

Memories of Danny Connor

As we entered the new millennium on 1st January 2000, it also saw the passing away of one of the moving forces within the martial arts in Britain.

Danny Connor was my first teacher in the martial arts, a mentor and also a friend. I would like to contribute a few remembrances and thoughts of him which I am sure will strike some chords with those who knew him, and say a little of his influence to those who didn't.

Danny began teaching Tai Chi in the days when it was virtually unheard of in the U.K. My first meeting with him was in 1972/73. By this time he already had extensive experience in the martial arts, having lived in Japan to study karate. It was whilst in Japan that he first encountered Tai Chi and this prompted him to travel throughout South East Asia looking into several of the Chinese martial arts.

Upon his return to the U.K., Danny set up classes in Manchester teaching Chinese Boxing. It was these classes that I first attended as a teenager, learning about some of the exotic arts of the east. The classes were small – perhaps half a dozen or so, but we were keen. Inspired by Danny's enthusiasm and knowledge, we attended and trained several times each week.

Then 'BOOM!' The Kung Fu pilot was shown on British television and the next week there were 50 or 60 people who came along to watch and then sign up for what was now becoming widely known as Kung Fu. With relatively little experience, the original students were now suddenly the senior students. This added responsibility encouraged us to train harder and progress further.

By 1974 Danny was setting up the Oriental World shop, selling martial arts equipment, books etc. and was also running organisations such as the British Kung Fu Union and the British Karate Association. He was also instrumental in bringing many teachers to the area such as Bruce Kumar Frantzis and Marnix Wells who he had met in the Far East and also arranging for Rose Li to come and teach in Manchester.

Within a couple of years Danny had stopped teaching to concentrate on his business. With Danny no longer active, I looked around at other alternatives but found nothing so inspiring. Without knowing it, this was a blessing in disguise. It meant that I had to look deeper within that which I had already been given by Danny. Therein were revealed layer upon layer of meaning and intrigue. I found that to discover things for ones self had an even more profound effect than having them served to you on a plate. Confucius recommended giving just one part or corner of a problem or solution, and letting the student discover the rest. This is what we were given by Danny.

By the early 1980's the 'Bamboo Curtain' was opening and Danny was visiting the People's Republic of China to be the first British person to train in Tai Chi at the Beijing Physical Culture Institute. Upon his return he began teaching again.

Danny had quite a reputation for being elusive – not always turning up where he was supposed to be. Many were the times when he wouldn't arrive for the lesson, leaving us to practice amongst ourselves. However, such was the quality of Danny's presence when he did join us, that we continued to turn up week in week out.

Always an inspiring person to be around, Danny had ideas and plans pouring out of him all the time, many crazy ones, some brilliant ones. To talk with him was to be on a roller coaster, exploring ideas in depth and then before you knew it switching by some means of lateral thinking to another angle or another subject. Like Socrates, he was interested in all aspects of life and continually questioned the way things were rather than just accepting as most of us do. The questions he posed and the astute observations that he made often had the affect of making people look within elements of their own character. He had an anecdote or story for every occasion and likewise, everyone who had any contact with him always came away with a story of Danny.

I have heard his character described as the salt within stew. Without it the stew would be bland – time spent with Danny was never bland.

His knowledge of the martial arts was extensive and his influence has set many people on a path that has inspired and given a deeper meaning to their life. He will be greatly missed but fondly remembered by many, not least his wife Joanna and two boys Alexander and Luke.

So Danny, myself along with many others give our profound thanks for your inspiration and acknowledge that knowing you has enriched our lives.

John Bolwell