots & Branches. Thanks to their intensive work, the video is used to teach the program, and also was edited to use in the seasonal home trainings developed by Johanna Koelman in Netherlands out of her love for our school.

Over time, we added Roots & Branches Level II, about seasons and cycles, enhancing the flow of qi in the shen and ko cycles of the five phases, and working with special groups. Then we developed Roots & Branches Level III Healing, for professionals and senior apprentices to pass the material to clients or patients.

In the meantime, Lucy and Joop Brouwer and I have been passing the Roots & Branches material to young children (4 years and up). We all had a lot of fun in the summer training with the bear and other animals like horses, deer, and tigers. On the last day we were the phoenix covered in large scarves. We included the tai chi kids' games and the tai chi form.

Patty and I had so much to talk about that I came to the US many times to work with her and have fun with developing sword fencing and tai chi pole. We liked dueling! We would go to the beach and bring our swords or poles. Inspiring! Happy times.





From Patrick's time, Patty and I had input from him on the progression in the 8th level. We compared and added to each other's ideas and sentences. We would question each other in a very inspiring way, like developing together, adding or erasing. This is what I miss the most: having such a working partner.







We developed the Golden Orbit home training with the input of Patrick Wooldridge. We have composed texts on the several levels. The Push Hands 7 group was suffering for a while from "not getting it," until we developed material and a home training on Spiral Awareness for this level of embodiment. For Push Hands 8, we developed home trainings and special work. And it continues on to the next step.

Nowadays since Patty went into the Dao, I find comfort with Edna Brandt. We talk and I tell her my ideas and she adds to them, and we already have taught a course on Zoom together called "Cycle of Transformation," using tai chi to open blocks in our mind and our emotions. Life continues, and together with the school we are on our path to the unity of all, the One, as Patty liked to call it. Change is key to tai chi chuan.

My thanks to all who are (or were) with us in our school,

My love

Gerrie


ALL of US
Past Present Future


Heaven
Yang
INSPIRATION
Legacy Holders Council
8th Level
Human
Circulation: t'ai chi practice/teaching in any form students apprentices
Earth
Yin
SUPPORT - FACILITATING
TCF – Stichting
Or any other form of organization for the School