

Openness and Flexibility in Training

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The art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is organic and alive, having unlimited depth and potential. It will always be evolving and improving—this is its tradition.

Rigidity has no place in any art, but discipline is another matter. While living in Illinois, I attended Kao Ching-hua's T'ai Chi Ch'uan classes for six years, gleaning everything I could, so that large chunks of that experience are now like videotapes playing in my head. In the nine years since, I've practiced diligently, often twice a day, adhering to the form she taught me.

Only in the last two years have I given myself permission to make some minor changes in the sequence—changes that followed the logic of my growing understanding and expanding influences. Before this time, it wouldn't have occurred to me that I would ever have the authority to modify the style in any way.

In a sense, the sequence itself prompted the modifications. After I moved away from my teacher, the series of movements took over where Kao Ching-hua left off. For several years, my solitary practice provided the setting for an intimate dialogue between me and the form. We got to know each other. Although the form had a life-changing impact on me from the beginning, the influence began to become mutual.

My teacher and I have had intermittent contact over the years since I moved to California. I've noticed her sequence has changed too, although she seems reluctant to acknowledge this. I adopt her variations when they make sense to me. Whether the changes come from me or from her, I talk about them in detail with my students. In a couple of instances, a few students who have been with me the entire six years I've been teaching have insisted on staying with the original way. They make persuasive arguments for their preference, based on physical, mental, and imaginative factors—so we coexist. I believe in listening to intuition, especially when there's a solid history of experience behind it.

T'ai Chi Ch'uan is based on the philosophy of change. The T'ai Chi symbol illustrates the revolving inevitability of evolution. As a form passes through generations, the people responsible for preserving it are also responsible for its improvement. Any style that really stayed the same through time would have to have a lot of uninspired and lazy devotees.

Much of what I offer my students I have gained through my own practice, and all of it is filtered through my personality. While my teacher stressed mental and physical fitness, I approach T'ai Chi Ch'uan with an emphasis on the internal and spiritual component. At the same time, I find myself increasingly investigating and talking about the martial applications. I think a sequence that is as complete as possible helps to draw out and develop a more rounded and whole person.

My teacher claims lineage with the Wu family, but refers to her form as "The Authentic T'ai Chi Ch'uan." I can't in good conscience call it that, because I have too much exposure to other teachers I respect, who also believe their styles are authentic. (Some of them say theirs is "the" authentic sequence too.) It's natural to have a preference for one's chosen style, but there are many styles; the fundamental principles behind them are the same; and they are all valid.

I visit classes of teachers I know. I follow their sequences, listen to what they say, and always learn something. Even when the style is nothing like mine, or even when it is a hard martial art, an audio recording of the teacher's words could often transfer smoothly into my class.

Over the years, I've talked to people who have studied multiple forms from teachers in different parts of the country. These students tell me that they get essentially the same benefits from all the styles. The critical ingredient, always, is practice. My theory on why such widely varying forms can produce the same results is that the qualities we tap into when we practice are so accessible and so eager to be known that they will emerge given any decent opportunity. All we have to do is get quiet and move, think, and breathe harmoniously.

Teachers can teach open-mindedness, or they can teach the opposite. Encouraging students to have a superior attitude about their style and close themselves off from wider exposure or their own inventiveness is bad teaching. It reveals a lack of confidence in a style's ability to hold up to comparisons.

None of my teaching is set in stone. I only believe in and impart to my students the things I have experienced. If I talk about anything else, I make certain that the students know the information is only second-hand through books, videos, or contact with other practitioners. I've learned to be strictly scrupulous and honest about distinguishing between what I know for myself and what is hearsay. What I know for myself can change. My being, like everyone's, is a very sophisticated state-of-the-art laboratory, and I pay close attention to everything revealed to me through this apparatus. I tell people in my classes to do the same.

I teach a Taoist "light exercise" that requires one to imagine white light streaming continuously down from the sky into an upraised left palm, through the arm to fill the

entire body, then out the right arm and downward-pointing fingertips into the ground. The directions for the process are short and simple, describing the color of light and its path.

After each exercise like this, I'm eager to hear comments from the students. Did they like or dislike it? What went on inside them during those minutes? It's fascinating when someone tells me the light wasn't white; it was red or purple or blue. Or that the stream reversed itself and entered the right hand from the ground, exiting through the left palm to the sky. These experiences are a source of information about ourselves—what sort of energy we currently need (earth or sky, yin or yang), what color is coursing through our bodies, or what color is necessary for our healing at the time.

When I get feedback from my students that contradicts what I told them to "see," that's a clear sign of the authenticity of the experience (which is not to say that only contradictory experiences are genuine). I tell people that my words and those of others are only a place to start, a point of comparison. It's extremely important not to try to force another person's occurrence or belief on oneself when something different is clearly happening within.

When teaching is followed slavishly, it can be a real obstruction to learning. A principal benefit I'm deriving from my practice is the ability to see inside more clearly, to listen to myself more acutely. I want to hear even the things I don't expect to hear, to see the things I have no idea I might see, based on my upbringing and teaching, and to notice the absence of things I assume to be there.

I have learned from both teachers and books that during seated meditation, energy circulates from the nostrils down the front of the body to the perineum and then up the spine, returning to the head. Before I was familiar with this information, I noticed my energy flowed distinctly in the opposite direction. I have since tried to move my energy in the pattern prescribed. The result is a sloshing feeling of two currents colliding and vying for primacy, with my original one definitely stronger. It's an interesting experiment, but I'll not interfere with my natural energy flow. Nor will I assume the direction will never change. I'll just watch.

One of the most valuable ways to gather information about T'ai Chi Ch'uan is by consulting my body, intellect, emotions, and spirit. Sometimes this can best be done by separating myself from teachers, books, and videos. The external noise level is reduced, and my own source becomes more audible. The internal aspects of an art can only be discovered by oneself. Even the physical dimensions require keen, solitary listening. A teacher can only accompany one so far. It's up to students to judge when a teacher is necessary and when it's time to practice alone.

I take a literally "hands-off" attitude toward students. I don't move their limbs around for them. Instead, I rely on their powers of observation, knowing that for the most part all they need is a chance to see the movement again and a chance to try it again. Gradually, things fall into place. There's no rush. I'm a new student in Chinese brush painting, with a teacher who shares my approach, and it brings home to me how this process works. Teachers may feel they are not doing enough if they're not constantly correcting someone, but this often just constitutes interference.

I've learned not to require or expect any particular regimen from my students. I know what their lives are like. I step back and respect their schedules and their different rates of learning. One of my long-time students recently told me that if I were more rigid and demanding, he probably wouldn't have stuck with T'ai Chi Ch'uan. He came to class once a week for several years before he found space in his life to practice at home. Being a physician and having a family didn't allow him much chance to slip off by himself. At one point he told me that 11:00 at night, after everyone was in bed, had become his time to practice. Six years after he first entered the class, T'ai Chi Ch'uan has enhanced both his professional and personal life in many ways.

This year he had an especially intriguing experience. He went for a solo hike on one of his favorite trails, which leads through redwood trees to bluffs overlooking the ocean. There he practiced the sequence. When he finished, tears were falling onto his tee shirt in big, heavy drops "like rain," and he heard a voice say, "It's okay. You belong here." He couldn't tell whether the voice came from inside or outside his head.

As he related the story to me, he kept reiterating what a pragmatist he was—that he saw human diseases and suffering every day and was not what he considered a spiritual person. Yet at that moment he had felt not only intermingled with the universe but also what he called "blessed." He was used to being thanked and having the sincere gratitude and appreciation of his patients. This was something different. He credits T'ai Chi Ch'uan for being the key that opened this new door. Not a bad return given his relatively scant (but persistent) practice schedule.

I've been a potter for the last twenty-two years, so I've learned something about working in a medium with a mind of its own. It teaches me restraint, humility, and flexibility. Clay is essentially friendly and responsive—as are my students—so it's possible, between the two of us, to achieve some gratifying results.

I regard my practice and my students with exactly the same attitude. I try to keep my ego out of the picture, to simply be alert and responsive. In class I offer everything I have, making sure people know I'm constantly learning too, and that they can expect to witness my own evolution and the development of the sequence. I plant a seed and give students a place to begin.